

Alumni interview:

# Chris Heaslip

**Faith has always played a big role in Chris Heaslip's life, both business and personal. The entrepreneur invented a payment app that allows church-goers to make mobile donations; and co-founded his company, Pushpay, in a sector that's worth US\$1.6 billion a year in revenue. At 35, he's also forged his own unique career path – and persevered through a number of business failures – on the road to finding his billion-dollar idea.**

**Chris shares the story of his journey to date, and the importance of staying true to your values.**

**CURRENTLY**

CEO and co-founder of Pushpay, a leading US/NZ technology company & KPMG client

**WITH KPMG**

Business Advisory (Private Enterprise), Auckland, 2005-2007

Like most great business ideas, Pushpay had its own eureka moment.

Chris and his friend Eliot Crowther were two young entrepreneurs who went to the same church in Auckland's Mount Eden. They had an idea for an app – one that would allow mobile payments at cafes – and entered a dragons' den-like competition with their idea. The panel, however, shot their idea down in flames.

"Eliot was in church that following Sunday morning, the bucket came around and he thought, I've got some plastic, I've got my phone, but I haven't got any cash. Bing! What if we take that idea we had for coffees...and applied it to churches instead. So we went to Life Church and asked if they'd like to try it out."

As co-founders, Eliot and Chris both put in \$40,000 each to build the original prototype. Having quickly signed up the five major churches in New Zealand, the obvious offshore market soon beckoned – a country with over 340,000 churches and 157 million church-goers. They went live with their first customer in the United States in April 2013.

Today, Pushpay is a NZX-listed firm with a market capitalisation of \$592 million (as of 29 July). The company employs 255 people across its two offices in Seattle and Auckland.

So what lies behind the phenomenal growth? The other big factor that makes Pushpay succeed in the States – aside from the massive scope of the church market – is the relatively slow uptake of online payments among American consumers.

"New Zealand is pretty switched on when it comes to internet banking and digital payments, but it's not like that in the States," says Chris. "I've still got to write a cheque each month to pay my power bill."

And he believes the market's untapped potential is even more exciting.

"Across the whole church sector in the US, only 13% of all giving is currently done online; the rest is still through cash and cheques. So when we think about how big this market is, our revenues will grow exponentially as the rate of online giving increases. All the tailwinds are behind Pushpay."

Although the church market is still 99% of Pushpay's focus, the business has also diversified into bill payments for enterprise, particularly utility companies. They're doing early-stage pilots for this side of the business in New Zealand, with two of our largest utilities.

Again, the philosophy behind it is convenience and control.

"There's a large segment of people who want to have the convenience of a direct debit, but the control of internet banking. So how it works...you get a text message from your utility company, with the amount due and a link to the app. You get sent over to the app with all the fields pre-populated, you put your thumbprint on, and the whole thing is done in 10 seconds."

Pushpay's track record in the church sector has definitely paved the way for the foray into enterprise.

"A lot of people have tried this in New Zealand around bill payments and haven't been successful," says Chris.

"But the difference with Pushpay is that we're doing over NZ\$1 billion of payments through our platform every year. So our enterprise clients know we can handle this size of business – we've got the track record of up-time and stability and volume that ticks all their boxes."

For Chris and Eliot, their faith and business pursuits remain intertwined.

"We say ministry is what we do, but business is how we do it. One church in New York we work with has ten thousand orphans in Africa they support. By providing the technology that allows people to give more, we play a small part in that. That's what we really love about this business...it's actually about helping people."

**Getting ahead: the strategic approach**

Ever since childhood, Chris knew he was going to be an accountant.

"My mother was a single parent who always worked really hard to support our family...so we had a strong work ethic modelled to us from an early age."

There was no accounting teacher at Kaipara College, but Chris taught himself accounting in Form 7. Around the same time, he read the seminal business book, Rich Dad, Poor Dad.

"And the line that stuck with me was you should never choose a job based on the amount of money you earn. Choose it based on what you'll learn, and the money will follow."

Adopting that as his mantra, Chris honed his tax knowledge during two years working for the IRD, while also studying for his Masters in Tax, before turning his sights to the Big 4. When offered a job at KPMG, Chris chose to broaden his skill-set by joining Private Enterprise instead of Tax.

"I remember saying in the interview, I'll do whatever it takes to make up for any deficiencies I have...because I'm coming here to learn. And KPMG's mid-market group offered the perfect mix – advisory, audit and tax."

Chris' other goal was to gain an insider's view on how a large and successful organisation is run.

"What makes KPMG so successful is all the stuff that most people don't see...the systems, the processes, the discipline and rigour. KPMG's commitment to training and investing in people is also world-class. As alumni, you take that away with you and it stays with you forever."

**“That’s what we really love about this business... it’s actually about helping people.”**

**The importance of values & perseverance**

In the years between leaving KPMG and launching Pushpay, Chris launched around 15 different business ideas that went nowhere. And he's philosophical about the often random nature of business success.

"We'd had some good ideas...so why those didn't take, I really don't know. You plant a bunch of seeds; some grow, some don't."

He says compared to the United States, New Zealanders tend to have an innate fear of failure.

"Look at the guys in the States who are all billionaires – the average number of companies they had that failed was 17. In New Zealand, people give up after three or four. I think that's something as a country we really struggle with. Everyone wants the output of innovation, but no-one wants the failure that goes with it. But failure is what gives rise to the stuff that actually works."