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October 9, 2014 1:17 pm

## The benefits of being a real fraudster



By Emma Jacobs



Stiff and quiet, Frank Abagnale stands in front of a small audience of security and anti-fraud specialists. He is here to deliver a speech in central London about his life.

Clearing his throat, he begins. “I was raised just north of New York City in Westchester County, New York, in a little town called Bronxville ... I was a middle child of four.”

So far, so ordinary. Then boom – a hand grenade lobbed into hearth and home. At 16, he said he was plucked out of his class, driven to a courtroom and told by a judge his parents were to divorce and the teenager would have to choose with which parent he wanted to live. It was the first the young Mr Abagnale had heard of his parents’ discord. So he did whatever any ordinary teenager would do: he cried and ran out. What followed, however, was extraordinary.

It was seven years before he saw his mother; he never saw his father again.

Becoming a runaway set him on a path of crime: forging cheques, posing as a pilot, lawyer, college professor and a paediatrician. His tale of opportunism and audacity was glamorised by the Steven Spielberg film, *Catch Me if You Can*. Leonardo DiCaprio starred as the master forger.

The criminal life lasted five years, before he was imprisoned and then made the switch to a more legitimate way of life, working with the FBI and making a fortune out of consulting on embezzlement and document security, as well as selling anti-fraud technology to financial institutions, law enforcement agencies and corporations. His latest trip to London, for example, was to promote the anti-identity theft products of LexisNexis Risk Solutions, a division of Reed Elsevier.

After the talk, we meet to reflect on his remarkable career. His security consultancy business, Abagnale & Associates, was born from necessity: he could only keep a job for so long before his employers discovered his background. It became clear that he needed to turn a “lemon into lemonade” and use his criminal past to his advantage.

So he approached banks, suggesting advice on security. It took years to build trust and a client base, he says. His biggest asset was: “I’m the guy who did it. If I didn’t have the background I have, I’d just be another guy speaking about fraud.”

He has also created technology to protect people’s personal information and secure documents. Lacking technical skills – he cannot code – he works with programmers and scientists to develop software to prevent fraud and protect identities.

“I’m an extremely observant person. I can see things other people don’t see.”

Technology makes fraud easier to commit than it was in his day, he says. On the recent cyber attack on JPMorgan, he is extremely dubious about the bank’s belief that the hackers did not take additional data (credit card numbers, social security numbers, personal information).



“The hackers probably had access to it.”

The high-paying clients have served him well. Mr Abagnale is dapper – a bright white handkerchief arranged into an origami-like design sticks out of the pocket of his navy double-breasted suit. For the past 25 years, his suits have been custom-made by the Italian fashion house Brioni.

Clothes have always been important. His teenage escapades included donning the uniforms of a doctor and a pilot. He soaked the Pan Am logo off a model jet he bought for about \$2 and had it laminated on to an ID card. This he would use to cadge a lift in the cockpits of rival aeroplanes. (He never tried flying an aeroplane, he wants to point out – he was not that confident, or indeed, stupid.) Or, filling in at a hospital – “during my entire stay no one ever doubted I was a doctor”.

Looking back on that time, he sees himself as merely a runaway kid who wrote bad cheques. An opportunist not a strategist. After all, if he had contrived a premeditated plan it would never have worked. The question, “what if?” never occurred to him. “The biggest asset was I was an adolescent, so I had no fear of being caught. I didn’t think about consequences as an adult would,” he says. Being tall and having a smattering of grey hair also helped him pass himself off as older.

Yet Mr Abagnale is the consummate salesman. As it happens, even before his parents split, he had dabbled in petty crime using his father’s credit card, and was sent to a school for wayward children. “I can only say that at a very young age I was very creative and always wanted to test loopholes.”

As the years went by, his conscience began to bother him. He came to realise that the teller who cashed his forged cheque might lose their job. Loneliness rather than fear perturbed him. “I never confided in anyone. I was always somebody else.” Leading a double life was exhausting. The key to maintaining a secret identity, he claims, is to keep some elements constant and personal. He would, for example, use his middle name as part of his name.

It was inevitable, he says, that his crimes would catch up with him. It was just a matter of time. When it came – in Perpignan, France – the relief flooded through him. “You’re done running . . . It’s all over.”

In total, Mr Abagnale was convicted of \$2.5m in fraudulent cheques. But over the five years he was on the run he probably only spent about half a million dollars. “I was making a lot of money, but I was a kid. [I] didn’t know what to do with it.”

Prison was not as bad as he feared (he was extradited to Sweden before being deported to the US). The French jail was the worst; the Swedish one “was like staying a night at the Holiday Inn”; the American version was somewhere in between. While there, he played miniature golf, watched a movie at the weekends. “You don’t pay taxes, you have no bills, somebody takes care of you. If you’re sick, you go to the doctor.”

After serving four years of his 12-year sentence, he was paroled on the condition that he helped the FBI uncover cheque forgers. “The biggest asset they saw in me was that I could become anybody they needed me to. The main purpose was to do undercover work.”

It was on a job, pretending to be a social worker at an orphanage, suspected of embezzling government funds, that he met his wife, who was studying for her Masters. For the first six months they dated, she knew only his fictitious persona. In the end, he came clean, breaking FBI protocol and gambling on her acceptance of his true identity. Which she did. He credits her with turning his life around.

The 66-year-old has paid all the money back voluntarily. “I had three sons that believed I should, because I could afford to do it.” One son is now an FBI employee.

Despite his own start, he believes modern society lacks an ethical foundation. “Enron and WorldCom, Tyco and Madoff – all these people, they came from the best backgrounds, wealthy families, tremendously well-educated, went to the best schools. They had no ethics [lessons].” Consequently, he believes, when they got into positions where they could manipulate things, they did.

Education is key – both on the topic of ethics and personal protection, he believes. “If you show people there are risks, people very quickly close those roadblocks.”

This criminal past is a double-edged sword, however. He admits to bouts of frustration. “It’s always amazing to me and somewhat disheartening that people only want to write about what I did 50 years ago as a teenage boy.”

#### Podcast

**Working lives: The benefits of being a real fraudster**



Frank Abagnale is a brilliant storyteller. But his story is more interesting than most. Emma Jacobs spoke to him about his life

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