



Tom Pickett

Chief Executive Officer, Ellation



Tom Pickett began his working life as a fighter pilot before leaving the US Navy to study at Harvard Business School. He became a strategic consultant and then joined Google, where he spent a decade in senior roles, including seven years on the executive leadership team of YouTube ultimately running global content partnerships and operations. In 2014 he realised his dream of becoming a CEO, running the tech and media company Ellation, which has 50 million registered users and owns the world-leading anime brand Crunchyroll.

Among all our Convergence Trailblazers, Tom Pickett's career path is the stuff of childhood dreams.

He started out by graduating from the US Navy's legendary TOPGUN tactical course for young fighter pilots, and today runs the world's most popular brand in the cult field of Japanese animation.

In between, he spent ten years at Google, where he helped turn YouTube from a fledgling business into a company making billions of dollars a year.

We might assume that this journey has been

“Try and find a place and build something”

meticulously mapped with the precision one would expect from someone who served as an F/A-18 fighter pilot over Iraq and later trained as a strategic consultant at Harvard Business School. But Pickett says otherwise. “I think that my career has been very serendipitous,” he tells SRI's Jay Hussey. “I had no idea what I wanted to do after business school.”

Yet at each stage of his journey he was “moving forward” and “developing a new skill” which would broaden his options.

The first step was a boy's adventure story. He joined the US Navy “just because I really wanted to be a fighter pilot as a kid”. But he admits that his transition to strategic consulting, after nine years in the Navy, was not a realisation of his vocation.

It “sort of extended the decision-making process (on a future career)”, he says.

With retrospect he realises his time in the military gave him exceptional qualities that helped him stand out from other business leaders. “What you learn in the military is a lot of operational rigour, you are part of a force that has a real operational cadence, and leadership and teamwork,” he says. “As an officer in the military you generally get assigned a managerial role right out of college in whatever unit you join.”

Even though he did not feel that strategic consulting was his calling, the lessons he learned during more than two years as a senior associate at Booz Allen Hamilton were invaluable. “I did not enjoy consulting but I think it is a rigorous endeavour

“You have to learn how to think critically and how to present and tell stories backed by data to senior executives and that was a very powerful learning experience”

because you have to learn how to think critically and how to present and tell stories backed by data to senior executives and that was a very powerful learning experience,” he says. “It was kind of like taking medicine - it was a bit painful as I went through it but I am better for it.”

Pickett realised he wanted a more “operational” role and joined Google in 2004 when it was a company of only 1,800 staff. By the time he left, a decade later, it employed 60,000.

After working in Google's business operations he excelled as a senior leader in its AdSense division, helping web publishers worldwide monetise their content. Then Google senior executive Sheryl Sandberg asked him to run YouTube.

He hesitated over taking what he saw as a “risky” move. “It was actually the best decision of my life and I'm kind of embarrassed that I had doubts about it.”

But back then YouTube was an operation of less than 80 people, struggling to monetise its global appeal. Over seven years, Pickett helped it “go from this small fast-growing service with no revenue, losing hundreds of millions of dollars a year to a profitable endeavour making billions of dollars and operating globally”.

Then he did something that was “kinda crazy”, by his own admission. He quit Google to realise his ambition of becoming a CEO. “For my personal growth and not having regrets in my life I had to jump off the big ship and go try something different.” He was stepping outside of his comfort zone. “I would say that my growth vector personally from a learning perspective just started to flatten (at Google). As a CEO it was exponential.”

He took the top job at Ellation, a young media and technology company that owns Crunchyroll, the world's leading brand in anime, the hand-drawn Japanese animation that attracts a devoted global following. “I have never seen more crazy fans than in the anime space,” says Pickett. “[They are] super passionate, want to get together online, offline, hang out at conventions, go deep, meet the creators of the content, take trips to Japan...”

Here, where exceptional fandom meets a “scarcity” of quality content, is where smart companies can grow in the niches left untouched by the media giants, he believes.

On a personal level, Pickett has found his own niche at the “intersection of strategy and operations”. It led him to finding the job “that feels like the right fit with my skill set”.

Tom Cruise's catch phrase as fighter pilot Peter ‘Maverick’ Mitchell in the film Top Gun is “I feel the need - the need for speed.” But Pickett advises young leaders to slow down in switching roles. “I encourage people not to jump too much or too quickly,” he says. “Try and find a place and build something.”



Interview with Jay Hussey
CEO, North America
jhussey@sriexecutive.com

TRAILBLAZER EXPERIENCE

LATEST TRANSITION

Technology
→ Media

OTHER SECTORS

Management
Consulting
Military

BASED
USA

