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AT WORK WITH THE FT

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Georg Kell, Arabesque Partners, board vice-chairman

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At our meeting in New York, Georg Kell hands me two new business cards. One is for the United Nations Global Compact, which Mr Kell founded in 2000 to promote corporate labour and human rights standards. Having just stepped down as executive director, he is now its senior policy adviser. The other announces that he is board vice-chairman at Arabesque Partners, a sustainability-focused investment firm. This card is made of decidedly thicker paper.

Acquisition of a heavier business card marks a significant moment for Mr Kell. After nearly three decades at the UN, he is moving to asset management.

Yet for Mr Kell, the shift is less a change of direction than the next step

in his mission — to harness the power of business for good.

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“Changing asset management from within is the next challenge,” he says. “Until asset managers are integrating environmental, social and governance factors into their allocation, this agenda will not have succeeded.”

When I first met Mr Kell more than a decade ago what struck me was his crop of wiry hair (with beard to match), his nervous energy and his infectious giggle. His hair has greyed but his energy is undiminished and the giggle remains irresistible. This is a man for whom passion and seriousness can easily dissolve into lightness and laughter.

Mr Kell’s adult life did not begin easily, however. Born in Germany, he lost both parents while a young boy. “That forced me to become independent early on,” he says.

So did dropping out of college at 16 and living rough in London and Amsterdam for a year before returning to finish his engineering and economics studies at the Technical University of Berlin.

Mr Kell’s first encounter with the UN — at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development — came as a culture shock. “I started with Unctad just before the Berlin Wall came down and I realised I’d landed on another planet. You couldn’t use the word ‘profit’,” he recalls.

“Early on, I got obsessed with modernising the UN from within and working with the private sector.” This obsession has sustained him for 15 years while developing the Global Compact. But it was an unexpected turn of events that precipitated its birth.

In the late 1990s, Mr Kell helped craft a speech for Kofi Annan, then UN secretary-general, calling on business to look beyond profit and to contribute to society, the environmental and global governance.

“The reaction overwhelmed us. It made the front pages in major papers. That’s where the real story of building the organisation started.”

Before our discussion, Mr Kell takes me around the Global Compact’s new headquarters. Occupying the full floor of a building a few blocks from the UN headquarters, there is nothing unusual about it — until you reflect on how the organisation started life.

“It was chaotic,” he says. With a budget of just \$10,000, the first office in the basement of the UN had no windows and one of the team slept there. “It was a real start-up in the UN,” says Mr Kell. “The working conditions were horrible but the spirit was high.”

Fifteen years on the Global Compact has more than 8,000 corporate and 4,000 non-business signatories. Each commits to reporting annually on its steps to implement 10 principles on human

rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption.

As a voluntary initiative, the Global Compact has been accused of lacking teeth. But, says Mr Kell. “It’s not designed to be a judgmental organisation. It’s a public service provider.”

And it can eject members that fail to report on their sustainability activities (more than 5,000 have been delisted so far). “Its main contribution is transparency and shining a light on these issues,” he says.

His task now is to keep on spreading ethical corporate practices by crossing over to those who finance business. He will need all his UN experience to help him as he hands out those thick, new Arabesque business cards.

On the Desk



When I ask Mr Kell to select an object in his office with a story behind it, he places a blank piece of paper on top of his desk. “That’s how it always starts,” he says with a wry smile. Nice idea, I tell him, but a sheet of paper is not very photogenic.

Luckily he has an alternative — a model of the USS Enterprise from the 1960s *Star Trek* series, of which Mr Kell is a fan. But the model — a gift from his colleague and deputy, Gavin Power, who joined the Global Compact in 2002 — reminds Mr Kell of more than TV.

“Gavin is my dear friend,” he says. “And with him, we’ve engineered many new concepts.” It was with Mr Power, for example, that Mr Kell developed the Principles for Responsible Investment, a global network of investors.

“He refers to me as captain and he’s always using *Star Trek* analogies, like ‘There’s no intelligent life

here' and 'Beam me up'," he says, his giggle breaking out again. "For me it means friendship, but also the ability to zoom through the universe and land anywhere."

And in introducing the United Nations to the idea of working with business, it could be said that Mr Kell boldly went where no man had gone before.

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