

**Disrupt Yourself Podcast**  
**Episode 29: Walter O'Brien**

*Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption.*

*Today's guest is [Walter O'Brien](#), an Irish computer expert, and the inspiration behind the TV show *Scorpion*. Walter O'Brien is a great example of "what made you odd as a child may very well be your super power..."*

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O: I'm Irish; I grew up in Ireland on a dairy farm. Um, middle of nowhere—we to this day we still don't have, um, internet or cell phone coverage there. My parents were dairy farmers. I was a weird kid. I didn't fit in at home; I didn't fit in at school. Teachers complained that I asked too many questions. By the time I was nine they thought I was probably on the autistic scale, so they sent me for testing. Tested out with the fifth highest IQ on the planet—197. For comparison, Einstein was 160. And that explained what was wrong with me. So I joined a gifted society at a computer club. Became self-taught through trial and error and by 13 I had [hacked into NASA](#) and stolen the Shuttle blueprints. Got busted by the NSA and Interpol because I did it on my dad's dial up phone number. Ended up doing a deal with them, um, to help them stop other people getting in, in order to keep me out of trouble. So I became a government contractor at 13.

W: So, Walter, what was it like when you got busted? I mean, did people arrive at your doorstep? I mean, what was that like?

O: So When I came home from school basically the house was surrounded by black cars and my mom was on the couch crying and my dad was pissed off and I, um, sat there and spent some time with some gentlemen who were very irate. But I had prepared for this so I pulled an extradition waiver out of my school bag and showed them that and said, "If you sign this, then I'll show you how I did it." And that seemed to calm things down a little bit, although they seemed surprised that a 13 year old was lawyering up with them. So that's how it started. I went on to hack the Bank of England, was national champion for a few years, sixth in the world Olympics in programming, picked up a couple of degrees in Artificial Intelligence and Computer Science and then started a company where basically helping people solve problems--initially all technical problems. And as I grew I hired my friends to help me and I thought having a company full of geniuses was a good idea. And I was wrong. That's when I started realizing there was a thing called [EQ—emotional intelligence](#)—common sense, social skills, and that often the higher the IQ the lower the EQ. And when I researched it—I think Carnegie Mellon had a report saying 85% of your success is your EQ; 15% is your IQ. So I needed to go get some of this EQ stuff. And it was in my face, because here I am running a business where my guys are good, we're technically correct, and we're better, faster, cheaper than the competition. But that doesn't matter; we're getting beaten out by the friendly guy who's the used car salesman, who's playing golf with the CEO. And we'll lose our contract to him every time. And I can't ignore that problem; it doesn't make any sense, but I can't ignore that I'm faced with that problem over and over again. That being right didn't matter.

W: How many times did you kind of...you were right and you still weren't getting the business before you said, "Something's wrong here; I gotta figure this out." And how old were you?

O: I mean it probably happened tangibly ten or 20 times, just in terms of actually losing business through losing contracts. It was a slow realization; I think I'd figured it out a little better by 15, 16. From there to 30 I was still working on figuring it out. Well, I'd figured out what I was missing but then I have to learn how to fake it. That took a lifetime.

W: You said that as a child...I mean, obviously you're a prodigy. How old were you when you figured this out or how old were you when your parents figured out that you were not like the other kids?

O: I was probably two when they figured out I was not like the other kids, but why I was not like the other kids took a long time. And even when the IQ test happened and I got into computers and people said, "You're a genius at computers" I was the last to believe it. Cause I'm like, "Yeah, I know I'm a genius at computers—I bought you your computer." So it was like everyone around me, I had taught them, so for them to think I'm a genius isn't any kind of independent validation—to me.

W: Right. Got it. Right.

O: At two I had this insatiable appetite for solving puzzles. So my mom would get me a Rubik's Cube and Pythagoras Theorem System and a, uh, you know, Spot the Difference and books of mazes. And she'd start with the little ones and then she'd bring the 300 page ones that were like a telephone book and it would keep me happy for three months and then it would keep me happy for two months and then it would keep me happy for a month. And then I'd be through it in a week. It just got faster and faster and faster as I developed. So she'd get me older books and older puzzles, so by nine or ten I was reading Frank Rose's *Into the Heart of the Mind* which is a 1960's professor doing philosophy on artificial intelligence. Which apparently didn't help me much when I tried to discuss that on the playground in Ireland when everybody else was talking about sports. When I did the Olympics and I saw what I ranked out of 1500 contestants from like 200 countries—and I ranked sixth with no training and no coaching—I thought, "Okay, maybe I am...maybe I am good at this."

W: So you were, um, 16 when you won that?

O: 18.

W: 18, okay. So that was the first real external validation that you were different. You mentioned this business called [Scorpion](#). What does it do exactly, and what can you say about your work with the US military?

O: Ok. I have a couple of companies, but Scorpion—which was my hacker name because it was my school nickname—as the company grew we started kind of as a geek squad, fixing people's computers and printers and bad floppy disks and things like that. And then businesses started using computers so we went into point-of-sale

systems, barcode scanners and inventory stuff. And then big companies like Microsoft, IBM, Lotus, Oracle started hiring me to work on ERP systems. These are the enterprise systems that run manufacturing, planning and sales and, you know, what they call shop floor planning and forecasting. A lot of math and number crunching and I was pretty good at it. So the company kept growing and we kept hiring geniuses and high EQ people, which we call super nannies—because they'd babysit the geniuses and the customers. So we had the best communicators working with the best thinkers and that actually made it functional as opposed to dysfunctional. So what happened then was, for 20 years we solved basically any technical problem that people had...

W: Yep.

O: ..and that's pretty broad. So, from insurance underwriting to healthcare to our smart grid, etc. You ask me about military; obviously a lot I can't talk about but, ballistic missile defense, targeting systems, the Naval Command and Control System, nuclear submarines, war game planning in Afghanistan for SOCOM Navy SEALs—basically, you know, the ten billion dollar systems that protect the US. And that's why Homeland Security transferred me into the US as a national asset. That's how I got my green card, because I don't have any family here to sponsor me.

W: How many people do you have working for you?

O: It depends. If you look across all the companies the number is well over 3000. Um, so, we have about 3000 geniuses and 500 super nannies and then admin staff on top of that, depending on the different business.

W: How did you hit on the idea of super nannies? I mean, you figured out that you needed this EQ component, but how did you hit upon that idea?

O: It's like a blind man who hears better when he knows his deficiencies. So I went out, hired people with high EQ's; so single moms, elementary school teachers, psychologists, people who were the opposite of me in terms of how they approach people and their friendliness level, etc. etc. But it took us years to hone in what's a good super nanny. And it's almost harder to find a good super nanny than a good genius. Because the super nanny can compensate and fix the genius. Genius is not going to fix the super nanny. If the super nanny has a vulnerability, an insecurity—you're managing people smarter than you, so that's intimidating and they're going to figure you out and they'll tear you apart if they find a flaw. And so you have to command their respect even though they think they're superior to you. And so a good super nanny is someone who is emotional and intuitive, but they're at least 51% left brain dominant and they have the ability to turn off their feelings. Otherwise, you'd just be a puddle of tears on the ground. Let's say you were managing a team for me and I said to you 'this guy here has been researching your family, was trying to blackmail your husband, and found...and was going to sabotage the project. However, he has, um, a skill that we need him to finish for this missile defense system. So I need you to manage him, go to lunch with him, and be his best friend and smile at him for the next six months and pretend like you don't know. Now six months and a day, we'll take care of it and you won't have to deal with him ever again, but until

then, suck it up. So a super nanny has to be emotional and then be able to turn it off and control it which is a hard combination.

W: How long did it take you to figure that out?

O: It was a slow evolution. There was no lightbulb there...

W: Yeah.

O: ...just years and years of 'why is this super nanny doing great and guys love him and the customers love him and why is this one flaming out, freaking out, headaches, migraine.

W: So, I don't know if you saw this, but one of the questions, so, when I posted that I was going to be interviewing you, Emily Anthon asked the question, "What advice do you have for people with high EQ working with people with high IQ?" Any one piece of advice you would give?

O: You gotta understand you're basically two different species...

W: Got it.

O: ...two alien species.

W: Okay.

O: You're not going to think or look at anything the same way and it's the same from their point of view. You're looking at them as they're not normal; they're looking at you as you're not normal. The one thing that I know the super nannies on our side have is a huge respect for geniuses. When they see what they can do, how they can solve a problem, some intricate architecture they've laid out—they look at it and go, "Oh, my God, okay I get it. This person is an artist and they can do stuff and keep stuff in their head that the EQ person could never handle. So that's one way to respect. The other way, the high IQ person has to see that the high EQ person is not out to get them, not playing games with them, that the customer—let's say they're running late on something, or they need more budget, or they need to push the deadline back—that they can explain that and have a relationship and build political capital and work with a customer where a customer's not upset, but it takes the anxiety away from the high IQ person. They could never have that conversation; they're terrified. They don't know what words to use, they know they may get yelled at, etc. etc. So when they see how a super nanny smooths over a situation because of relationships and using the right words to do it, they're basically watching the back or protecting the back of the high IQ person.

W: Yep. Interesting.

O: So basically don't try to change each other. Accept that you're two totally different species. And just try and be complementary. Okay, let's understand my strengths, let's understand their strengths and let's see if together we can make a better human being.

W: Yeah, interesting. Okay, so you've done work with the US military, you have Scorpion—it's sort of your B2B business—and now you have a business, or an extension of that which is called [ConciergeUp](#). Can you just talk about some of the kinds of problems this particular business solves, and how it works?

O: I'm running my business for 20 years, solving technical problems. And we got really, really good at solving problems. And part of that is...had started from unusual points of view, like the customer's always wrong. And smarter customers will get that. They'll realize that if you hire a bunch of geniuses you don't want them to do what they're told; you want them to push back, question, ask why and get to the root of what's motivating you. Why are you doing this in the first place? Are you sure you're doing the right thing? Are you going down the wrong rabbit hole? Is it...have you got the appropriate risk factors to see this through, etc. So, since I had a factory for solving problems, it seemed terrible to limit it to only technical problems. So, I came up with the concept of ConciergeUp because I was at a hotel and we're used to concierging down things that are too simple to do yourself: get a limo, get tickets to a show.

W: Ahhh.

O: But what if you could concierge up things that are too complicated or you don't have time to do yourself? So what if I had a company to solve any problem? Where you get a super nanny assigned to you and they manage a bunch of geniuses and we figure it out. Which makes it kind of like rent-a-brain. And you know, if you were going to move house tomorrow you'd rent a truck because your car doesn't have the capacity to handle moving everything in your house. So everything you have...you own—your career, your happiness, your family—everything started in your brain and how astute and how good your critical thinking was. So why not rent more of that to change your life.

W: So...will you give us an example of...

O: Yeah.

W: ...one of these kinds of problems that you've solved?

O: People will go to ConciergeUp.com and all you do is type in whatever your problems are. Like you would like an affordable Santa Claus and these are your three wishes for your genius in a bottle. So basically people started typing in things like, "my daughter has anorexia. Can you find all foods that are odorless and tasteless, but high in calories and fat so we can get her back to ballerina weight." "My mom has throat cancer. Is there a way of removing the throat cancer without removing her jaw?" So non-FDA approved solutions. "I wrote a book. Can you get it on the New York Times bestseller list? And manage my whole book tour across the nation?" Um, "I was running a startup and my technical CTO just quit on me in a big fight." Which happens all the time. "He took his passwords and went home. So I need someone to come back into my business, change my passwords, run my business so it doesn't shut down on Monday, write a job description, start interviewing people, bring in a new CTO, train him up and make the whole thing like it never happened." And do that

with one phone call, like Ghostbusters. Someone else wanted to, you know, retire their parents to Florida. Talk to the parents, figure out what they wanted, help them shut down their business, break them out of their lease, sell their customer list to a competitor, auction their equipment on EBay, buy them a house in Florida with a Cadillac and an assistant and move them there. Again, one phone call, because the son was busy. So the whole point of this is we're managing this like we manage software or an engineering project.

W: Yep.

O: So if you were getting married or divorced, we would manage it with, "Okay, here's the plan, here's the budget, here's your timeline, here's your disaster recovery backup plan in case it rains," you know, etc. etc. So we're using like an engineering methodology to engineer the hell out of whatever the problem is.

W: Alright, so I came up with some questions and I thought it would be fun to kind of have you push back on these questions and sort of say, 'is that even the right question?' So, for example, our—we have a daughter; we have two children—we have a daughter who's a rising junior in high school and she would like to go to an Ivy League college. So would I type in 'how do you get into an Ivy League school' or do I type in 'which college would be the best college for my daughter?' And what would you do when you saw that question? I mean, I'm not asking you to solve it right now...

O: No, that's...

W: ...I just want to know sort of how your brain would work.

O: Right. And it's a great quest...it's a great example. So I'm glad you did...we're playing, this role playing. Um, but, so the first think I'll say is, we get those requests probably once every two or three months, and the whole magic of ConciergeUp is we become a little bit like a brain for the planet; whatever you bring us, we've probably seen it a couple of times and we might already have a checklist of how to do it...

W: Right.

O: ...which gives us a huge advantage. So it's not our first rodeo.

W: Yeah.

O: What we would do when we talk to you is say things like, "Okay, um, what does your daughter want to do? Does she know what she wants to do? And, have we got situational matching with [Myers Briggs](#) to know that her brain is suitable for that or is she going to suck at it? Has she interned anywhere to know that the real job is not like it is on TV. You know, if she wanted to do CSI or something else. Now there are jobs where people care about what college you went to. If you're a lawyer or a doctor, you care. Half the benefit of college is the alumni you hook up with. If you went to Harvard, it's not about Harvard; it's about the alumni for the rest of your life. But depending on what job you're doing, people may not give a damn about where you got your degree or what it's in. Um, so the first thing is, you know, why does she care about an Ivy League college? Because we've got to step back from that and ask if she's

sure what she wants to do and is her brain suited for it and does she know in reality what the job is really like. And has she looked at the government salary reports to see, on average, what people make in that job. Because people look at some lawyers or plastic surgeons or doctors or whatever and ‘oh, they’re all making millions.’ No, on average, some of them, they make about 150 grand a year.

W: Yeah.

O: Now that might be great but at least let’s know what the average is. And where does she want to do it? You know, if she wants to travel the world and work different places then being a lawyer’s a bad idea because she’ll only be qualified in the US...

W: Right.

O: ...to do it. She may not realize that. We look at the whole picture. You know, what does her happiness in life look like? Second thing, the cost. Can she afford that; can her parents afford that or does she have to get a scholarship? So we start looking at those numbers per colleges and start doing your ratios and the math—because life is a casino and we play the odds. So we’re going to figure out, okay, which of the Ivy League colleges is she most likely to get into for her particular practice and then...for the choices she’s putting down, we also need to figure out—as a backup plan—the colleges that have the highest transfer rate. We’ll do the college next door, that’s easier to get into, that no one ever heard of; do three semesters there and then you’re right in, because they transfer, you know, 2000 students every quarter, in. So find a backdoor. Um, so the conversation...the first conversation would be like that. We tear apart the problem...

W: Love it.

O: ...start laying out all these things.

W: Love it.

O: And say, ‘okay, now you’ve rented a brain, so we’re starting to think of things you might not have thought of.’

W: What if...what if, um, Bill Belichick from the Patriots came to you and said, “Walter, what’s the strategy that’s going to win us the Super Bowl?” Have you had...I have to think that people have come to you with those kinds of questions—is that a question you would take on?

O: All the time. These are called...

W: No way!

O: ...these are called our [Moneyball](#) questions. So, we have moneyballed racehorses, um, and won champion...national championships four times.

W: Okay.

O: But that's a non-team based sport, so we're just looking at heart capacity, lung capacity, adrenalin storage, size of the foot, size of the legs and if we look at seven years of winners and seven years of losers, the computer will tell us what the winners have in common all the way down to their DNA. So we could know before a horse is born that it's not going to be a winning racehorse. Secondly, we have people come to us with things like, 'Hey, I want to buy a football team or a hockey team. Let's find one, negotiate the price and then run everything from the stadium down to the parking and concession stands.' Now if you're running a team, um, it's about enhancing it. Can we predict which team is going to win? No, because they're humans and it's a team based sport. So I don't know which guy is going through a hangover and which guy his wife cheated on him and which guy is under or going through a divorce. But what we can do is when you're drafting people in, you can do the math on all the aspects of drafting that person like we would with a racehorse. What makes a good football player per position.

W: Got it. Let's talk a little bit about disruption. So could you share a time when you...you've either disrupted yourself or disrupted your business?

O: Thinking outside the box is always a good idea, because that's where the instructions are written...

W: Yep.

O: ...but, you know, when you do it every day it becomes very...it's hard to disrupt something that's constantly disrupting. However, we did have a couple of big pivotal moments. When I talked about ConciergeUp and opening up the think tank to the general public and not just the military, that was a big disruption. You know, folks on our side were terrified, but what do we know about this and that versus technology, but it's worked...it's worked and we've helped a lot of people.

W: Yeah.

O: Another big one was when we did start getting up to 3000 requests in the door, for help, we started running out of geniuses. So how do we find more geniuses? So, we thought about it. If I write a book the millennials probably won't read it. If I made a movie they'd forget my name in six months, but if we replace CSI as the number one [TV show](#) on the air for the next ten years, then maybe the geniuses will come find us and the twelve year olds out their will grow up wanting to be scientists and problem solvers instead of wanting to be Kim Kardashian. And that's got to be good for the country. So, that's what we did, three years ago. We created the [TV show Scorpion](#) and now we're taping Season 4 and we'll probably go into syndication. So, you know, we concierged up ourselves and that was quite...I mean, who would think that when you're sitting in the middle of a consultancy company going, "Yeah, we need a TV show." Like Cyber McGyver. Now we had people who were curious about us; we had trolls attacking us online, we had me being more of a public figure than I was comfortable with. So we went from talking to a very small select group of elite people with problems to the whole frigging general public calling us and figuring out how do we talk to them? How do we screen them? How do we help the people we can help? Etc. etc. And that was a huge disruption to my business, but a good one.



W: I guess last question for you is, what will you do to disrupt yourself in the next 12 months?

O: Well, that's a little tricky at this point because I'm pretty much up for anything. Um, alright, I should have the perfect answer for that. Remember I talked about life balancing the IQ and EQ and so on. So I've been working on all that. For anybody who's seen me there's one of them that I've completely ignored which is body intelligence and health. I've basically been hunched over a keyboard for 20 years trying to help other people and pretty much forgot about myself. So, I can't help people if I'm dead ten years earlier than I should be...

W: No, you cannot.

O: ...so I just flipped the shift on that tradeoff. So I'm now on a health kick—just, just starting—but you know, the prepped meals being delivered and the protein shakes and the...taking the right vitamins and getting a personal trainer to come to the house because I can't get out. Um, and you know, we'll see what happens over the next six months but so far it's been good signs and I've stuck with it for a couple of weeks, which is good, and I'm not sneaking out for a Red Bull and a Snickers bar, which is what I was worried I'd be doing. So, um....

W: That's a big disruption.

O: That's, that's a big personal disruption because that's the only thing I haven't done before and that's a big deal.

W: Well, thank you very much for, um, spending all this time. I think people are going to be fascinated. I really appreciate it and, um, thank you again.

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*I loved Walter's a-ha about the importance of EQ. While it's true that we sometimes undervalue who we are, we can also overvalue who we are. It was also interesting to hear how the TV show Scorpion came about. Most of like to project ourselves onto actors, so it's always fun to get behind the scenes. My favorite part was listening to Walter's mind work – how he would go about getting my daughter into an Ivy League school. He didn't know it was coming, but he's smart, so why not?*

*Thank you again to Walter O'Brien for being today's guest. I'm Whitney Johnson, and this is Disrupt Yourself.*