

Cambridge don can also talk business

Andrew Herbert of Microsoft's Cambridge Research Laboratory reminds the firm of its European roots

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Researchers are well known for being averse to politics – especially when it interferes with their research. But when you run an international research lab for Microsoft, recently in the headlines for European Commission

findings that it has operated as a monopoly and must be punished, it's hard to avoid visibility.

"The EMEA [Europe, Middle East and Africa] office is aware there are perceptions of the company that have to be addressed," says Dr Andrew Herbert, director of Microsoft's Cambridge

Research Laboratory in Britain. To that end, Microsoft's European HQ must particularly value Dr Herbert, who is a businessman and academic researcher.

He no doubt functions as a useful reminder that Microsoft is not purely a US firm but has growing European roots. He can talk research with researchers, and business with the corporate world, duties that occupy a quarter of his time, he says. And he carries the cachet of his Cambridge University affiliation into the field.

Last week, he was in Dublin to meet researchers at a UCD event and talked to business customers. He also met researchers at Media Lab Europe (MLE).

"They're an interesting group," he says. "They're a group we might be interested in being involved with."

He laughs off suggestions of secret negotiations, but says the Cambridge Lab wants a group of people who might look more at applications to "balance things out", and that MLE works on the applications end.

"Not that we're poaching people," he laughs.

"We invest a lot in external research with academic partners," he says. At events like last week's, "we give them an update on what's happening with Microsoft Research".

What's happening at the moment is work around new computing languages, and with trust and security issues in computing, he says. Seven years after Microsoft founder and chairman Mr Bill Gates flew into Cambridge University in a helicopter to

announce the £50 million laboratory project, the lab is firmly entrenched in the university.

Operating initially from temporary offices on Cambridge grounds, it now has dedicated buildings. It has also built up a set of research teams that have grown organically from a core group set up by the lab's first director, internationally-renowned researcher Dr Roger Needham who died suddenly from cancer last year.

"We went back a long way. It was a great blow," says Dr Herbert, who had worked with Dr Needham since the 1970s. He suspects Dr Needham brought him in three years earlier with a successor in mind because they shared expertise in areas that have become part of the lab's research focus.

He says: "Roger had done a marvellous job of building up the lab from ground zero and in understanding that its strength was its people." He was also recognised as an independent mind, an ideal first leader of a Microsoft-run lab. When the project was announced, there were mutterings that Cambridge had sold out to the money of the giant US firm. Would the cream of Britain's researchers – and Europe's – be forced into designing consumer products for the US market?

But Dr Needham set up the lab in his own way. And he was not averse to admitting with some glee in an *Irish Times* interview that a great advantage to working from Cambridge for Microsoft was distance – with its Washington headquarters thousands of

miles and eight time zones away.

"Which is a style I intend to continue," Dr Herbert says. He describes part of his job as maintaining "excellent relationships" with "the mother ship". "Microsoft Cambridge is a small company within a large company," he says, and in that sense has a certain independence.

His style seems to be one of not directing research too strongly. "If you start telling researchers what to research, you get poorer results." He likes throwing problems at them, "which challenges the research, which is different from directing them. And you make sure they have the resources." Some of the initial groups "were reaching critical mass" by the time he joined three years ago. Now, hiring and further developing research programmes is a matter of "cantilevering out from that core competence. You start to see where the holes are. So in some sense, new hires are self-selecting. Research always starts to build a life of its own.

He likes newer lab members to straddle areas of interest. "We've done a lot of hiring of people with one foot in one camp and one in something completely new. Sometimes if you add a number of pieces to various groups, those pieces coalesce." Has Microsoft's recent European legal woes dented its ability to hire researchers? "I'm sure there are people who don't want to work with us, who are unhappy with how large a company Microsoft is and the company itself."

But he says the strong position of Microsoft products in the Euro-

pean market as a sign that "the technology is here [in this market] and people want to use it". He also points to a competition for young college coders that had a huge response, and other projects where the firm has released some code – for example, from Windows CE, the operating systems for handhelds – to see what applications third parties might come up with.

"In those projects we're primarily inviting people to push the envelope. We're looking for ideas. And out of that work came ... a lot of work with Lancaster University," he says.

From Microsoft's point of view, the firm primarily markets platforms (Windows), and new applications help to seed additional markets for the company.

Given Microsoft's focus on addressing security problems – the firm has been strongly criticized for vulnerabilities in its software and its slowness in correcting them – does management turn to Cambridge and demand it work on certain problems?

No, says Dr Herbert. "It's pretty hands off. But that's also a legacy of research spotting problems before others in the company."

After his many years in research, and in his new role as head of the Cambridge Lab, what motivates him most in his job? "The relentless flow of new technology to understand. I love that," he says.

"And working with some of the smartest people. It's very nice to work with very highly motivated people who are passionate about technology."