

John Garrett Podcast: Sam Ovett

John: Welcome to Episode 391 of What's Your "And"? This is John Garrett, and each Wednesday, I interview a professional who, just like me, is known for a hobby or a passion or an interest outside of work. To put it another way, it's encouraging people to find their "And", those things above and beyond your technical skills, the things that actually differentiate you when you're at work.

If you like what the show is about, be sure to check out the book on Amazon, Indigo, Barnes and Noble, Bookshop, a few other websites. All the links are at whatsyourand.com. If you want me to read it to you, look for What's Your "And"? on Audible or wherever you get your audio books. It's out now.

The book goes more in-depth with the research behind why these outside of work passions are so crucial to your corporate culture, and I can't say how much it means that everyone's reading it and writing such great reviews on Amazon and, more importantly, changing the cultures where they work because of it.

Please don't forget to hit subscribe to the podcast so you don't miss any of the future episodes. I love sharing such interesting stories each and every week, and this week is no different with my guest, Sam Ovett. He's the founder of Mobile Pocket Office, and now he's with me here today. Sam, thanks so much for taking time to be with me on What's Your "And"?

Sam: Hey, John, it's good to be here. I will say, it just snowed 10 inches at the house, so there's some skiing to be had. You're actually not that far down the road. So, after this, I may have to get some lunch laps in at the resort, eight miles from our house.

John: That's awesome, man. I'm super jealous that I can't wait to talk more about this, but first, I have these rapid-fire questions, get to know Sam right out of the gate here. This is going to be fun. Do you have a favorite color?

Sam: Blue.

John: Blue. Okay, mine too. How about a least favorite color?

Sam: Orange doesn't really suit me quite well, surprisingly, even though I have red hair.

John: Right. That's the only orange I need. How about cats or dogs?

Sam: Dogs, for sure, 100%. I've got a guard dog. Her name's Lula. We love her. She's great.

John: That's awesome. What kind of dog?

Sam: She's rescue. We were at the dog park, and they're like, what kind of dog is this? Is this a Basenji Border Collie mix? I looked that up on Google, and it was like, there's a bunch of Lulas. So, we think, without any testing, Basenji Border Collie mix at least, pretty roughly. Google it and you'll see pictures of that kind of dog.

John: That's cool. Very cool. More suit and tie or jeans and a T-shirt.

Sam: Jeans and a T-shirt. I can do both, but I'm wearing jeans and a T-shirt right now.

John: Right. Exactly, if I had to choose. There you go. How about a favorite actor or an actress?

Sam: Oh, I am just the worst with movies and actresses. It's cliché, I really like James Bond. That's a lot of different actors, depending on which one.

John: The character itself works. That's totally cool. We're not even going to argue over which one was best. We can let someone else do that. There you go. Are you more of an early bird or a night owl?

Sam: Early bird.

John: Oh, okay. All right. There you go. How about more Star Wars or Star Trek?

Sam: Star Trek, and that's just because we grew up and our dad was always saying quotes about it.

John: Okay.

Sam: I've got my hands up in this.

John: The Vulcan...

Sam: Yeah.

John: The Spock whatever. That's awesome. PC or a Mac?

Sam: Mac for sure. I think a PC is just, they're so hard to use and clunky and difficult. They're good because you can put some different software on it that you can't on a Mac. Otherwise, it's a waste of your time.

John: There you go. All right. All right. How about a favorite ice cream flavor? Oh, okay. I think that's the second time I've heard that one on here. Not super popular so it's always available. That's awesome, man. Very cool. How about favorite season, spring, summer, fall or winter?

Sam: I love winter, and we live in winter. We're up in the mountains, so we're used to it, but I think the heat, straight up, like dead dog days of summer is probably my least favorite. I like all the others because I always have a sport for the others. In the dog days of summer, actually that's good too, because then you can go Alpine rock climbing. It's a tough toss-up. If you have something to do in all the seasons, I think it's easy to love all the seasons.

John: Nice. Okay, I'll take that. I'll take that. How about a favorite cereal?

Sam: I don't really eat that much cereal.

John: Even as a kid? Okay, all right.

Sam: No, I'm an eggs guy.

John: Oh, an eggs guy. All right. All right. How about your first concert?

Sam: It was a Phish concert, I'm pretty sure.

John: Oh, okay. All right. There you go.

Sam: With this one friend, he was super into it, and we went. He was like, this is the greatest thing ever. You know how they are. They're really, really into it.

John: Right? You're like, is this just one long song? Are they going to play a second song?

Sam: Yeah.

John: When does the next song start? That's funny.

Sam: That's how I feel about it, for sure. We always just set random things related to Phish.

John: Right? Just for you, skiing or kayaking.

Sam: That's a toss-up. Right now it's skiing, for sure, right now, but I used to kayak professionally. Maybe it's just because I'm onto a different phase of trying to get really good at something.

John: Sure. No, no, totally. I understand. Three more, three more. Favorite number.

Sam: 13.

John: Is there a reason?

Sam: Yeah, because it's everybody's unlucky number, so I like it.

John: Okay. All right. There you go. I love that. When it comes to books, since the audio version of mine is out now, audio, Kindle or real books.

Sam: Okay, so if it's got pictures and diagrams, and I'm trying to learn something from that perspective, then I want a physical book. If it's just all text, then I want the Kindle. Then if the narration is good, and I haven't listened to yours, John.

John: It sounds like this voice reading you the book.

Sam: Okay, then I want audio book. Because the worst is when you get an audio book where you're actually listening to someone else read the author's book, and you're like, I want to hear from the person who wrote it and connect with him.

John: It was so hard to do, man. I'm not even going to lie. Luckily, my book's very conversational in tone, even the text is. Reading it should have been easy, but it was eight hours to record a 200-page book. It was crazy but, yeah, it was cool to do.

Sam: Well, I'm getting an audio copy of your book, John.

John: Okay. All right. I'll hook you up, man. I'll hook you up.

Sam: No, I'm going to go buy one.

John: Oh, okay. All right. Well, you're too kind man. You're too kind. I sold one now. All right, perfect. The last one, the favorite thing you have or the favorite thing you own.

Sam: The favorite thing I have or I own. Well, I don't know. That's an interesting — things, you can replace things. We bought our house in June here. I love that. It's on an acre. We have tons of space up in the mountains. I love that. The rest is like, things are things. There's a lot of things I love and want. I always want the latest this gear or that gear, but it's stuff.

John: Yeah, yeah, and then you wait six months, there's a new thing that you want too. It's like, all right.

Sam: Yeah, and if I've used it well, then I've destroyed it.

John: Right. Which leads in perfectly to talking about just high adventure/kayaking/skiing/all of those things. Maybe we'll start with the kayaking. How did you get started with that?

Sam: The way I got started with kayaking is actually my brother, who's my best friend — my wife and my brother are my best friends — my brother, I think he was nine or 10, and he wanted to kayak. He found this camp online that you could go to, and he showed our parents. He said, "I want to go to kayak camp." It was a week-long summer camp. He showed them. They're like, okay, yeah, sounds good. We were involved in Scout —

John: Was it camp with a K? Was the kayak and the camp and KKK?

Sam: Oh, that would be great but, no, this is — it was White Water Learning Center of Georgia, because we grew up in Georgia.

John: Oh, wow. Okay.

Sam: It was actually just this gentleman who was, I think he was a retired banker, now that I think about it. He was in his 60s, and he started this camp to introduce kids to whitewater. He drove this 15-passenger van with a trailer full of kayaks. He drove it — we grew up in Roswell, which is like northeast of Atlanta. We would meet in town.

There are rivers, but there's not a lot of good whitewater down there. He had to drive up to the North Georgia mountains, which was like 45 minutes to an hour. Not too far but every day for that camp, he would drive, and he would just fly in this van with kids in it. If you think back, we were just hauling down the road with all these kayaks and these kids in the van, and then an instructor too that was helping him out. He'd go to the lake for two days.

So, Max went one summer, and then Max was like, oh, this is great. I love whitewater. He was all psyched out. He's, I guess, 10 or 11 now. So I was like, well, I want to go. We were involved in Scouts, growing up, and so that was definitely an introduction to high adventure things and skill sets around that, which was a big part of our development in that arena. That was the very first.

After that, Max just got really into — we were into rock climbing because it was easier to do in your house. A few years later, he went to a summer camp. So, really, I guess I attribute it to my brother, Max, and our parents saying, yeah, let's do this. He was super motivated. He wanted to do this. I was just like, even though my younger brother, he was just psyched out. I was like, all right, we'll do this.

We were always doing something, mountain biking, whatever, and our parents would get us involved in these different sports activities. Outdoors was a big thing that they liked, and so we did it too. We were always excited about the outdoors. That was something we were always into, and different outdoor sports. Yeah, so that's how we got into it.

Then, as soon as I was old enough, it was right before college or the summer of, I started — I was like, I want to be a whitewater guide. I want to guide rafts and kayaks, take people down rivers. So I started guiding with a company in western North Carolina called Endless River Adventures, and that is where it all really took off. That was like the entree into the world of whitewater kayaking and guiding in the States and a little bit internationally in Ecuador, and doing more expedition-type trips, and then getting introduced to the different brands because they had a retail shop, which led to the sponsorship for professional kayaking. If you ask my dad, I went to college for a degree in Environmental Science/whitewater kayaking.

John: Right. Exactly.

Sam: Because I would schedule my classes, I'd have class, Tuesday to Thursday, and then I'd guide and kayak, Friday, Saturday, Sunday and then Monday. So that's how we got into it. Whitewater was the basis for all this adventure stuff we do.

We learned how to learn a new sport. We learned how to excel, how to become good at something, and then those lessons have translated, because we decided to be aware of them, to the rest of our life, and also what we do in business. I can talk about that separately because the point is that there's a life outside of business.

That's where I met my wife, working on the rivers. She was running the outfitter. That's probably one of the largest influences in my life is whitewater, led to the way I live my life and what we do and how we think about things.

John: Yeah, because what's cool is, from doing all these shows, is how much your outside-of-work interests impact the other parts of your life and vice versa. We can't really keep them separate. You're Sam. I can't say, Sam, not the kayaker part, can you leave that outside? It's no, no, it all comes with me everywhere I go. What is specifically, mindset-wise, would you say, or skill set-wise, translates over from the adventures and the kayaking?

Sam: Yes. I think this is an interesting thing. You don't have to be doing this thing at a professional level, or guiding at this extremely high level, to take these lessons away. I think that's one of the beauties, for many of these, what are called high adventure sports, where there's a component of athleticism, there's a component of risk, there's a component of judgment involved in what you're doing. Those lessons are probably, outside of the joy of doing the actual thing and the experiences that they give you, those lessons are the ones that you can take, in my opinion, and apply to other aspects of your life.

From a business component, I always bring those back in. I'm looking at, if we take the whitewater analogy because that's the thing that I've excelled the most at, in my life, and from a sports perspective; you're working either on a team of other people that you're going down the river with. You're making independent decisions yourself, in your boat, but you're with a team of people. If you're guiding, then you're guiding people through an experience who have less experience with that environment, which is a lot of times what people do in business. You're working with other people. If you have a client relationship with people, then you're working with people who have less experience in the domain that they've hired you to effectively guide them through and hopefully give them the best experience they can without killing them or, in this case, killing their business.

John: Right. Right.

Sam: You're looking at these components of objective and subjective risk. What is actually risky here that we're doing, and what is just scary but not actually that dangerous? For me, I'm looking at, downstream in the process, to use that metaphor, we're going to make changes to business. Our company does automation and process consulting and implementation, so we're making changes to businesses quite a bit. We are always looking at what is the risk? That's objective, meaning, usually your revenue. When we make those changes, let's make them in increments that are measurable, and we're protecting the potential risk of impacting your revenue. If we're trying something new that could affect how you do business and your customers' experiences, let's think about what's the risk and how can we try it on a small portion of customers first, and then scale that up to the rest of the organization.

John: Right.

Sam: So, using this framework of assessing hazards that are real, identifying them, and then not being afraid of the things that are just maybe new to you. That's new, but it's not that dangerous. It's just new. It's scary because it's different, but it's not actually going to harm you, so let's try it.

John: Yeah, and if you have the guide, someone like you, then it minimizes the risk, for sure.

Sam: It gives you that opportunity to really explain. Okay, we've seen this before in other industries or other businesses. Guess what? You're going to be okay. Or, hey, that thing that you think is totally good to go, is not. It's actually really dangerous and has a potential to negatively impact you in a massive way. You may not be thinking about that, but we've seen it before, and so let's guide you away from that.

John: Right. No, I love that man, and in that analogy. Plus, when you're kayaking — I mean, I've done it a very minimal amount, but canoed a bunch, as well — there are split decisions that you're making on the river because you're going and then all of a sudden, it's like, oh, there's a log there or a rock there that I didn't see under the water, that's just high enough but not enough to create a rapid. It's those quick decisions that you have to make that sometimes you do have to make in business. With courage and conviction, you decide and do it. You can't hesitate because that's when bad things happen.

Sam: It also leads to this perspective, and this is maybe an unfortunate thing but fortunate at the same time, being in that world of serious high adventure, accidents happen. We've, unfortunately, known people who've passed away and been involved in accidents, where

we're responding to them. At the end of the day, in business, not 100% true, but in the decisions of marketing and sales and fulfillment-type of automation, people don't die.

John: Right. Exactly. Exactly.

Sam: Nobody's going to die today. It's going to be okay, but there is the seriousness of we're impacting your revenue and your livelihood. Hopefully, positively is what we aim to do with people, but there are risks we're taking with people's business, with them, and guiding them through that risk and that experience. It's perspective I'm able to keep to say, nobody's going to die today. Because there are crises in business.

John: Oh, for sure.

Sam: It's stressful, but having dealt with crisis where people have actually died, it's not as stressful as my email went out wrong. Okay. Well, that's okay. You can —

John: Put things in perspective.

Sam: Yeah, exactly.

John: Yeah, just make everybody wear a life jacket and a helmet, and then you'll be fine.

Sam: Then get on your keyboard.

John: Right. Exactly. Why is everyone in the cubicle sitting in there with their helmet on? Safety first. You never know. Safety first. Do you have a favorite river or a favorite story from your kayaking days?

Sam: Oh, man, there are just endless amounts.

John: I can imagine.

Sam: I would say I think that one of the cool things — I like to try and relate these stories in a context that are useful — is the rivers you spend a lot of time on, that are comfortable to you. You know all the nuances of. You've seen them at different water levels, and you know them in different seasons. Then there are new rivers that you go to, you've never been to before. I think that idea that you can take that and relate it to experiences that you're comfortable with, that you're familiar with, and go, okay, well, what lessons do I know from the river that I'm familiar with? What do I do there? I know how to operate there. I'm comfortable. If I go to this new river, what features are familiar to me? Different place, different environment, different feeling, but the waters can do similar things, given similar circumstances.

So, if you're putting yourself in new situations, look for what's familiar in the situation and then identify what's different. That way, you can mentally stop thinking about the familiar things. You know how to handle that. When you get these new things you can focus your attention on, okay, how do I deal with this new challenge or problem or address it or use it to my advantage? All the rivers are wonderful. My favorite river is usually the one that's closest to me at the time.

John: Right. There you go.

Sam: I definitely have some ones that I love, for sure. If you can recognize that the difference between a familiar and an unfamiliar environment, and then in that unfamiliar environment, when you're pushing into these new challenges, okay, what do you know that's — how do you operate in this portion of the experience? Cool. You know what to do. How do you operate in this other portion of experience is totally different. That's what you can focus your time and energy on. You don't have to stress about the whole experience.

John: Right. Yeah, because you've done it before. Yeah, you've got this part down, so only focus on the new stuff that you're learning or that's new to you. Yeah, that's such a great parallel for what you're doing with Mobile Pocket Office as well. It's exactly that.

Sam: Right, because we come into a business, and we're always, each business is different. Hire different people, they sell something different, they'd do it in a slightly different way, but there's a lot of familiar things in how businesses operate. So we pull those lessons from the whitewater world. Now I'm really into skiing and backcountry skiing and getting more into Alpine rock climbing and that kind of stuff. Pulling those lessons from it.

Okay, I know how to tie into the rope. I know how to belay somebody. I know how to ski down this type of snow on this pitch. I know my bindings work the same here, as they do anywhere else. Now, what's different about it? That's what I need to focus on and address and spend my energy on?

John: Yeah. No, I love it, man. That's awesome. Yeah, it is interesting how much that plays into so many different aspects of your life, as well. How much do you feel, at a larger organization, that it should matter and creating that atmosphere where people can share those hobbies and passions? Versus how much is it on the individual to maybe just start a conversation in their little small circle?

Sam: Well, it's dependent. If you've got a leader who encourages that at an organization, it's going to be easier, bottom line.

John: Definitely.

Sam: If it doesn't exist, then it's going to be on you to just start having that conversation. Probably the best way is, yes, you're interesting to your coworkers, but what's probably more interesting is you asking them about themselves and what they do outside, because we all like to talk about ourselves. That's our favorite subject. If you're asking others that you work with, what are their hobbies, what do they do, oh, what did you get up to this weekend; then that's going to naturally bring that conversation. You're probably going to feel more connected at your office and your work, like we are.

One of our team members is a big skateboarder. I always ask him, oh, send me some video. What trick are you working on? But you've got to be genuine about it. You've got to actually be interested, not like, oh, I've got this new tactic. I'm going to ask my —

John: Right? Like a checklist?

Sam: Yeah. Okay, I asked him about it. Now why aren't my business relationships better?

John: Right, right. Yeah, because then there's the follow-up, like you said. Hey, you were working on this new trick, let's see the video, type of thing, because I actually want to see this. This is awesome. You're celebrating with them, the things that really light them up.

Sam: I got him a skateboard deck that he really wanted, not just some random one, but I found out what he was really interested in and then got him this super special, to him, deck. Funny thing is he hasn't even skated. He hung it in his home office.

John: Right. I don't want to touch it.

Sam: Yeah, I was like, dude, you need to skate that. We can get you more decks.

John: Right? If you're not using it, you're not going to break it. You're not doing it.

Sam: Exactly. That's definitely my approach to that stack. I think it's just a matter of being interested in people. It doesn't have to be high adventure. It could be they're interested in cooking or whatever that thing is that just fires them up. Most people have something outside of just work and business. It could be their kids and their family is their big hobby.

John: Yeah, or what they do with the family.

Sam: Right, exactly. So I think just being aware and trying to pay attention and asking people and being genuinely interested go a long way. Your connection to whatever you're doing, it probably makes it feel a little more meaningful, and your coworkers' connection to you and their connection to what they do. Also they're going to — when you guys need to burn the midnight oil and make it happen for some project, who do you think they're going to be more excited about working with? The person who actually gives a shit about them and asks about them, or the person who is all business all the time, no fun, doesn't care about them as an individual?

John: Why are you looking at me in the eyes? Get back to the computer? What?

Sam: Yeah. Those experiences and that conversation make a big difference. Now, I don't work in a huge organization. We're small, but I'm a human. I work with other people, and we do have a team.

John: Yeah, we all are. Even if you work for a large, huge global corporation, you're little department is no different than that.

Sam: That's right. You work with a team of people.

John: Yeah. Even if the CEO of the organization thinks a certain way, your group doesn't have to. Your group can be the coolest group in the world.

Sam: And that influence can spread throughout, over time. Don't expect it to happen overnight if this is the culture you want, and you're not the top-down leadership, but if you are, you can make it spread pretty fast if you start asking people.

John: I agree, man. I agree.

Sam: The reverse is going to be harder, but it is there. At least your team is tight, and people back you up way more. I'll be back. They'll pull through for you. People will stop being clock watchers and just trying to get out of there.

John: Yeah, exactly, and they'll stay longer because you actually care. They can do that job at a bunch of different places with different logos.

Sam: Why do people leave places is because of the people. It's largely because of their boss, whoever they work with. So, if you are somebody's boss, hopefully you're trying to think like they're — leading them because you're working with another human, not just a robot. We implement robotic stuff for people, with automation.

John: They can be more human because then they don't have to do those mundane tasks, and now the robots are, the AI and all that.

Sam: So I think the big takeaway is take these things that when you're fired up and passionate about something, and that's your "and", and it's outside of what you do, from a revenue, this is how I make money perspective; then that can be somebody's "and". There are plenty of people who have that. For the large majority — I mean, I'm very passionate about what I do, but I'm also very passionate about back country skiing and kayaking and climbing. Those things fuel the way that I look at situations and the way that I approach them, and also the discussions and conversations I have. If you can ask people, and if somebody asks me about that stuff, I'm going to light up and be excited that you are interested in that aspect of my life as well, because this is another dimension.

John: Exactly. No, I love it, man, and such a great takeaway for everybody listening, of just show that genuine interest, ask and see where it goes. Like you said, at the end of the day, it's not that high risk. No one's going to die.

Sam: Yeah, and nobody's going to die if you ask. Nobody's going to freak out. They're going to be like, oh. They're probably going to be taken aback at first, if that's not the norm, and then they're going to probably open up if you keep asking and keep showing an interest.

And think it's cool. Yeah, exactly. No, I love it, man. That's awesome. It's only fair though, since I started out the episode, rudely peppering you with questions, that I turn the tables. Welcome to the first episode of the Sam Ovet **John:** podcast. Thanks for having me on, Sam. I booked myself, so you really have no choice. Here I am. I'm all yours, man. All yours.

Sam: John, what is your "and"? What do you do? I talked to you about coming up to go back country skiing, and I'm going to drag you up here to Nederland since you're down the road in Denver.

John: Right, get up in the mountains. I mean, definitely college football is huge. Ice cream, I'm a little bit of a junkie on ice cream. Concerts are awesome.

Sam: College football, who's the team?

John: Yeah, I graduated from Notre Dame, so, Notre Dame. All college football I love, but definitely Notre Dame is my team.

Sam: Nice. Ice cream, what's your flavor?

John: Yeah, my go-tos are anything with massive chunks in the ice cream, so I can get most calories per spoon.

Sam: Cookie dough or non-cookie dough.

John: Cookie dough, brownie fudge chunk, whatever.

Sam: If you're getting an ice cream near your house or somewhere in Denver, where's the best spot to go? I mean, it's tough. You've got a pandemic. We're in the middle of pandemic still.

John: Yeah. No, absolutely. There's a place here in Denver, Little Man Ice Cream, and it looks like an old milk jug, like the metal milk jug from the old days. Or maybe they still use them, I'm not sure but, yeah, Little Man Ice Cream in Highlands there, just across downtown, I-25.

Sam: Okay, so 2620 16th Street, Denver, Colorado, Little Man Ice Cream. I just looked it up.

John: There it is. Yep, there it is. Throw it out there. Everybody go. They have this Salted Oreo.

Sam: What are you getting there? Salted Oreo?

John: Yeah, Salted Oreo, and it is, yeah, it is really good.

Sam: Waffle cone or sugar cone.

John: Oh, you know, that's a good —

Sam: Or a cup. Or buy a cup.

John: Here's what I do. I do the cup, but I get the waffle cone on top. I get both, but I don't spill it all over. Yeah, so, cup but with the cone sticking out of it, if that makes sense.

Sam: Big spoon or tasting spoon.

John: Oh, yeah, big spoon, and I'm not sharing, one spoon. You get your own, man. You get your own.

Sam: Yeah, that's good. Since you're already close, we have to have you up here because you're — it's pretty unique that people are this close and so that would be cool.

John: No, I'm looking forward to it, man. Absolutely. Thank you so much for being a part of What's Your "And"? This has been really, really fun.

Sam: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

John: Absolutely, and everybody listening, if you want to see some pictures of Sam in action or connect with him on social media, be sure to go to whatsyourand.com. All the links are there. While you're on the page, please click that big button, do the anonymous research survey about corporate culture, and don't forget to check out the book.

Thanks again for subscribing on iTunes or whatever app you use and for sharing this with your friends so they get the message that we're all trying to spread, that who you are is so much more than what you do.