

BNZ banks on Bongard's proven nous

Georgina Bond

John Bongard didn't think he'd wash up working with a bank when he retired from the helm of whiteware manufacturer Fisher & Paykel last year.

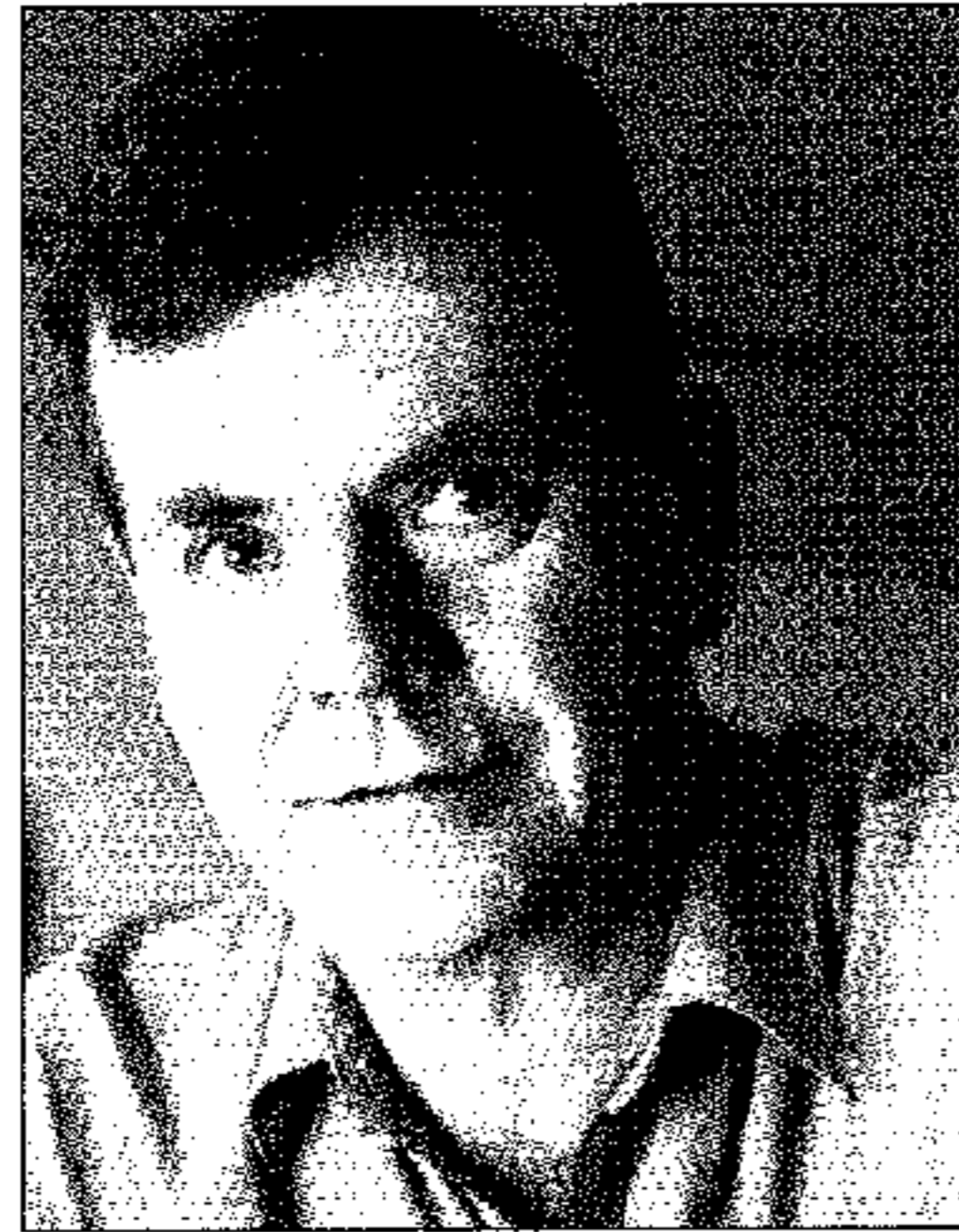
But having just been named the first external chairman of the Bank of New Zealand's new BNZ Partners Centre at Highbrook, Manukau City, that's the latest addition to his CV.

Opening in mid-August, the Highbrook BNZ Partners Business Centre is the eighth of what is planned to be 19 centres set up by end of the year as the bank moves to extend beyond traditional banking and lending to more active business facilitation.

The centres provide a professional office space for local businesses to host meetings, and access facilities and technology such as boardrooms, conferencing and presentation equipment they could not justify the outlay to own.

Partners centre teams will also provide mentoring and advice from specialists in areas such as business and agribusiness, cashflow, plant and equipment finance and international trade.

Mr Bongard will work closely with the Highbrook team as the bank restructures the way it works with companies in the region and



JOHN BONGARD: Pulled out of retirement to help corporate New Zealand grow

help the team engage with the challenges local businesses face.

"I told BNZ I wasn't keen to be a banker but they said that's why we're talking to you because we've got a lot of bankers inside BNZ but need business experiences to help us with their new business strategy," he said.

In last year's New Years Honours Mr Bongard was made an officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to business, soon after resigning as chief executive of Fisher & Paykel to battle prostate cancer.

He has since been concentrating on getting his health under control, recovering his golf handicap and

pouring effort into charitable activity in South Auckland – with a particular focus on programmes for at-risk youth in Manurewa and Papakura – where he grew up.

He is also on the boards of Nethall New Zealand and Tourism Holdings and has investment in a private Auckland-based small business.

Although that keeps him about as busy as he wants to be, the unexpected approach from BNZ this year held appeal.

"The last thing I thought I'd ever do would be working with a bank but there's appeal in the way they've been prepared to take a different look at the way they were doing things."

There was also appeal in the opportunity to help businesses in his South Auckland hometown where he spent 36-years at Fisher & Paykel, working his way from a 19-year old purchasing cadet to chief executive – in the latter days, leading the manufacturer through significant upheaval in global whiteware markets.

"I get frustrated with so much negative news in the region, because there is good news, particularly in the business sense – there's a lot of innovation."

He hopes to help nurture that innovation by helping local

companies, particularly those looking to export, to make better local and international connections.

BNZ Partners director Anthony Healy said Mr Bongard's appointment was the first in what he hoped would be more chairmen and women of his ilk.

"We're looking for people like John Bongard who will push us, test our thinking and play the role of client advocate.

"They'll need to have an international perspective as well as connections to their local region and won't be shy to push us into what the client wants."

Mr Healy said the partners centres were a direct response to feedback from business customers about what they needed in business support.

"Many businesses prefer not to invest their capital in their offices and technology but still need facilities for important client or board meetings and that's what BNZ Partners provides," said Mr Healy.

The centres had the "look and feel of a Koru Club" and would often be co-located within a BNZ branch, or at a site where the landlords were the clients, he said.

Access to the partners centre required a minimum annual turnover of \$1 million, although BNZ said the criteria was flexible and

each business would be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

With a \$2 million investment to set up each partners centre, Mr Healy said BNZ was taking a long-term view of a bank's role in enabling businesses – any growth its customers enjoy is obviously good for the bank.

"If you take a short-term view you wouldn't be doing what we're doing."

Business adviser Sarah Lohead-MacMilan, who provides bank mediation services to business owners through her company SIM Group, said she thought the partners centres offered some benefit for businesses in the vicinity of a centre but did not cater to the lion's share of New Zealand companies – the one-man bands.

"The clients that need this help most, usually the one-man bands, aren't managed by business partners but through the branch.

Mrs Lohead-MacMilan said there was still a need to improve banking support at the branch level to help businesses in difficulty.

"The bank managers I deal with, when businesses are in difficulty, don't know how to mentor or deal with them," she said.

"And is the bank a bank or a conference centre?"

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