

CITATION: JOHN WILFRED LAZAR

John Wilfred Lazar was born in March 1959 in the East Rand town of Springs, South Africa. He attended the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg from 1979 to 1982, graduating with a BSc and BSc (Honours) in Computer Science. Lazar briefly lectured in computer science before moving to the United Kingdom where he entered Balliol College at the University of Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship, earning a Master of Science degree in Computation.

An early indication of Lazar's eclectic intellectual interests manifested in his continued studies at Balliol College, where he earned a D. Phil in History. In 1987, Lazar joined the UK-based startup, Data Connection Ltd., as a software engineer. He oversaw many aspects of the business which included software design, engineering, customer support, product strategy, and revenue generation. The company grew its United States operations massively during the 1990s. In 2000, Lazar led a small group that facilitated the company's debut in the telecommunications carrier space. This initiative included the development of a suite of packet based voice, video and data communication solutions, while the early focus on using commodity hardware resulted in industry-leading Cloudnative functionality. Data Connection Ltd ultimately became Metaswitch, a major player in the telecommunications industry, and Lazar led a round of funding in 2008 with Silicon Valley investors, Francisco Partners and Sequoia Capital, joining as shareholders. He served as CEO from 2009, leading a subsequent round of funding in 2015 with Northgate and Walden Capital. Lazar stepped down as CEO in 2015 and as Chairman in 2016. Four years later, Metaswitch was acquired by Microsoft.

In 2011, Lazar was elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering, where he took a leadership role in multiple developmental activities. These included eight years as a Judge on the Africa Prize, which awards support for commercialisation to African innovators who develop scalable engineering solutions to local challenges. At various times, he chaired the Academy's Standing Committee for Enterprise, served as a Selector and Mentor of Enterprise Hub Fellows, served as a member of the Academy's Standing Committee for International Development, and served as a member of the Standing Committee for Education and Training, which, inter alia, developed a new computing curriculum in UK schools.

In 2016, Lazar became a Non-Executive Director of What3words, a novel global standard for communicating location. He later served as Nonexecutive Chairman 2018-2023. What3words continues to be used daily, worldwide, as a precise and memorable way to pinpoint location based on assigning each 3m square in the world a unique 3-word address that will never change. In 2017, as part of his activities on the Academy, Lazar served as a member of the steering committee of the Global Grand Challenges Summit in Washington DC. In 2019, he chaired the Global Grand Challenges Summit steering committee, which was co-sponsored by the US, UK and Chinese Academies of Engineering.

This summit saw some 900 engineers assemble in London to debate and co-create solutions for some of the world's most intractable challenges resulting from phenomena such as disruptive technologies and population growth. In 2019, Lazar co-founded Enza Capital, a Nairobi-based group investing in founders and teams who apply various technologies to the solution of significant and large-scale problems throughout Africa. To date, Enza has engaged in over 40 investments, ranging from logistics and infrastructure to health and fintech.

Lazar serves as Chair and a Trustee of the Raspberry Pi Foundation, a position he has held since 2020. This UK-based charity has a global mission to promote the advancement of young people through digital technologies. In 2024, the Foundation's commercial subsidiary, Raspberry Pi Holdings, listed on the London Stock Exchange, securing an endowment in excess of £500-million to promote the global mission of the Foundation. As a mentor and early-stage (angel) investor, Lazar has been responsible for numerous successful startups and enterprises. He serves on multiple charitable and educational organisations and has received many awards and accolades. His passion for combining communally beneficial projects with entrepreneurship has had immense social benefits, particularly in Africa.

Lazar is an enthusiastic advocate for the "Maker" movement which emphasises hands-on learning and creativity involving materials as well as technology, and which he views as an important driver of innovation and social advancement. Lazar currently serves as President of the Royal Academy of Engineering (RAEng), United Kingdom, a position to which he was elected by the Fellows for a term of five years. The RAEng has a Leaders in Innovation Fellowships (LIF) Global Programme to support innovators with a technology prototype to create an entrepreneurial mindset. Wits together with the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) of South Africa's Department of Science and Technology are country partners for LIF in South Africa. In early 2025, Wits facilitated the Engineering Challenge for the LIF participants, and in doing so, Wits has been fortunate as Lazar has been recognised in the United Kingdom with national honours. He was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) by Queen Elizabeth II in her Birthday Honours list in 2016 for services to Engineering, and in 2025, he was Knighted by King Charles III in his New Year Honours list for services to Engineering and Technology.

Over the years, Lazar has maintained an ongoing relationship with Wits, where he has graciously provided mentorship and counsel at his alma mater, particularly in the innovation space. In view of his global impact in engineering, education, entrepreneurship, and social advancement, it is befitting that the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg award to John Wilfred Lazar, the degree of Doctor of Science in Engineering, Honoris Causa.