**Consulting and Preserves**

**01.05.2018**

XX: I recognise I am quite lucky for being the age I am (37) and the position I am, I feel like I am 7 years ahead as my peers are around 45 years old. I reckon that at my age and with my degree, well my Dad is very chauvinistic but I never felt there was anything I couldn’t do. I think there is just one generational gap (10 years) is all we are talking about for a change I culture. So I think we will start to see more women coming though. One thing I worry about is that we are forcing it too quickly. We are trying to move women forward and into roles to balance out the statistics and it might be too soon, they don’t want to do those roles yet. It is such hard work running your own business. You know, there are much easier ways to earn a living!

I was really lucky when I was young because I was given a lot of opportunities. I think because I came from a bog standard comp and I had an aptitude for science and I went to an all-girls school, I was picked for any “Woman in Engineering” event that was going. So I was thrust into all these different situations, and then I was sponsored through 6th form college and University. It was because all of a sudden, they wanted girls in engineering.

CG: If I just take you a few steps back to the beginning, please can you tell me about your business?

XX: At the moment I am a management consultant and my business is called S. Consultancy. The name came from the company I set up before, making jams and chutneys. Prior to that I worked for V and B engineering. I went in on the graduate scheme and then when I had the children I stopped work. My husband works in the fire service and his shifts were all over the place, so it wasn’t practical for me to keep working in a corporate environment.

CG; So what did you do at V?

XX: I was a relationship manager, I managed outsourced contracts. Then when I done the jam & chutney business for a while, I was at a tipping point. I could either close it down or expand into premises and pursue big wholesale contracts with Waitrose etc. I enjoyed the business, but the margins were just so low. So I decided to take out all the learning and contacts and use that in a consultancy business, where I could help grow other businesses. I now focus on small business start-ups in the public sector. I combine that will being the interim CEO of XX though the consultancy. It is 100% owned by the Hampshire XX as a public sector trading company and all profits are returned there. I work with others setting up public sector trading company mentoring them or working on their plans.

CG: When you shut your jam and chutney business was it because the margins were too low to sustain a business on the scale you wanted?

XX: Yes, for the effort it didn’t feel it would provide enough. I was supplying farmers markets and small local retailers, but it needed an investment of c£20k to scale up and target the bigger region / national supermarkets. I was looking at my options and some consulting opportunities came up. It felt like a way to use all my learning but to earn a better return. Then they set up 3SFire and I could offer them start up experience and big business experience.

CG: So you chose the consulting sector for better returns?

XX: Yes and because there were some good opportunities which fitted really well with my skill sets. Purely a business decision. When we talk about my sector I think consultancy covers all the sectors my clients belong to, so it’s very varied: fire, local councils, forestry. I recognised that my skills applied very broadly across many sectors.

CG: You have mentioned engineering, do you do a degree in that?

XX; No, in physics.

CG: Please can you tell me the ages of your children.

XX: So I have C1 who will be 11 tomorrow and C2 who is 9.

CG: And you husband, do you feel he is supportive of what you do?

XX: Yes he is very supportive and I think that is really crucial actually. We have a team A. mentality and what is right for the team isn’t necessarily what is right for me or my husband at time. We have a clear vision for our family team and that visions enables us to achieve our goals. When I stopped working, I handed in my notice after my first maternity leave, so many people said I would regret it and that I shouldn’t walk away from my career because I would never get it back again. It just didn’t work for us as a family to have both if us working full time in demanding roles and so something had to give. I decided to be the “best supporting actress” for a little while and out my career on hold. So I took on the home responsibility and had another child. My husbands career developed rapidly as I was supporting him at home. I took a real interest in what he was doing and he asked my advice etc so that we maintained mutual respect and equality. I describe as we blended our work and home.

CG: So that blending means that you weren’t defined by your roles?

XX: Yes definitely, because if now I need to work on Sunday, he totally respects that and can pick up the family / home stuff. We met very young and we have earned more and less than each other over that 20 years, so neither of us gets precious about status and roles. There have never been defined roles. But naturally I am a mother and my maternal instinct is very strong and also men are useless at remembering things, so we find a balance at what we do best. It’s not in his skill set to sort out after school care.

CG: So what does your husband do?

XX: He is assistant chief fire officer.

CG: If you look back over your business career, what you would you say were the key milestones or turning points for you?

XX: Firstly, walking away from corporate career despite everyone warning me not to. I don’t think I was fully confident about the decision but my husband was very supportive. I was fearful that having a pause in my career might mean I wouldn’t be able to get back onto the career path again, in terms of progress and achievement. It was my husband and questioned that logic – you’re the XXme person with the same intelligence, so why wouldn’t you succeed again. That bolstered my confidence to take the plunge.

Secondly, 3 weeks after my son was born I was in the medical centre getting him weighed and a lady from the job centre, an advisor was with all the mums. She asked me if I was planning to go back to work and at the time I was a bit miffed as my head was all over the place. I just said I’ll probably start my own business making chutney, I think because I has thought about it in the past. She asked me what I would need to make it happen and I told her a food hygiene course. She took all my details and booked me on the course and I didn’t have to pay for it. Funnily enough that was the impetus I needed, I went on the course and set up the business. That was the catalyst – what’s stopping you?

I do think a lot of my contemporaries might not have pursued it, but my husband was enthusiastic about it and supportive and so it felt like I had nothing to lose. That support at that point made a really big difference. I made me feel OK if I hadn’t done all the cleaning in the house.

CG; It seems to be that a supportive husband can be very important to running the business. His attitude permeates down to the children. It can either be a struggle and conflict or it can be supported and positive, which really impacts a women’s confidence.

XX: Yes, yes, completely agree. At that point, I might have just gone back into a job. But the skills that I got from S. and the contacts were really worthwhile and they led to what I am doing now. My biggest piece of advice to small companies that want to grow, especially if they come from a corporate background, is that they have to be prepared to do everything. I can remember when I started up 3S and stepped out of my wellies having moped the floor to put on my heels, pop next door and speak at a major event to give our year end numbers. You have to muck in and do what has to be done when it needs doing.

CG: So they were the two key milestones?

XX: Yes, I mean there were lots of smaller things that were important. For example I found myself a “friend of the show” on BBC Radio Solent in the gardening slot, being the expert in preserves (when I was doing S.) and from that I ended up doing after dinner speaking at for example the UK Growers and Producers Annual Meeting and then from that connections with some restaurants which I then sold my product to. So I think that was what differentiated me at that point, I was a WI lady who just made jam, I had a corporate business background and could speak their language and make sales. That’s what I have brought forward to my consultancy – ask the questions, grab any opportunity, look to differentiate.

CG: Stepping stones…

XX: I have been doing some work recently with a government department on international trade and I have been leading a group representing the fire industry. Not sure how I got this role, but anyway. We try to work collaboratively on a quite high-profile piece of work; senior government officials, senior members of the fire service. I think I ask questions in a way that don’t offend people and build relationships on the back of it.

CG: Just to get an idea of the scale of your current business. Do you have any employees?

XX: Yes I employ a PA and then freelance consultants as and when I need them. They are all women with children, so I give me flexible hours. I am a very different type of boss because I understand their pressures and the timetable they have to work to. Like I tell them, spend the first 10 minutes doing your Tesco online shop, then crack on knowing all your shopping is done. As a result I get loyalty and they work hard.

CG: What are your aspirations?

XX: Just building on what I do, less about money, more about fulfilment. The International Trade contract for example has been great, I never got the chance to travel and this year because of that contract I’ve been to Brazil twice. Ultimately what I would love is to have 20 different clients and work 20 days a month, so have to development and variety. I don’t really wake up and not want to go to work, I enjoy the variety and the work life balance.

CG: How the locality supports your business and then you.

XX: My business can be anywhere a most of what I do can be done online., but my personal base needs to be in Southampton. I have a nanny, a PA, both sets of parents, a great group of friends that help us out. They are all close and we are very settled. I would prefer not to move. But then I have really enjoyed all the work I have done on Brazil and I am learning so much about International Trade, so maybe in the future….but then where I work and working with small businesses, you see the results, the impact of what you have done. I couldn’t be that cog in a big corporate machine.

Although a couple of year again my husband nearly died. If we had lost him, then I probably would not have had a choice, I would need to stability of income and I would have had to go back into a corporate role. I am lucky that my husband has the stable income so that I can take risks. Maybe that changes your outlook. It would be about the money.

Life is too short, I want to work doing what I enjoy.

CG: Sometimes women are pushed into entrepreneurship because it is the only way to fit work around families. For you, it seems that you are pulled in by the opportunity to work as you do.

XX: I am in control of my benefits, what I invest in my business, when I work and how I work.

CG: So is it freedom, control and variety.

XX; Yes that it, along with impact. I want a business that delivers more than just my goals, but improves others too. I will always look for more opportunities to make an impact. I don’t want to be too set on a pathway, I don’t want to miss unexpected opportunities and then regret it.

CG: Thinking about your support network, looking back to when you first started in business with your jams and chutneys. Did you rely on friends and family to help our at the beginning.

XX: Yes, my husband was the labeller. I remember taking Fraser when he was a toddler round the wholesale warehouses, 100s of jars on palettes sometimes balances on his pushchair. My sister-in-law came up with the name. Loads od stuff about my business was definitely influenced by my friends, I was so lucky that they all had different skills and helped me out. One of my friends was in marketing and helped me plan that, another was a designer so she helped me with my logo and packaging. Just having coffees with a load of friends and bouncing ideas and getting solutions.

Do you know I see loads of mums who are really capable, thinking about buying franchises. I just think they can do it themselves if they had the confidence. I should design a franchise specifically for mums…. A business opportunity for me.

CG: What would be the one thing that if you could have changed or you experience that made your life setting up and running your business easier?

XX: There used to a scheme called Business Link run by the government. When I first started the business I linked in to the Business Link because I had attended the course organised by the Job Centre advisor. I went on a free seminar and I met a few other mums who were doing similar start ups and that was really helpful. Unfortunately they shut it down with the cuts, so now you can’t access those resources and the training and a local network of people who are in the same position as you. Such a shame, it was a great aspirational centre and it made you feel you weren’t alone and there was somewhere to connect.

I don’t think we have enough mechanisms to help people with aspiration for business. When people fail in business, it doesn’t just affect them. Say if I know of them, I might have decided to go back to work in an office because the chances of success seem to low, the risk of failure too high. We need success stories so more think they can give it a go, and for that people need support at some point with one particular skill they might be lacking. A mentoring network with lots of different experiences, targeted advisors to help fulfil potential.

Another thing; imposter syndrome. Most women I know struggle with it. I have days when I think someone is going to find out I don’t know what I am doing. But then when I sit down with my husband in the evening, he ‘ll ask me what on earth I am going on about. He is so matter of fact about it, that it helps me believe that its not important.

Added by email the next day:

CG: How do you feel about the term “mumpreneur”?

XX: Oh... thats an interesting question.... I got called it a lot when I had the jam company... less so these days.

It kind of felt OK when I was pottering about from home, but perhaps I feel that now in my current role the fact that I'm a mum isn't really relevant.... I'm fairly sure that we wouldn't call a man in my positions a dadpreneur.  Perhaps being a mumreneur implies that you are only running the business to fit in with the kids rather than for whatever the core function is?

That said, I'm not offended by the term and it depends in which context it is used.  I wouldn't put it on my bio though!

**Personal Details**

Age: ~~16-29~~ 30-39 ~~40-49 50-59 60+~~

Nationality: British (white)

Country of origin: UK

Mode of working: Full Time: ~~Part time:~~

Children: (1) ~~0-2 3-4~~ 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Children: (2) ~~0-2 3-4~~ 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Children: (3) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Children: (4) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Highest educational qualification: Physic degree

Location of business: Winchester

Home working: No

Last position held in employment: Outsource Contract Relations.

Husband Occupation: Assistant Officer

Husband highest educational qualification: GCSE

Household income: Dual ~~Single~~ (Both income not required.)

2 Questions

This is the hardest question that I have ever been asked!

Firstly.... I don't really have a metric for success management, and i'm terrible at striking up things as a success.  I say this because I think it is kind of important.... and when I chat to other people who run businesses I think that most of them don't consider their success as a measure, and this "lack" of success is what keeps us driving forward if that makes sense.

I had dinner with a friend last night and we were talking about exactly this and she offered some sage words that I needed to seek some counselling to deal with what she calls my imposter syndrome! I pushed back that if I changed my approach and decided that this was success, I might not be effective at my job as the drive to progress is probably what makes me progress!!

I guess if I ask the question differently, and say how do I know im progressing and moving forward in my business and career its a question I would find easier to answer.

If my ultimate team (my family) are happy and supportive this is a big marker for me.  I also think how you judge positive movement in a business is subjective but ultimately that comes down to my customer! If people continue to use my services and I have more work than time, then this is success for my business.

In the beginning success was about small steps.... these days the distance between milestones is greater.  I have to work harder and smarter to feel the progress.  When I first started the business, simple things like having business cards printed with whatever I had decided was my job title was an achievement.  These days I need to have a much bigger win to get the same buzz but it still feels as good when they come!

Running your own business can be lonely and not having a manager to celebrate your successes is a challenge so you have to look harder to find an audience who can judge your progress if you are unable to do this yourself.  I use my husbands direct and at time brutal feedback as a marker for my performance and its important that I listen to both positive and negative feedback from someone whose opinion I trust.

Perhaps the key to judging success is actually a blend of hard and soft metrics and review and that one key performance indicator isn't enough.  How much money I earn seems a lot less important than the blend of what I can achieve and how happy I feel about it.

**Yes that's a great answer, thank you so much! Success is a very personal but I think it is so much more that simply profit and number of employees....**

**I have interviewed 20 female business owners so far and I keep coming across some form of imposter syndrome. I think the difficulty in setting up a business is that the "entrepreneur" role model is a very male one and it's almost diametrically opposite to the "role" of a mother. So for mums starting a new business this really challenges their identity of business owner which can impact confidence and make you feel like an imposter. Does that ring true for you?**

Yep, I agree entirely! BUT if I think if you can get over that it makes you a much more powerful entrepreneur because you have broken the mould.... people remember me, and my competitors don't see me as such a threat... I'm a stealthy weapon and have a few more tricks up my sleeve than they do!

I think that my stronger emotional intelligence and empathy make me better at it than the boys are! the biggest hurdle to my success is myself... its just how you can put the lid on the self doubt jar!