**Soft Furnishings and Interiors**

**18.9.2018**

XX set up business after having twins. She started with blinds and simple curtains and has expanded into more complicated patterns, accessories and upholstery. She runs a business from home.

CG: So if you could let me know what drove you to start up the business and give me a quick overview of what you do.

XX: I started TI 4 years ago, following sewing as a hobby after I had the children, who are twins of 11 now. I have always been very creative and I was looking for a creative outlet after I had had the children and wasn’t working. I took maternity leave and then redundancy from my previous employer.

CG: Was that because you didn’t feel you could make it work around a family, or was this planned anyway given you were having twins perhaps?

XX: I knew that I didn’t want to continue working in the same industry, full time and in that work location. So in the years after I gave birth, I started off making cards, that turned into making personalised pictures to sell at Christmas fairs mainly. I found that this was to just seasonal, so I started sewing and making things with fabric to sell around the year. Then we started to renovate our home and I wanted to save money on furnishings as it was getting expensive. I went on course and learnt how to make cushions and I enjoyed it so then I went on to learn how to make blinds and curtains. I then went on a business course, because I wanted to have a clear plan and know how to manage my business on my own. I knew I didn’t want to go back to what I was doing before. So it was a case of re-training in something that was very flexible, I could work from home, I could decide when I wanted to work, which clients to accept and control my workflow around the children. Still being able to build up and expand a business in the future, so long term potential. At some point the children will fly the nest and I want to be able to throw myself into something that has a future. So I took my time, step by step and built up to where I am now.

There was pocket money generated by Christmas fairs, but once I started in proper business will substantial high value products and a web-site, that’s where my training has come.

CG; What was the job you did before this?

XX: I was HR consultant for IT/Telecoms for 10 years.

CG: Have you found your skills have been developed by the business?

XX: I had worked on web-sites previously, that has been incredibly useful. I designed and built my own website and other social media sites, that I regularly update. It’s great I can do this because it is my shop window. My marketing and branding knowledge was useful and data management. I do all the accounting myself after my business course. So that has combined.

CG; What are the key skills you have picked up by building the business?

XX: I have done it all myself, I love the whole creative side. I deal with customers happily but I have had to push myself out of my comfort zone by having to visit strangers in their homes to measure up and quote and then supply. I have had to learn the finance side which I have to do myself.

CG; What have been your key milestones?

XX; When I first set up the business, friends and family were incredibly supportive and they commissioned so many jobs from me, but my first sale to someone I didn’t know who approached me was an important milestone.

When I first set up the business, I did it with another friend for the first year. Unfortunately her circumstances changed and it meant that we couldn’t continue together. I then had to push forward on my own, which was the hardest time. I had really enjoyed us going off to different clients together and bringing different skills sets to the jobs to provide a great service. To be suddenly on my own was tough. That was 3 years ago now and I just had to push through. I am really comfortable doing it on my own now, as most people in this industry do.

CG; So in a way that was a more gentler start up because you could share ideas and break new barriers together.

XX: Yes it was.

CG: So where are you now, at a plateau, do you have growth plans?

XX; I am very happy with how it is going at the moment. I am not someone who looks towards a 5 year plan or a 10 year plan because at the end of the day I want my business to work around school holidays, matches and events, sickness days etc. It needs to be really flexible and I need to be able to respond to unplanned things that come up, that this job does allow me to do. I don’t have a long term strategic plan in the sense of targets. I do as many jobs as I can fit comfortably in. I do increasingly more complex jobs that are higher margin and as the children grow more independent I will take on more.

This business needs to be a fairly local business, because I need to travel to each customer’s house and be there in person; to measure up and then later fit. That locality and my personal time restrict the volume of work that I can do. At the moment that works well.

I have recently expanded the business, but not my own actual workload into upholstery. So I sell those services whilst I am visiting and I use a separate company to complete the order. So the outsourced is a way of increasing my income beyond my time restrictions.

CG; How do you feel about the interconnection between your time with the children and with the business?

XX: I don’t feel that my business involves the children. They like what I do and they can see me working, but this business is for me and not them.

CG: So, say the children were now independent, say 20 would you still be doing this business?

XX; Yes definitely. It is for me and I am not filling a gap in order to move onto something else. This is for me. I had my gap; I was here full time before they went to school. This is my future and I didn’t rush into it, I planned it carefully and built towards it. I think you always have to be open minded and go with the flow, because you just don’t know what life presents. But I just felt I have the skills, the creative eye…I mean it’s not high powered and my husband certainly feels like I don’t make enough money out of it ….it’s not a labour of love, it is a business and I make good profits from it ….but I could probably earn more.

CG: Do you think you will try and drive more margin from it?

XX: Yes, I think as the business has grown and I have been monitoring my quote to business win ratio and I will start to amend my pricing to maintain a healthy balance. It is a learning process. In the early years I was building a reputation and testimonials for my web-site. The price point was different back then.

CG: When you become a mother, there is obviously a big change how you see yourself. Some have found being able to also assume the role of business owner to be a relief and others to be very confusing. How would you reflect on combining those two roles?

XX; When I have friends who say they can’t do something because they are working, I feel I have a very different identity from that. To me, they are on a different level of working. So when I say work, I know at the end of the day I can make the time to do anything that comes up. I can work into the evening, I can work into the night to make a deadline and still be able to attend an event. I am not getting in a car having to be in an office by 9am that I am contractually required to do and then not be able to leave until after 6pm that night. I almost don’t refer to myself as working….which is wrong.

CG; You are running a business and yet you don’t consider yourself to be working?

XX: Yes I know, because I don’t always have to, because I have the flexibility to make my products when I choose to. So I suppose I just consider myself and my situation different from someone who has to commute, has to be in a set location and has to fill a role for somebody else. At the end of the day, because I am managing my own workload and I am my own boss, I can choose to work till 2.30am in the night to get things made. Those are my choices.

CG; Do you feel that you are a business owner?

XX; Yes.

CG So you feel confident in that.

XX: There are times when I am working hard and feeling very much the working mum and there are other times when I can be sociable in the day and work around deadlines. It’s that flexibility – there is not the constant pressure on me to get through a fixed amount of workload every day.

CG: So that is a reflection of your agency in the situation you found yourself in?

XX; Yes!

CG: You have designed your solution to your situation. You have created the income, lifestyle and freedom who wanted to access, that you couldn’t in a corporate environment? Do you feel an ownership or pride that this is what you have achieved? I “don’t have a proper job” …. Well you do, it’s a business not a corporate job.

XX: Yes I know, I suppose it takes somebody else to say that, for you to believe it. I was talking to someone very recently, and they were saying to me “You have set up your own business, you should be incredible proud of that.” And I was quite taken aback, because I suppose I don’t really see it in that way.

CG: So why do you think you don’t see it in that way.

XX; I know! I suppose I just a lack of confidence, I don’t see myself that way. If I was looking at someone else doing what I do, then I would see it very differently. I think maybe because it’s a creative industry, I know that it’s not writing policy documents, or law contracts or something really serious. I am just making things.

CG; You are designing and creating things that given people pleasure that they want to pay you for.

XX; I know …. But I suppose I see creative as less serious, it just doesn’t compare to what other people do. But I do definitely consider myself as a business owner and it I know that it is all, 100% down to me.

There are times of the year when it is absolutely crazy busy and other times when I take on less work at school holiday time. I try and step back from the business more then and manage my customer’s expectation then. So far, that has really worked for me. Christmas is often the only real deadline people have, for the rest of the year I can manage, they are not desperate for it.

CG; When it gets really busy, how do you manage the competing demands of work and family?

XX; I am lucky, that they are at school for a long day. I can get through a lot of work then; 8.30-6. That also lets me slot in a spin class or a tennis session which means that doesn’t impact on an evening or weekend. I pick them up from school and we do dinner together and homework, then if I need to sit down again at 9pm and work through another couple of hours, I do that then. Worst case scenario, as I had in the school I work through till 2 or 3am in the morning, a couple of nights running just to get everything done to make a deadline. So yes sometimes it is a bit crazy and I do have to do that, but rarely.

CG: When you have that pressure, you still wouldn’t eat into the time you have with your children?

XX; No, I wouldn’t. I have always done it that way. Although in the holidays it is kind of thrown out of the window because they are always here. So I may be working in the background, but I will be there to answer questions, supervise play dates, get food. I always prioritise them, as in if they need me to do something or show them, I will stop what I am doing and meet their needs. I will always do that over my work because I know that I can sit down later and work through once they have gone to bed.

CG; How does your husband feel about your business, how did he feel about you setting up? You are working from the home and therefore embedded within you joint household.

XX: I think he likes the fact that I do work from home, because if there are deliveries or I am 5 minutes up from the road from school if the children are not very well, he very rarely has to worry about anything domestic. I am here. I think it is a comfort to him that I am here all day. We are all pretty laid back, I think maybe in another type of family, the husband might not take kindly to his dining room being permanently taken over as a workroom. I think maybe in other set ups, there would be a workspace out in the garden. But I want to be in the house so I can hear phone ringing, door bell, children…so I am very happy about taking over the dining room, the least used room in the house. They don’t go in, but they know that is where I will be.

It impossible to get on with my work when everyone is here, so at that point I just leave it and I can do that; walk away and pick up later.

CG; Do you find you children see you differently because you are working and being their mum?

XX: They are pretty laid back about it. This is another reason why I started up 4 years ago, as opposed to 6 or 7. I think it would have been a very different experience, difficult for me to have done when they were toddlers and just starting school. I think they needed to be a certain age, where they were more independent. That has allowed me to get on and do all the things I need to do, I think they have been really good and accepting, if anything it is my husband who has been more frustrated by my workload, than ever the children have.

CG; Why is that?

XX: It’s conflicting with home life; so yes basically the housekeeping… the housekeeping conflict …dinner, the washing, the cleaning, the tidying up …that’s what he would say. Definitely.

CG; Do you children respect you more?

XX: I have a few friends who don’t work and it’s interesting because these illustrious careers behind them, with no plans of going back and doing anything in the future, is now I find surprising because I am also aware of the education I received, the degree I took, the career progression plan I worked so hard to achieve and for that to then fall away with out…you know… I mean men have this whole, unaffected pathway in front of them, they can simply walk along through their whole working life, they can confidently follow that clear line. With women it’s interrupted, it stops, it’s a dotted line sideways, sometimes backwards…I couldn’t not work now, I just simply couldn’t.

When they were young and….. twins which was so tough – it was mummy, mummy all the time, it was just full on. I don’t think anyone who hasn’t been through it can fully appreciate the demands on your time … and that is why I just dabble in creative work when they had gone to bed. I needed to do something, but I had no capacity then. I didn’t want to go back to work, I couldn’t, I just had to focus on them.

Now it is a completely different ball game. I am able to focus 90% of my time on the business without having to worry about anything else. I definitely feel like I did it at the right time, whilst I appreciate some people will not have that luxury of ti ming choice, they have to work within the year or have to go back to a guaranteed income. It is a lot of pressure on women, but also on the plus side, as a women if you do want a change, having children gives that breathing space to assess whether you do actually want to go back to something you have invested a lot of time and training in or if you do actually want to try and change and find a new path.

I do know a lot of women who have been able to pursue more creative choices, into a more creative industry because it is something they need to do and want to do. Whereas before they made early career choices almost with limited knowledge and pursued safer options and what was expected. {SO IT’S AN OPPORTUNITY} Now they have the experience to know themselves better.

CG: So rather than a “push” motherhood is in fact a catalyst to a potentially more fulfilling career choice?

XX: I think you have to feel supported by your partner to be able to take that opportunity. If my husband had said “look you have all these years worth of experience and training and HR, how can you not continue to use that to earn income.” He was very relaxed about what I did, he likes me being at home IF the housework is done. But I can imagine if you partner expected you to earn more and associate their respect for their partner with where they worked then….. because I do not people who have that, who partners push them to do something that challenges them intellectually. That’s not where my husband comes from, he just wants us all to be happy as a family unit and me being at home helps that. We have never had that conversation where he has pushed me to do something else, this has been accepted – it is what I do. And that choice has been completely driven by me.

If you ask my husband he would say “yes, she’s doing really well” but there has not been a lot of support, I have been very much left to my own devices.

CG: So in a way, you both prioritised family cohesion and your business dovetailed into that quite nicely.

XX: Absolutley, if I commuted to a full time job it would be utter chaos. Definitely. My husband works locally so he would have to take the children to school, he would have to cook dinner regularly and he would be fine with that but he would make me very aware of the extra pressure that would be putting on him.

It is certainly family cohesion and it keeps me busy during the day. I do sometimes need to work in the evening and he doesn’t like it when I do, but equally every now and again it does happen. He works 6 days a week too, so it doesn’t impact him unless I do work in the evening.

CG: How would you value your success?

XX: There are lots of jobs you could do. I have this friend who has an amazingly creative eye, so have the most beautiful home and so many design abilities and she is a cleaner. To me that is heart breaking. She says she loves it because she has OCD and therefore loves to go in and transform, but she has so much talent. If she lived nearer I would definitely work with her. That is what I am aware of .. it’s someone’s potential and their fulfilment. After children, when they don’t need you as much, it’s about regaining your sense of self and achieving and fulfilling your potential and being happy with what you are doing….for the long term I am not belittling somebody cleaning, but when you could be a successful interior designer, using your creative talents to really make a difference and in a very profitable way.. that’s what I think is important.

So for me setting up the business was being true to myself; fulfilling my potential. From a business point of view I always strive to push my standards forward, everything I create must be the best I can do and that is truly satisfying. I like to think that if you look back to when I started I have progressed so much that the product I make now are truly high end, top spec and premium; totally professional. I want to continue that path to create beautiful soft furnishings that challenge me creatively.

CG; You clearly get satisfaction from the products you produce and your customer feedback.

XX: Yes absolutely, my success comes from taking great pride and satisfaction in what I do. From a financial perspective as well, we could just about manage without my income although it really makes a welcome difference. I suppose I haven’t got the full pressure thought of having to make x to pay the mortgage. I enjoy earning my own income, that’s important too. But it is me providing a service I feel very proud of and my customers taking great pleasure in what I do. That’s the core for me, it’s satisfies me.

CG: What are your long term aspirations, would you like to expand, to employ?

XX: I have considered that, getting help. What I would worry about, if I did have someone working for me is on a fixed basis, is that I would lose my complete flexibility. I pick up and manage my workload entirely around what I want to do, especially around school holidays. What I want to do, recently my original partner has changed circumstance again and she does do bit and pieces for me, I want to increase that. I am being very open minded as to where that goes. At the moment I am paying her to make some products for me, when I have a heavy workload. She is happy with that for now. She want to so more interior design, rather than workshop, so lets see.

I am open minded as to where the business goes. People always need soft furnishings.

CG; You have to visit your clients in person and having children often means that restricts your locality. How do you find that? Is your local area supportive?

XX: The local area is my business. My clients are through my local network, often through school. Just very recently I even had a job making curtains for the school. People find me through Google, Instagram and Pinterest, all locally based.

CG; Do you find when people come across you like, do they question your ability to get the job done, your legitimacy, especially at the beginning.

XX; Absolutely, yes. I still get that. I still question ability. I have been professionally trained and I have learnt something on every job, so I have the experience. I have this fabulous curtain track and pole fitter, he is very experienced, done it for years. Whenever I have doubts or concerns he has always helped me, almost a bit like a mentor. I think everybody needs someone they can go to with questions or self doubts. This is the thing when you are on your own, with your own business, who do you ask advice from?

Definitely in the early days you constantly question yourself. My view was always, as long as the customer was happy and I would do whatever it took to make that happen. Now I am more confident which is through experience alone, no substitute.

CG; Do women have less confidence, imposter syndrome?

XX: I sometimes have to have a pep talk with myself, even now, going into jobs…come on you know this. I have had jobs that are simply beyond my skill base at that time. I am just honest. I do push to learn new strategies and extend my skills but I wouldn’t take well beyond them. You have to be aware what is realistic that you can do, be balanced. You need to keep learning and developing.

CG; Anything to add

XX; In my industry it is all women, so I have contacts with women who have taken the big step up and opened their own interiors shops – that take huge investment in fixtures, fittings, fabric books. I admire them, they have to have a work room of people working for them, they need to be in the shop.

I think I mainly struggle with the fact you have to do everything – I can be measuring up, then invoicing , then making, then fitting. The next step is the team of people making it all for you, but I don’t want that, well yet. I see a lot of women in my industry working in their shops or from home, doing it all and balancing families.

I generally see women who are full on working or who are not. I don’t see many part time, maybe it’s because all the kids are in secondary school and we can all move back up again. As long as companies give flexibility for below fives children, then you’ll have them back for another 20 years.

**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: Degree

Location of business: Winchester

Home working: Yes

Last position held in employment: HR Consultant

Husband Occupation:

Husband highest educational qualification:

Household income: Dual Single