**Accountancy**

**27.04.2018**

**Accountancy and tax services and strategic financial advice.**

CG: Please can you take me back to the beginning to tell me how your business came about, what led you to the decision to set up your own business?

XX: So I was working for X in London and when I had my son it was almost impossible to manage commuting to D every day, doing the working hours that were required and managing childcare, with T and I working full time.

CG: Were you both in A at that time? So a round trip of approximately 3-4 hours every day.

XX: Yes, we were in B, so the commute to D is 2 hours each way. I sat down and did my calculations an worked out that by the time I had paid for childcare plus travel costs and generally being out of the house buying lunches and what- not, and paying tax. That was when I was earning a decent banking salary; I only had to earn £25k per year as self employed to have the same take home pay.

So that’s how it all came about. I then went to work for a friend who had a chartered accountancy practice as a self employed worker for her. I worked for her for about 18 months to 2 years just helping her and seeing how it was all done, and gradually I started to take on my own clients from that point.

CG: So therefore would be describe as a mentor for you?

XX: Yes definitely, she was the most wonderful, generous woman.

CG: How did the transition happen? Did you pull out of part of the business, or did you run two completely separate businesses?

XX: I was supporting her as a freelancer and she paid me an hourly rate for whatever work I did. Then gradually took on my own clients, so I just ended up doing less for her. She was completely wonderful in that she didn’t mind. She was based over in A so there was no possibility of competition but she didn’t mind anyway. Just a lovely person really, who gave me a break.

CG: So therefore did you find that you were looking for an opportunity. I trying to see if you were pushed into setting up your business or were you pulled by the opportunity, because it was a real chance to pursue your interests.

XX: It was essentially, I would say I was pushed out of employment, without a doubt. I pushed out of employment because so the way the corporate world was then, well in banking. You have to do long hours, it was common that if I left the office at 7pm at night, someone would comment “Oh early night then”. I got into the position where I would have 2 jackets and leave one on the back of the chair, whilst I left for home with the other, by the back entrance. I just wanted to be home to see my very young child. Particularly when you have a 2 hour commute and you want to see your child before bedtime, then you have to leave the office by 5pm.

Then you have people booking meetings at 7pm in the evening and it’s just not possible to do both of course. I increasingly found that because it is such a competitive environment in banking, people would purposively book a meeting at 7pm in the evening, knowing you couldn’t be there and therefore they would look more committed and better than you.

And it would be so frustrating because equally when I was in the office I worked incredibly intensively to get everything done, whilst those very same people who booked the 7pm meeting were playing on the internet for 2 hours at lunchtime, and then tutting at me because it was leaving in the evening. That’s why I feel I was absolutely pushed out of employment.

I was also left with a slightly bad taste, because I was employed in HK with them. When I was 9 weeks pregnant with my son, I was offered the position of Director in New York. I hadn’t told them about the pregnancy and I had only been offered the position verbally by the Head of Equity Admin in HK. It would have been a global position to head up the department. I said that I would be interested but I was pregnant. His immediate reaction was tell me that it wouldn’t work. There was no mention or questions about whether potentially my partner could travel with me and provide the necessary childcare in New York. He made the assumption it was out as an option.

Of course then I was just 30, hormonal, in HK and not sure what I would be doing anyway. You know as a 49 year old now, I would not have told them about the pregnancy until I had the job offer confirmed in writing. I would have most definitely told him that I absolutely, most definitely could make it work. But I simply had no concept of what was coming and how to respond. So that left me with a really bad taste.

I do still think the working environment in that type of employment is still the same. Long hours the same, slightly unnecessary need to be in the office at all hours, so it’s still impossible to have a young family that you get to see.

CG: Do you think if you had been given the flexibility to manage your job around your family and the support required, do you think you might have stayed in employment and not set up your business?

XX: Yes.

CG: So in hindsight, how do you feel about the decision to leave employment and set up a business on your own?

XX: Retrospectively it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Setting up my own business has been without a doubt the best thing I could have possibly done.

CG: And why is that?

SH: Because I have had the best of both worlds. I have been able to be completely flexible around my children, 100% flexible around the children combined with earning a very good salary. Possibly not as much as I could have done if I had stayed in banking, but … I earn absolutely enough.

What’s really interesting now, is that one of my clients is a city start up, set up by bankers. I provide their entire finance department, outsourced from home. There is absolutely no need to be in their office apart from once a month.

CG: With that reflection that you were able to enjoy the best of both worlds, how do you think the stress for you personally has been? Comparing a full time job in employment and your own business?

XX: I think it has been much less stressful because it has been entirely under my control. Don’t get me wrong it is stressful and I worked ever hour God gave. You take an afternoon off for a school event and you may it up late into the night, but it was always entirely in my control.

CG: So control was the key factor for you?

XX: Yes, it is.

CG: Were there any key milestones, when you look back over your business what were real turning points? When did they come?

XX: I suppose it’s when I took on really crucial clients. He big ones, that have give me the ability to do other things. Early on, when I set up the business, I had cancer and I worked all the way through it, which if I had been employed, obviously I would have been able to take plenty of time off. But I had to work through, and you do, then you come out the other end. Soon after the treatment, when I still had no hair, I met a wonderful new client who just took a punt on me really. They were a big client and they instantly gave me enough income and take on a bookkeeper. That was probably the biggest turning point, both for the business and for me.

CG: How far in was that?

XX: I suppose 2 or 3 years in.

CG: At that crucial point, did you get any support? Obviously you were able to bring in the bookkeeper. Did you have any support network of people to ask about the big step up, how to move forward? Or was it just a natural, organic process that didn’t require great forethought and action.

XX: I have always had a network. So the lady who I originally worked for and who helped me learn the business, was always there for me to phone and ask about difficult issues. Then through her I also met other women who were doing a similar thing and that can also be helpful too. There has been a network for female accountants who I can call on, always women because there are quite a few of us doing similar things that I could rely.

CG: Apart from that network of female accountants are there any other networks you came to reply on?

XX: No – that was the key one.

CG: How many bookkeepers do you employ / contract with now?

XX: 4

CG: What would you say the proportion of your customer base is local? How spread out is your client base? Where is a spread geographically?

XX: South east England and London, quite evenly spread.

CG: Is that because you can provide a lot of services remotely?

XX: Yes absolutely.

CG: Has that changed over the life of your business? Has it become more spread out?

XX: I have probably gained clients that are more spread out. It’s been entirely driven by word of mouth. So my clients are down to who is particularly chatty with their friends at any one time!

CG: If think about your aspirations for the business when you first started and how has that changed since?

XX: Initially I just wanted to keep busy. Then I set myself a target of £2,000 per month turnover and that was kind of wanted to build towards. Sales grow exponentially, so you know 1 person brings in another client, then 2, then 4, 8, 16 all coming from that original base client. Then it was just a case of setting myself targets, what do I need to cover all the household outgoings? I do it to pay all the bills.

CG: So once you have paid all those bills, do you want to then explore franchising, more internet based solutions, full sale exit? What would you like the long term options to be?

XX: There has always been a number of routes that I can take the business. One option was to set up as a traditional, local chartered accountancy firm on the high street. That would mean having employees and structuring the business how everybody else does. I considered that many times, but then I have always steered away from it because quite frankly I want it to be enjoyable. I want the business to support my lifestyle; you know to be able to work from home, work the hours that I want when I want, around my family. I want to be flexible, that is really, really crucial to me. I don’t want that corporate type. You have to be there from 9 till 5, and so does everybody else. As important to me as the money, is that flexibility. Being able to do what I want, when I want.

And equally I have looked at do I set up a franchise arrangements, where you take on a pool of bookkeepers and you spread the resource nationwide. That would create a real scale of business – but I don’t want that huge business, I don’t feel my life is going to be fulfilled by success in business. Business is something I do to pay the bills and because I enjoy working with the people I am working with. I don’t want to be stressed.

Longer term, as bills go down with the children leaving I will probably will just slightly reduce the number of clients and carry on. Pick my favourites and I might end up doing some voluntary work, helping the disadvantaged set up businesses. Perhaps training the disabled to become bookkeepers, yes there are various things I would like to do.

CG: Almost like a social enterprise.

XX: Yes that’s it, as a social enterprise. I have often thought about contributing to the National Curriculum to add a better understanding of finance and business for all children. Setting up micro business for people, as soon as I don’t have to earn so much….if that ever happens.

CG: Perhaps it’s a reflection of where you are, the business has been going for years and you have achieved what you wanted?

XX: Exactly. One thing I learned pretty early on at C, is that the corporate world makes you feel very special when you’re in it. But actually you are not special at all. As soon as you step outside that corporate world, you look back on it and think why? Why did I think that was so important to my life? My life actually is defined by my children and my friends and everything here around my home, not by my business career. The corporate world is so good through staff appraisals and that’s how they hook you.

CG: The long-term incentive plans, the dry cleaners on site…

XX: Exactly, wearing all the smart expensive clothes with the staff parties … but it’s actually a bubble. As soon as you walk out that door, they will never call or think of you again. Very, very replaceable.

CG: When you were scaling up your business, what were the key challenges you had to overcome?

XX: The key challenges are…. Well you are quite isolated when you are working on your own and then finding out how you should be doing things is not easy, even with a network of people. You know it’s sill things like what do you charge for your services, what software you should be using, what processes to follow. I found that hard. Second challenge is finding staff. How do you go about finding people when you can’t afford to pay a head-hunter £10k or an agency fee? Where do you go? Again it was networking among friends and business associates that really helped me. I asked them and they asked around, word of mouth basically. That way was the only way I found.

CG: How about the challenges in the context of household and children?

XX: When they were very little, I was saved by having a wonderful childminder. As they started school, there was more freedom.

CG: Was it disruptive?

XX: Well not any more as they are teenagers now and pretty self-sufficient. But yes certainly when they were younger, you are always juggling. Always juggling, even now when they are teenagers they want lifts to places, homework has to be monitored.

CG: I have talked some to women who are very clear, if they didn’t have children their businesses would be more advanced? Do you think that is true of yours?

XX: I did it around the kids, a worked full time, I had childminders and I worked late into the evenings. I don’t think I would want my business to be any further on or bigger and anyway I employ my kids a fair bit so that pretty useful! They make quite good bookkeepers, even though I hear the “mum this is boring”.

CG: How do you feel you were supported by your family? How do you feel your husband and your children saw you, treated you as a result of you having a business? Was it all positive or was there any resentment?

XX: I feel very lucky because my husband has been really good. In the early days I gave up a very well paid job to do it and so for the first 3 or 4 years obviously he was carrying income responsibility.

CG: And in those early days you were ill too, which is a big burden for both of you…

XX: I think the biggest challenge I face with my husband is that because I am working from home, he doesn’t see my job as the same as his. So he will expect me to pick up all the childcare issues and I suspect that is a generational thing and it is probably a function of simply me being at home. I am there whilst he is out in an office. He is very good in that if I ask him to do things, he does but he is also equally a bloke in that he will get stressed because he has 2 things to think about! He can’t possibly do a day job and remember he needs to be at home at 3.30 to pick up a child from school. It just doesn’t seem compute! But then he is again, in theta position where he is going out to the corporate world and you can just leave the office at 4pm to collect the kids. So that’s probably the hard thing – I have ended up doing all the home stuff as well as running my business.

CG: How about the children, how do you feel they view you?

XX: I think it has been really positive. They respect me and I think they … if there is not a meal on the table in the evening, they wouldn’t ask me what I had been doing all day, they would muck in and help or get something until I was able to get everything together. They have had to adapt. Now they are teenagers they love it, because I leave them alone!

CG: So in an way does that make them more independent?

XX: Absolutely, so I think it has been really positive for the children. I certainly have friends that don’t work, where the children do now ask them “what is it you actually do?”. Which is completely wrong because they are running around doing a million things, but it’s a question / judgement I never face.

CG: So in a way it’s the supportiveness of the husband and respect he shows that might set the tone that the children follow?

XX: Yes that’s right. Yet in a sense I have worked hard and earned often more than my husband, particularly when he has had patches not working, and therefore it would be very difficult for him to be anything other than fully supportive!

CG: Yes, how do you think he might feel if you were doing a project that you loved, but didn’t earn very much money?

XX: He would be a completely different scenario! I think from his point of view, if I wasn’t earning well, if I wasn’t earning on a par with him then he would expect the house to be tidier and food to be more available and more things to be easier for him. But I earn the same or more, if he asks what’s for dinner and I say I haven’t got a clue, he’ll sort it out. If he calls on the way home he’s happy to pick something easy up. There is an understanding.

CG: So your earnings have given you an equal footing.

XX: Yes, but also I think he’s always been feminists of sorts, always generally supportive.

CG: In terms of how connected your business into the locality, how embedded do you think it is? If you had to move your business tomorrow, what would change?

XX: The biggest impact would be that my bookkeepers are all local and I do need to see them regularly. And staffing is key to my business. Clients, well I have an awful lot of clients I never meet. I may get to London occasionally, so that would continue. In terms of gaining new clients, you have a live in an area where there are lots of businesses. I have a very good friend who came into partnership with me, to I effect replicate my business over in S. There is just not the same level of business up there and she has really struggled to find any clients. So area is crucial for our business, there has to be enough demand there for you.

CG: Have you had any access to local institutions or financing?

XX: No, no connections. Actually one of the biggest things for me, was when I was ill I had not access to sick pay/leave. I was on my own and just had to work though. Whereas obviously as an employee you have access to those benefits and the maternity pay, that’s a big difference.

CG: So actually location can impact the aspirations for a business, it can really matter if we compare S to here.

XX: Yes I think location can make an enormous difference, it does matter. You just have to have customers. In fact she had to set up a completely different business to match her location as she couldn’t make the accountancy business work. She set up DH, looking after old people in their home. That is such a different business from what she envisioned doing – so many staff and wafer thin margins. All based on location choice.

CG: How you noticed any changes in the business environment; way people do business now, the types of business they set up?

XX: I think I am seeing many, more, younger people setting up their businesses. I think it has become much more acceptable to set up your business when you are young. I think young people are less afraid of doing it.

CG; Just going back to your local networks; you have you mentor, your business networks and your friend networks and then family. How important are they?

XX: We have T’s mum and dad who live locally, they were limited help but they were there. Far more importantly, the friends and business network were vital, to my business but more importantly to my own well being. There is a lot of crossover; I have a lot of friends who also own their own businesses, all women. We support each other, whether it’s a glass of wine or just some advice. I often sit with them and chat through issues. I don’t think I would have had the confidence to do this without them. It’s the people around you that make the difference.

CG: I suppose working from home, on your own can be quite isolating?

XX: Yes.

CG: Do think they impact the way you run your business?

XX: No, they give advice and support, but it probably doesn’t change how I run it. You know, they tell me I need more staff and I just say, yes yes and just carry on. Where I am supposed to find all these staff?

CG: If you could change one thing about how your business worked or was supported, what would that be?

XX: I would have found a business partner. I do have a business partner, up in S doing her own thing as there wasn’t enough business to replicate what I do here. I have always wanted to find a business partner from around here that does what I do. I have just never found them. It would have made my life much easier.

Not finding that business partner was because my network was built on word of mouth. There isn’t a formal way to match up people and interests, we need a Tinder. It would be great to have an online entrepreneurs Tinder, so I can look at people and if they look interesting, be able to contact them. Linkedin is for business and that’s not what I want, I need it for self employed people. I want bookkeepers but I don’t know where on earth to find them. I advertise in the local papers but that gets no response and I can’t justify the cost of a recruitment agency, so how do I go and find another bookkeeper. I know there are women out there who want to work from home, around children who could help me, but I can’t access them. If there was a tinder I could find them.

CG: Also you might be able to find that illusive partner – someone doing the same business, on the same scale in Wiltshire …

XX: Yes, we should set it up!

**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 5-1~~1 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: maths degree

Location of business: Rural Hampshire

Home working: Yes

Last position held in employment: Head of Financial Accounting

Husband Occupation: IT Consultant

Husband highest educational qualification: degree

Household income: Dual ~~Single~~ (Both income required.)

Adding 2 Additional Questions (18.9.2018)

CG: how do you value success?

SH: 100% my family, my work has been to facilitate my family and the success and achievements of my family are my success. The harmony I was able create.

When you are in corporate life, you are often driven by work, you aim to achieve those corporate targets you are paid most for. When you are working for yourself it becomes a much broader spectrum of what you want to achieve, the reasons why you are doing it to succeed.

Obviously you do it generate an income, but also because it really supports your self-worth, you get to meet lots of different people. All of that, but also because it fits in really well with the rest of your life. So it will then facilitate the fact that you can go and pick up the children from school, see them in a match or play, help them when they are at home. That’s rewarding on top of the money you make.

CG; So the corporate world conflicts with family life, setting up your own business enables you to harmonise with your family.

SH; yes because from a corporate point of view your family is a bad thing for them. It distracts you and they want people there who will give 100% to their corporate goals. The fact you might be off because you have a sick toddler, or leave early to make a school event is definitely not what they want.

CG: what’s the most important element of success for you? Children’s respect, employing other women on family terms.

SH: Yes all of that, although children are pretty selfish and centred so whilst that is a good benefit, and setting role models is great example, ultimately they are mostly concerned about their life practicalities – are you there at pick up etc.

I do think it’s important that my world does not centre on them. I am busy and have other priorities too, and that keep life in perspective for them. I think there are 2 elements to children. One is them seeing their mum achieve and succeed and lead a life outside the domestic. Two is the practicalities to meet their needs.

When you are running your own business, when you find something doesn’t work, you have to push on and try something else…I think learn that tenacity and creativity can achieve rather than just accepting things are the way they are. Lexy needs to raise money for her GAP year project and we come up with lots of money making ideas.

Working does give you confidence as a woman. If you are stuck at home , as the children grow, they become more isolated and they lose confidence.

Working for yourself therefore has a lot of “success” elements to it, whereas working in a corporate environment is pretty restricted. It’s more about whether you have been in the office 8 till 8 how much money you have made for them.

CG: 2nd question is about identity and the relationship between mother and business owner identity.

SH: When I had my first child, I was working in banking and my intention was to go back. Then I was ill so I didn’t, so I was kind of forced into setting up my own business. Although when I looked at the costs of commute, tax and childcare I found actually it was worth exploring.

I struggled with motherhood because it was immensely lonely, isolating. I was very lucky to find an amazing childminder. I found that I could run a business knowing that my children were in safe hands, in fact who I felt did a much better job of it than me and at weekends I could gradually adapt to it and that felt manageable to me.

CG: So setting up the business was helpful to you because it gave you a break from motherhood and help you transition better into it?

SH: yes that’s right. It gave me a break from my son for at least half the week, that kept me sane. But I could still be around and still pop in at lunchtime and always be there for bedtime. That enabled me to start to feel human again, to start to build something outside motherhood that I felt I was successful at and I was capable of doing. It meant if I was having difficulty at the weekend, being a “mother” I knew on Monday I’d be back, successfully building a business of my own. It helped me break that struggle and yet not feel guilty because I was around if needed.

CG; So in a way it was empowering for you. You used your agency to build a solution to the problem you were experiencing. For you, the avenue back to corporate work was closed (because of the conflict you felt with family life), but you were ready or able to be a full time mother either.

SH: the only thing I regret about my solution was not making sure my husband also took an active role in raising the children. Because I was at home, he never had to look after the children for any length of time. It all came down to me. I found that for a very long time, I would be working intensively all week and after the children went to bed and then at the weekends I would be doing the children all weekend. I just never got a break.

Whereas Toby was working outside the house at a “job” he felt the weekends were for him to relax like they had always been before children. That set up a bad habit that we have never broken, 15 years later it’s is still the same. Because I am here at home I am expected to do everything else on top of my work.

I get resentment is there is not a meal on the table, even though I have just worked right through since early morning. No lunch break, no commute down time. Even though he will say “Oh I don’t mind if there is not a meal” …he is tired and hungry and completely resents it when it happens.

It is just ingrained, assumed, unquestioned, because he has been OUT at work.

I would have benefited hugely from coaching on how to set up good habits as a small business owner working from home. Being able to mix roles.

CG: I suppose it is being in the home environment that defines it?

SH Yes because they just don’t see it as separate. It’s a problem and it has remain unchanged all the way through. It makes it sad later on because they just don’t have that relationship with the children.

CG: Also another mum explained that because they are so separate from the life at home, they just don’t appreciate how much needs to be done and therefore that doesn’t help understanding.