

Celebrating entrepreneurs

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Women delivering real leadership in a multibillion-pound industry

Charity is not be dismissed lightly, despite lingering stereotypes, reports
Angela Jameson

For many, the stereotypical image of the not-for-profit sector is one of “do-gooding, canvas shoe-wearing, middle-aged women — and Michelle Wright hates it. How can it be true when leading British charities control £56 billion of assets and when they run essential services?

The 37-year-old is anything but a stereotype herself. After almost five years as development director at the London Symphony Orchestra, the former professional violinist set up on her own four years ago in a very different line of work. Her business, Cause4, advises charities on strategy and fundraising and has grown from two employees to thirty in only four years.

The charity sector is dominated by women, who make up 68 per cent of the workforce, and yet it is “shy” about shouting about its female leaders, Ms Wright believes. “This couldn’t be a better sector to show women in very strong leadership positions, but we just have to make more of it.”

The problem is, perhaps, deep-rooted. The rapid growth of her company has led Ms Wright to put in place a graduate trainee scheme, yet she has concerns about the lack of confidence displayed by many female graduates. “Too many female graduates seem spoon-fed to pass exams and even the very talented ones are not work-ready. I’m not seeing female graduates with the confidence to do something and the curiosity to find out more.”

“I want to see our graduates become the next generation of leaders of charities and social enterprises, and training and mentoring is an essential part of that development.”

Cause4 started in 2009 with a turnover of £121,000. That has now reached £911,000 and it has raised almost £8 million for its charity clients



Michelle Wright, centre, has made a success of her Cause4 advisory business and she wants other women to follow suit

in the community, sports and arts.

Anne O’Connor’s business, run with her husband Keith, is in a sector typically dominated by men, but this has been no impediment. Fleetsolve’s background was in the automotive world, where the company designed biofuel engines for buses, tractors, trucks and motor sport. Now it has moved into renewable energy by making, installing and operating combined heat and power units for commercial premises, including the first carbon-neutral supermarket for Tesco and Harrogate International Conference Centre.

“We have managed to get a good team of powerful women together who have been there from early days,” Ms O’Connor said. “Whether you are male or female, the most important

Top tips

Anne O’Connor’s tip: Always see the opportunity, even on the days when everything is going wrong. Believe in what you do and enjoy it
Michelle Wright’s tip: Learn from your peers. Whatever discipline you are in, people are having similar difficulties so learn from networking with other entrepreneurs

thing is that you do what you say you are going to do.”

When the company is recruiting, its priority is to get the best person for the job, regardless of gender, from female administrative support staff to female engineers.

The business was founded in 2002

with no external funding. It has gone from turnover of just mere £46,000 then to turnover of £6.5 million today, with 15 big clients.

“Keith’s passion is engines and I was very involved with the dirty end of the business in the early days, too,” Ms O’Connor said. “When you tell people that you have your own business, they think that you’re out on the golf course the whole time. It’s quite the opposite.”

“Keith designed all the technology himself and, when we first installed the Combined Heat & Power [mini power stations], it was us out there at 3am responding to call outs to start with. So we really understand the challenges people face. In order to get a company like ours off the ground, you have to devote a lot of time to it. It is your life.”

It’s time to break down the barriers

Andre Spicer

When we think about successful entrepreneurs, those who come to mind first are the likes of Sir Richard Branson, Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou or Mark Zuckerberg, very different characters with one thing in common. They are men.

Things are beginning to change. Net-a-Porter’s Natalie Massenet, Songkick’s Michelle You and Unruly’s Sarah Wood are part of wave of female entrepreneurs helping to change how women think about their career choices.

Women make up about 30 per cent of entrepreneurs around the world, yet in Britain men are twice as likely to try to start a business and there has been a little change in the past decade. In 2002, only about 3 per cent of women were thinking about starting a business; in 2011, this had gone up to about 5 per cent.

The first barrier for women is stereotypes and a lack of role models. The second is mindset: women are likely to be more cautious and less optimistic than men when thinking through business opportunities. The third barrier is finance: women are often hesitant to seek funding for ideas through loans or seeking equity. The final barrier is lack of childcare: despite some exceptions, women continue to bear the brunt.

If we are interested in breaking down such barriers, there are steps we can take. First, increase the number of women entrepreneurs in the public eye. Second, ensure that there are more female mentors for women who want to be entrepreneurs. Third, form mixed-gender entrepreneurial teams. Fourth, ensure women have equal access to finance. And finally, it is important that we support budding entrepreneurs with support for factors such as childcare.

● *Andre Spicer is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Cass Business School*

Inspirational books to get you going on the long road to success

Katherine Griffiths

Many entrepreneurs say there is no substitute for learning on the job, but a significant number also point to books that have inspired them. Here are some that stand out from the pack.

Good to Great, by Jim Collins

The 2001 book seeks to explain why some companies transform themselves into market leaders and others do not. It aims to show that there is a pattern that business leaders can follow for success and breaks the guide down into seven

characteristics. Leaders must confront the “brutal facts” about a situation but at the same time never give up hope.

The E-Myth: Why Most Businesses Don’t Work and What to Do About It, by Michael Gerber

The book considers the mistaken belief that most businesses are started by people with budding business skills, when most are created by experts in a particular field who start out knowing nothing about business.

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, by Stephen Covey

Named by *Time* magazine in 2011 as

one of The 25 Most Influential Business Management Books, the blockbuster apparently made a big impact on Bill Clinton when he was President. It prepares readers for a fundamental change in approach to life and introduces seven “habits”.

A Book About Innocent: Our Story and the Things We’ve Learned, by Dan Germain, Richard Reed, John Hamilton

The founders of the smoothie brand say: “We started innocent from scratch, so we’ve learnt a lot of things by getting stuff wrong. Some other

lessons have come from listening carefully to people cleverer than us. And some stuff we just got lucky on.”

Choose Yourself!, by James Altucher

The author argues that everything that seemed “safe”, such as employment, retirement and the Government, no longer is. “It’s on you to make the most important decision in your life,” he writes.

The Founder’s Dilemmas, by Noam Wasserman

The Harvard Business School professor explores the key early decisions and pitfalls faced by

entrepreneurs and investors and outlines options for start-ups.

Anyone Can Do It, by Sahar and Bobby Hashemi

The book describes turning Coffee Republic from an idea into a high street brand. The authors seek to dispel the idea that entrepreneurs are inherently “special” people.

Why Should Anyone be Led by You?, by Robert Coffee and Gareth Jones

The authors set out to demonstrate what it takes to be a leader who can inspire employees to achieve outstanding results.