



## **Entrepreneurial Lives**

*Invisible boundaries: When the home is the business*

### **MariaLaura Di Domenico**

When you hear the word 'entrepreneur' what sort of person comes to mind?

Perhaps you're thinking of someone like Bill Gates, Richard Branson, or Steve Jobs? Or some other high-profile entrepreneur who has made it big.

But the reality is that most entrepreneurs are small business owners. The sort of people you and I come into contact with everyday. You may even be one yourself.

I'm MariaLaura Di Domenico from the Open University Business School. In this series of podcasts called 'Entrepreneurial Lives', I'll take you on a journey exploring the everyday realities of people who run their own businesses.

I want to debunk the myth that to be an entrepreneur you need to be a special sort of person or someone who's only concerned with making it big. For me, entrepreneurs and being entrepreneurial is all about a state of mind. It's not exclusively about business growth and huge financial returns. Entrepreneurs are to be found in very diverse settings and can be driven by a variety of goals such as independence, family, community and lifestyle. What all entrepreneurs have in common then are intrinsic qualities such as creativity, energy, resilience, flexibility, persistence and passion.

In this first podcast I'm going to delve into the often messy reality of what it is like to run a home-based business.

Running a business from home may seem like a good idea when you're first starting out. Yes, the overhead costs are low, and the spare room or garage can be the control centre of your new business. You'd be at work without even leaving the house, putting on a suit or putting up with a monotonous, daily commute to the office. A no-brainer you might think? But as well as the upsides, running a business from home can also have its downsides, perhaps more than you might first imagine.

Sarah Hodgkins is the owner of Charlotte Designs. Her motivation for setting up her business from home is one very common to small business owners trying to balance work and family commitments:

### **Sarah Hodgkins**

"I have been interior designing on and off for well over 20 years now and after the birth of my second child, I wanted a business that I could fit in around the family and so it seemed an obvious choice to go back to interior design and having your office at home, which is very easy to do, meant that I could do it quickly, cheaply and still be able to spend time with the children as well."

### **MariaLaura Di Domenico**

"So what sort of set up do you have at home? How do you practically manage having a business at home?"

### **Sarah Hodgkins**

"It's not easy. I have the dining room as it once was and is now my office and really everything is in there. The computer is in there, all my books and reference stuff is in there. I also have space for curtains that are waiting to be hung, paints and things like that. So it is a bit, it's a bit messy really but it works for me and it means that I have got a space that I can go and do my business."

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

And Sarah's certainly not on her own. Another working mother, and entrepreneur, Kate Hopewell-Smith, runs her photography business from home. Like Sarah, she's also found creating time and space for work and family a real challenge:

**Kate Hopewell-Smith**

"It's quite difficult. I have 2 young children, so 5 and 2. We are lucky enough to have a room in the house which is my husband's library/office space and I have a small area in there which I use for my editing and admin."

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

"Is there anything that you do to manage the space or your time or.....?"

**Kate Hopewell-Smith**

"It's been a learning curve and it's taken nearly 12 months for the children to really understand that, when mummy is working, that they are not to disturb me but still they come crashing in, crashing in when I am on the phone or when I am really trying to concentrate on something and the other really hard thing is that I have a kind of agreed timetable with my husband and you find that you have to literally stop what you are doing, leave the office, walk 5 paces and be a mummy again and in many ways that's one of the hardest challenges."

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

Deciding to set-up a business at home can have many benefits. However, as we've heard, managing the physical set-up isn't always straightforward. It will usually involve some kind of compromise .... like keeping certain rooms or areas as 'work only'. Drawing such physical boundaries and zoning areas are common strategies for the entrepreneur trying to run a home-business. Time management such as earmarking certain times of the day for work tasks and devoting others exclusively for home and family are also common techniques or coping strategies. These are particularly important if you want to be able to concentrate on your work or at other times completely 'switch off' from it. Whatever the approach, it's important to devise some kind of method for drawing boundaries between home and work.

For example, one of my colleagues explained that on 'working from home' days she would get ready as if to go to the office, literally walking out of her front door and closing it, only to then open it again and walk back inside and then get down to business in her home office. It was as if she left the stage after one act and came back on ready for another. This little ritual helped her to prepare herself mentally – to get into the right zone or frame of mind so that she could switch from the 'relaxing at home' persona to the 'working' persona despite only leaving the house very briefly.

So we can appreciate then that our approach to work, including the type of work we do, involves a lot of mental self-discipline and emotional management.

This brings to mind the related academic concept of 'emotional labour'. This is the idea that the emotions we display to other people do not always match those we actually feel. So, in many service jobs for instance that are customer-facing it's often important that staff smile and be courteous .... Even when they may be having a bad day themselves, and they're not in the mood to smile. Think about it. Your pet cat could've died or you may have just been given a parking ticket. Yet you're still expected to tell the customer to 'have a nice day' and pretend that you mean it!

So how does all this relate to managing a home-based business? Emotional labour and managing the impressions we give of ourselves are a key part of any business, and very important to the entrepreneur running a home-business. You'll need to try to create a positive impression to clients and customers. This could even be over the phone for instance. When there is no face to face contact you still create impressions through your voice as well as what you say. Noises in the background can also have an effect. Perhaps you want to hide the fact

that you're working at home? Otherwise, if you're on the phone to clients you probably won't want customers to hear the baby crying or kids playing or shouting in the background.

This was highlighted by Jo Winchcombe who jointly runs a company with two other female entrepreneurs called Simply Stuck, which creates personalised name labels for children. Although it has now been moved to alternative premises, this was originally set up as a home business:

**Jo Winchcombe**

We very much marketed it from the fact that we were mothers and we understood that people needed labels for their children's clothing because they do get lost. I think they still expect a professional service and the last thing they want to do when they're ringing up a business is to hear a child crying in the background or being told that it can't be delivered for 2 days because you are doing something with the child. So I think professionally you have got to present the business as a business and I think that you have got to keep the two separate".

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

However, home-based businesses can also involve a lot of face-to-face interactions. Another example of a home-based business that I've personally done a lot of research into and written about is the small hotel or bed and breakfast. B&Bs are often run from someone's actual home. *Their* castle. But wait - This is when it can start to get *really* complicated! It's not a hotel. It's not *just* a private house. It's neither exclusively one nor the other and yet it's both.

**Sound of doorbell .... Door opening...**

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

"Hello David."

**David Meek**

"Good morning, welcome."

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

"It's nice to meet you."

**David Meek:**

"Yeah, welcome to Number 68, come on inside."

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

"Thank you very much."

**David Meek**

"Would you like to have a look around?"

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

"That would be lovely."

**David Meek**

"Ok. Well let's (door closes) pop upstairs first. (Footsteps can be heard going upstairs. Sound of vacuum cleaner). Now there are one or two bits around as we are just getting the rooms ready for some guests coming in but there's a single room here and there's a chap been staying in that for a long time and this room will be filled by an American guest who is going to Bletchley Park later today "..... footsteps ... fading out.

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

David Meek and his wife Amanda run Number 68, a bed and breakfast based from their home in a leafy English suburb of Milton Keynes. David talked to me about how running his home-based business is like a performance from the moment the door bell rings:

**David Meek**

"If you're unhappy about something with the other person, oh look someone's knocked at the door, why then your suddenly happy again and it's a bit like going on stage, you know once you step on to the stage you put on the public face and any of the unhappiness has got to be pushed aside."

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

"So you mentioned that you feel as if you are on stage. Can you tell me a little more about that?"

**David Meek**

"Well sometimes of an afternoon you're sat relaxing thinking, right the rooms are done, there are no guests in the house and you're reading the paper or watching the TV. Oh, there's a car door outside, right ok, right put that down, there might be somebody out there. Is that, oh yes they've arrived, right ok quick clear that rubbish away, make everything look right, go to the door, dash outside and you greet them and welcome them and bring the cases in, so suddenly you've had to sort of go into top gear and into the public mode rather than this is the private relaxed mode that you like to be in - it's the swings and the roundabouts I'm afraid."

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

So, as we've heard, David Meek feels like he's 'on stage' when he's with customers or anticipating their arrival at his business.

This reminds me of the famous quote from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* - "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players". Let's think a bit more about this analogy.

We all perform for each other and even ourselves. We play different roles and try to manage the impression we give to customers, colleagues at work, our friends and even when spending time with the family. Hopefully, this is in the way we *want* to be seen. You may want your colleagues at work to see you as conscientious for example. Or your friends and family to see you as fun-loving and easy-going. It is possible then that you might not want each of your roles or audiences to get mixed up too much.

I've used these ideas in my writing and I've also drawn on the work of other writers. For example, the American Sociologist Erving Goffman used the metaphors of the theatre, the stage and role-playing in some of his work in order to capture how we play different 'roles' in our everyday lives. He spent time in a small family run hotel – observing the theatrical nature of performance and how waiters would move back and forth from the dining room and kitchen through rotating doors. They would smile broadly to customers before sometimes groaning when out of ear shot! It was as if they were going from a performance on stage with the customers present to going off-set again to a back stage area in the kitchen. Arguably you are more yourself or relaxed when you're 'off stage' and not having to perform to customers. Or you could argue that you are just putting on a different performance when you are back-stage.

For me, the bed and breakfast is an especially interesting example of a home-based business because clients are physically present in the actual home.

In this type of business it can get quite tricky for the owner and also for guests for that matter, to negotiate this space. Think about the possible feelings of intrusion. The extent of vulnerability at having your personal home and family exposed to strangers in this way. How would you cope with it? You'd probably enjoy playing your part in the performance and interacting with new and interesting people some of the time .... but there is likely to be some tension between enjoying these aspects of the work .... and literally never leaving the workplace and always having to be ready to perform nearly all of the time, just in case, in order to meet the needs of the customer.

Finding strategies to help cope with the constant physical presence of customers is vital to maintaining some emotional space. I asked David if he had devised any rules to help him and his wife Amanda have a break and switch off from the business:

**David Meek**

“ I don't particularly think that there are rules, although sometimes you feel that we've had somebody staying for such a prolonged period or a constant flow of people over a number of weeks, you think we've not actually had the place to ourselves for a while and yes, it is our home, so sometimes you think 'oh I just want to relax for a day or two', so that particular weekend we might just say we're full and not have any guests.”

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

So turning the B and B back into a private home again – even if only temporarily is how David is able to mentally switch off. This again highlights how it can be challenging to draw invisible boundaries between home and work.

But it's the fact that the bed and breakfast is a genuine home that is what is often appealing about it. Some customers search out what they perceive to be an authentic experience and enjoy staying with a family. So, this feature is recognized by David and highlights the co-presence of home and business and the idea of creating the feel or impression of a surrogate home for customers.

**David Meek**

“When we look back through the guests comments book that we have, a lot of them do put home from home or better than home. They come from all over the world so they have different expectations maybe. We have people, say from India and one word they often use is cosy which is a nice sort of warm sense of feeling about the place that they enjoy. We've recently had somebody from LA and he stayed for about a month and he put in his comments you know you make me feel like part of the family so I think he's quite happy.”

**MariaLaura Di Domenico**

In this podcast we've considered the challenges of running a home-based business and we've heard from some people who run their own businesses from home. Sure, it gives autonomy, flexibility and a lot of personal freedom. But, it can also cause significant tensions between work and personal lives. We also considered the various coping strategies that can be used to do this. These include time and spatial as well as emotional management strategies - the need to act-out, 'perform' or manage the impressions given to clients and customers.

Working from home is of course not a new phenomenon. But, as we've seen this flexibility and autonomy brings with it both physical and emotional challenges and tensions that we need to manage if it is to work.

Thanks for listening. Do join me for my next podcast when I'll be exploring the issues facing mumpreneurs – working mothers who run their own businesses.