



Entrepreneurial Lives

Making it up as you go along: Business as bricolage

Collage.

Bric a brac.

Montage.

Mosaic.

Pastiche.

Bricolage.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

What did you think of when you heard these words? Perhaps you thought of a medley or assortment of different objects? Or an artwork using a mixture of materials?

All denote a similar notion - the idea of an assemblage – a pot pourri of different things combined together to create something new.

I'm MariaLaura Di Domenico from the Open University Business School and this podcast is called 'Making it up as you go along: Business as bricolage'. It is part of a series called 'Entrepreneurial Lives' which is all about exploring the everyday realities of people who run their own businesses. I use the concept of bricolage – the idea of 'making-do' with what is at hand – such as resources, people, ideas and know-how - in new and creative ways – to explore 'real-world' approaches by entrepreneurs to address the problem of resource acquisition for their businesses.

Resourcefulness is a central concept in the study of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs are often innovative in trying to create something unique from what is available to them. Many entrepreneurs are constrained by having to operate in resource poor environments. They may not have enough cash, assets, market penetration, raw materials or expertise about a particular product or service for instance. So, how do they get round this?

For me, entrepreneurs are often bricoleurs. They are tinkerers - improvising, imagining, playing, creating, experimenting and searching for opportunities to make novel use of what is around them.

Creatively reconfiguring a collection of available things in an innovative way or for a different purpose has been used in many different disciplines such as literature, art and music. It involves the construction or creation of something new from things that happen to be available or that you can get hold of. We see this happening around us in everyday life. Recycling is now in vogue. Now usurped by the likes of e-bay, the corner bric-a-brac shop would have all kinds of odds and ends available. A squirrel's paradise!

In literature, bricolage is used to refer to a piece of writing created from existing pieces or previous stories that have been incorporated into a new narrative. This technique is also used in drama and theatre.

In visual art, an artist can create a collage or mosaic from various materials or objects to signify something new. For example, the famous bed by Tracey Emin – a piece of art comprising a dishevelled double bed featuring some of her highly personal belongings.

And in folk music, kitchen implements and other everyday objects are used in new ways to create sound. Such as Irish spoons, the washboard, gumleaf humming, and the largophone made from a stick and bottle tops. The musical theatre production called 'Stomp' is a recent favourite of mine – dancers perform acrobatics on stage whilst creating contemporary music with empty oil drums, newspapers, pots and pans, old kitchen sinks and brooms.

The term 'bricolage' is French in origin. In common parlance it's often used to refer to DIY or 'do it yourself'. So it's about being creative and resourceful. Using whatever materials are at hand for a new and different purpose.

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss – introduced the concept of intellectual bricolage in his book *La Pense Sauvage – The Savage Mind*. For him, bricoleurs acquire, compile and store materials for future use. Therefore, the resources themselves actually determine what they are used for. And what the outcome will be. There is no set plan, goal or objective as such. The bricoleur is therefore innately flexible.

Now, this goes contrary to what you are advised to do in business. Sure, you're meant to be flexible but you're also instructed on the importance of meticulous forward planning and having solid business plans. So a bricoluerial approach seems almost counter intuitive. Even foolish. Yet, this is the approach that many entrepreneurs have said they actually used in practice. Being able to change direction. Being open-minded to opportunities and not too wedded to plans and forecasts, even when these had been devised.

Sarah Hodgkins runs an interior design business Charlotte Designs. She has a high regard for this fluid and organic approach:

Sarah Hodgkins

Be flexible. It's amazing to me how often the most successful businesses are those that have evolved and maybe they started off doing one thing thinking that they would be going down a particular track but have veered off because something has come along that was of interest that they found that they were good at and I think that if you allow yourself to grow organically, get yourself known for something that's quite specific and be excellent at it and be known for being excellent at it, you're far more likely to succeed than having a plan and just not deviating from that and being too rigid. We live in a society now where things change very quickly and what was right and what was done a year ago is not what's being done now and is certainly not what's going to be done in a year's time. So I think you have to be, I think you have to be more fluid than perhaps you did 10, 20 years ago and just allow yourself to develop and take opportunities and follow a path that appears in front of you, rather than trying to battle through something that is maybe not going to take you to where you want to be.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

And that's how you found your business to be quite organic?

Sarah Hodgkins

Definitely. When I first started, I was much more of a mainstream interior designer. I didn't think the murals were going to be such an important part of what I do, but because it's something that's quite unique and there's no-one else round here that really does it in the same way that I do, it became apparent quite quickly that that was going to be what was going to be the differentiator - make me stand out from the crowd. So I've just capitalised on that really and used it as the flag for Charlotte Designs and it's worked.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

The entrepreneur's business network is often instrumental to providing access to knowledge, information and resources. Entrepreneurs also use personal networks such as family, friends and mentors in order to access support, skills and experience. The social networking platform

LinkedIn is an example of this type of networking. So, as the saying goes - 'it's often who you know and not what you know' when it comes to creating and developing your business.

Sarah Hodgkins

'Women in Business' network is an organisation that I belong to that helps me to tap into other women who are experts in their field. So it's great for me that if I want some photographs taken of a particularly good interior that I've done, I've got photographers I can just phone up and say could you come and do something for me and you know web designers, graphic designers, printers, all these kinds of people now I can - I'm a good directory for this kind of thing.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

Photography business owner Kate Hopewell-Smith also invests time in networking with other businesswomen in order to build her resource base:

Kate Hopewell-Smith

I've found my accountant through networking and I've been able to refer friends for independent financial advisors or building websites. It's incredible the range of businesses that you come across via networking.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

Many entrepreneurs have to bootstrap. This is when entrepreneurs avoid using finance raised from external investors such as venture capital, public equity or loans. So, for example, the entrepreneur who's bootstrapping would perhaps instead choose to invest their own savings in the business rather than getting a loan. They might try to multi-task or learn new skills in order to do more things themselves to reduce the expense involved in hiring someone else. Or they might try to get advice or expertise given to them pro bono – as a good will gesture or on an 'I owe you' basis. Or they might share equipment or staff with other firms to reduce costs.

Here's Sarah Hodgkins again on how she has made do with limited resources in running her business:

Sarah Hodgkins

My first website is probably a really good example. I decided to build it myself to cut cost and I'm not a technical person so that was a bit of a challenge - quite a few late nights and you know, it wasn't great - it got me up and running, it got me a web presence which I do think is extremely important even for very small businesses. Looking back now it was no-where near as good as the professional website I have now but it got me up and running. I still design a lot of my own literature. I still design all my leaflets, handouts, brochures, that kind of thing. Because I have a design eye, I can do that and save the cost of someone else doing it and I think just keeping an eye on what works and what doesn't - nothing upsets me more than seeing people spending money out on advertisements or things that just aren't working for them - so making sure that you keep accurate records of what works for you in terms of marketing is extremely important so that you don't waste money and if something doesn't work, don't do it again, try something else and if that does work repeat it and I think that's, that's the key thing for keeping an eye on marketing costs at the very beginning.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

So, key approaches of the entrepreneur as bricoleur then are: making do with what is at hand and recombining them for new purposes, refusing to be constrained by the limitations they are faced with, and improvisation.

I've researched the small hotel or bed and breakfast where owners often convert their private homes into hospitality businesses. This is an example of making do with what is at hand as the home is modified for the new purpose of running a bed and breakfast. I went to meet David Meek who did exactly that with his bed and breakfast business – Number 68.

David Meek

Well it came about through a coincidence of several things. A couple of years before we started, we were both made redundant, having been in a job () for the best part of a quarter of a century and we then did a couple of different things and it coincided with somebody knocking on the door who had done the quotation and planning for when we had a new gas boiler, and said, "did you want to sell your house because I'm looking for a place with a Granny annex?" and we thought, no we don't really want to sell the house but that put a thought in our mind that we actually wanted to stay where we were and we didn't want to move away or downsize but we realised that we had a big asset that we could use.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

Another example is the idea of using discarded resources for new purposes. For instance, where entrepreneurs are able to tap local resources that other organizations have failed to recognize or value. So, the business model of the socially-oriented *Furniture Resource Centre* based in the city of Liverpool, is based on the collection, refurbishment and resale of domestic furniture which is no longer needed by its owners. This is also the business model of the London based *Greenworks* which specializes in recycling office furniture. The furniture is donated to these organizations which then refurbish and sell them on.

Jo Winchcombe

I think we were very creative and we used and abused people when it was our very busy times. You know, we'd get anybody in to come and help us cut and bag the labels, take the cheques down to the bank to bank them, enter data on the PC. It was very much about getting as much help as we could for very little, you know maybe some labels in return for their children rather than actually paying them for their time at the beginning. You know, living in a village, good local network - people very willing to help to get the business off the ground.

MariaLaura DiDomenico

That was Jo Winchcombe describing the early days of setting up her company - Simply Stuck – which produces clothing labels for children. As we've heard, entrepreneurs may need to think laterally. Improvising is all about trial and error. Within the constraints of the limited resources available, it's all about trying out different approaches until you can come up with the one that is the "best fit" or works best. So for example sharing or swapping goods or skills as a form of barter or exchange if there's a scarce supply of ready cash to actually pay for what is needed. The website swapaskill.com comes to mind, where people can exchange goods and advice in lieu of payment.

For me, it's vital that the entrepreneur as bricoleur needs to create something that will be valued by someone else. This is a must if the business is to succeed. Through their networks the entrepreneur must also bring others on board. I call this 'stakeholder participation'. That way they will be able to access a lot of interest and good will and may even be able to avoid challenges or people trying to put obstacles in their way to make life difficult. So, for me bricoleurs are also master persuaders. They'll often be political actors, and they'll know what's going on in the community and the interests and agendas of different groups. That way they are able to get hold of new resources by exerting influence on the right people and building a network of support around themselves.

For example, I interviewed an entrepreneur who ran a social enterprise – an organisation with social and environmental as well as business goals. He wanted to set up a wind farm. But in order to do this he first needed to secure the consent of a local land owner and farmer as the wind turbines would be on his land. He told me that it took him a while to develop a relationship and the trust he needed to secure his agreement. So his first meeting with him was across the farm gate but on that occasion he didn't even get through the gate. The next meeting he met in a cowshed and it took a few attempts until he got in the kitchen. It took a few years until he got a cup of tea...and...eventually secured his agreement.

Overall then, the entrepreneurial bricoleur has a resourceful, persistent approach. They often make do with what is at hand, reconfigure objects, skills or ideas for a completely new purpose. They think of ways around the constraints they face and improvise where they can. Always aiming to come up with things of value they often have to persist and persuade others to participate in what they are trying to achieve.

In the next podcast I'll unpack the notion of the 'lifestyle entrepreneur'.