

Podcast Transcript: Running your own business – career journeys that lead to start-ups

Host: Katie Masheter

Guest Speakers: Jennifer MacDonald-Nethercott and Jacky Bloomfield

Katie:

Hello. This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands Careers and Employability Centre. My name is Katie Masheter and in this episode I'm speaking to two contacts, Jennifer MacDonald Nethercott and Jacky Bloomfield. Both have career journeys that have encompassed a whole variety of roles but in the end, they've considered their skills and followed their passion to set up their own businesses. Their stories really help show that if you soak up all the learning opportunities and believe in yourself, you can take your career anywhere you choose.

So first up we have got Jennifer MacDonald Nethercot, from ski instructor to pool lifeguard in the past. Now in marketing and brand development, Jennifer is a chartered marketeer, running her own business 'Strath Communications'.

Jennifer:

I am Jennifer MacDonald-Nethercott. And just to give you a bit of background, I have lived and works in the highlands for over 20 years now. And as you alluded to, I first worked in Aviemore, while I was at university in Glasgow as a pool lifeguard and ski instructor and then I moved up to the Spey Valley full time when I graduated and have never left. So I now run my business and live and work in Grantown-on-Spey with my husband and two kids, and we recently just got a Border Terrier puppy so that's keeping us busy. I now have a role where I run my own business, providing marketing, planning and campaign management services to small and medium sized enterprises.

Katie:

It is great that you've managed to set-up your life and your business in the Highlands. For students that are just about to finish university or are looking at their future job prospects and maybe do not really know how to navigate the current landscape, it would be great to hear a bit more about how you gained experience and got into a position where you could set up your own business.

Jennifer:

While I was at university, I worked in hospitality which is probably where a lot of students find themselves. However, I managed to get myself a role as a pool lifeguard which meant I was always finished nice and early compared to some of my colleagues who are still at you know serving behind the bar at two in the morning and I managed to go out and have quite an enjoyable work life balance shall we say, through my university career and during that time I worked as a ski instructor as well. And, as I left University this led to a full-time role with Hilton in Aviemore, because I'd quickly realised while I was at university that being a full time ski instructor was never going to pay me very much money, and it wasn't going to go far and it was definitely something to keep as a hobby rather than as full time employment. And certainly at that time, I gained a BA in Leisure Management management, but I still didn't know, you know may early 20s, what I really wanted to do in my life so if I probably sort of fell into it and it kind of suited me at the time. I worked as a pool lifeguard and it paid the bills and that is, that's where I was. But eventually as I realised that I didn't want to do that forever, and it led into a role within the events team at the hotel and then that kind of really opened my eyes to sort of realise what I could be doing with my career and I really loved that organisation and the planning side of things. Which then I suppose, as I then realised as well, hospitality is a 24 hour operation, no matter what role you're in and eventually I realised that I quite liked my weekends and I wanted to get those back and that's when I moved into a first sales and marketing role, still within the tourism world, but it was, it was more around what I wanted to do. And that

lead me further into a pure marketing role. So, at that time I got a role in the marketing team with Macrae and Dick who at that time were Scotland's oldest Motor Group with dealerships across Scotland which was brilliant. And that was really good fun getting into the world of cars, and working with a range of different people, and I stayed in that that role for quite a number of years. And part of that company it gave me a lot of training and development to expand myself and give me different opportunities as well. One of the opportunities I had was sitting on a board for Honda UK and advising them on their national marketing which was brilliant and that involved trips to London. But again, as things change after 10 years within the world of automotive, I was decided I was ready for a new challenge, and obviously living in the highlands. You always sometimes wonder where is that that challenge going to come from? We're going to have to move away but I didn't. I got a role as marketing manager in with a company selling fmcg goods, but it wasn't just anything, it was marketing beef and salmon jerky snacks, which had a totally different customer service, in terms of going from marketing Jags and land rovers to trying to sell people, dried beef snacks. So again, this was a national company that head office was in Milton Keynes, but they had a factory up here in Scotland, and they exported their products worldwide so that gave me more personal learning and development opportunities in terms of dealing with that kind of business, and that kind of customer segmentation as well. And we ran a lot of customer facing exhibitions which took me from everywhere from Birmingham to Germany and Chicago with that business to learn more and more about the way that customers snack, nowadays. And it was really from that role because it was watching the directors day to day and attending monthly board meetings that really sort of started to make me think about, well, what would it be like running my own business look like, and certainly with that, that business I had that direct day to day contact with the directors and business owners to see what they were doing, and it was tough, you know it's not easy running your own business, but I felt in 2018 that the time was right for me to now focus on the type of marketing that I knew I could really deliver for businesses, and not necessarily just deliver that for one business, but to deliver it for a range of companies, and that's when I decided to take that step and come out of full time employment and start up my own business. Which again, over the last few years has been a massive learning curve again because when you're in the comfort so to speak, of employment, you know you're going to get that monthly salary month in month out, but once you start running your own business, it's not just marketing that I was delivering anymore. I had to learn about sales, and accounting, and setting up my own business, and making sure the books were always up to date. Never mind just being able to pay myself every month as well, so certainly the skills that I've had to learn over the last couple of years I think have really developed and shaped me and I really now know what parts of the business I like delivering on and what parts of the business that I've taken extra support in. So and I now have someone that does all my bookkeeping and I've also got a virtual assistant that helps me with a lot of the admin kinda side of the business too and that's where we're now see it's growing and developing and working with different people in different ways. I think the beauty of running your own business is that you don't just need to conform to everyone does it, you can pick and choose as to whether or not you want to take on employees or if you want to work with specialists in their areas. So it's been quite a journey to get me to where I am now. And through all of that is, you know, always learning as well there's always something new to learn in business.

Katie:

Wow Jennifer, just to pause to kind of comment, what a journey it's amazing to hear about it and it's really clear that you are energised by that learning and embracing the challenge. Are there any particular people that you've worked with or that you are surrounded by who have inspired you along the way?

Jennifer:

Many individuals and groups that have probably helped me and been really supportive. It's hard to kind of pick out any sort of one individual person but certainly, you know, I've definitely, during my career, it's amazing you know in the past, it would have been a Filofax, showing my age to write all your contacts in, whereas now all your contacts are on your phone. And I would say, you know it's a case of, you know, if you get a business card, keep those details and follow up with that person. You just never know when you may need to reach out to them but likewise, they may reach out to you. And certainly, you know it's looking at sort of networking groups. Since I've gone self-employed, I joined Highland Business Women last year, and they've been so supportive to myself and also my business development as well, and there have certainly been a few other members that I've made and we've all been at similar stages in our business journey. We've all come out of full-time employment around the similar time and started on this, you know, setting up her own business journey together and it's really nice to have those other people that you can phone up because you know they are at the same stage as you to bounce ideas around or have a bit moan because you are having a bad day. And obviously you're not in that kind of office environment to share your problems. Recently I joined my local Chamber of Commerce, when I first started as well, the Cairngorms Business Partnership, and they've been really great in communicating all the ever-changing support that government's been putting out recently. Those two groups offer something different, one's quite business focus one's more sort of that that personal supportive side of it. And I think that's where it's great, it's getting that balance between the personnel as well as the business support, when you're going through your career.

Katie:

And so is there one key lesson that you've learned along the way that you feel like it's really prominent in your mind, good or bad, something that maybe stands out from your career that you've kind of always taken with you as a bit of a mantra?

Jennifer:

Key bit of advice with everyone is don't burn bridges. The world is a very very small place so you never know when your paths may cross in the future. And I did learn this, I had the same boss twice, in two different companies. And it really is that thing, you know if you maybe don't quite get along with someone, or don't quite agree with someone, you may be relying on that individual to either get you the sale, agreed that contract or, you know, give you that introduction.

Katie:

Yes, good advice. So given the changing times, a turbulent 2020/2021, an unpredictable kind of uncertain jobs market of the future, is there anything advice that you'd want to give students to better prepare themselves?

Jennifer:

Never to stop learning about yourself, as well, and what you want to achieve in life. Being prepared to muck in, sometimes you just have to get on and do it. It might not be in your job description but sometimes you just have to get in there and get on with it. Last year I embarked on really studying myself through personal development and there's been a couple of books that that really kind of shaped my year that I now wish I'd read at much younger age. 'Think and Grow Rich' by Napoleon Hill, written in the 1930s, but it's amazing how much of it can be applied to business today in terms of really focusing on your goals. It talks about not worrying how you're going to do something just keep focusing on your goal and the 'how' will come to you. It's really about having that self-belief in what you're doing is right, and kind of talks to you about persistence and self-belief and really having that desire to achieve your goal. It's quite a light read, I thought that with it having been written in

the 30s, it could be, you know, the language is different but it's not, it's actually been really written really well for our time. And then the one that I'm reading for the second time now is called Psycho Cybernetics by Maxwell Maltz and again it was written in the 60s but it really focuses on self-image, and really sort of believing more in your inner self and how then that portrays yourself. That's really helped me as far as my confidence goes over the last few years and really believing in me and knowing that I am an expert and allowing that to shine through. Go out and grab it! Look for those opportunities and try and create them for yourself as well you know, don't just sit there because you've got to kind of take that action and make those opportunities happen for yourself.

Katie:

Great words of advice in there Jennifer. Thank you! It's something we are always trying to encourage students to do. Our strapline for the careers centre is 'Look Up, Look Forward and Be in the Know'. That's where the future me podcast came from, encouraging people to tune in to the opportunities and think about how they can take advantage of them. And you are absolutely right, action changes things so just go for it. Thanks again!

Next up we have Jackie Bloomfield, with 40 years of photographic experience, both in commercial and wildlife. She's been running her own business with her husband mark for the last 15 years. We're really intrigued to hear what Jackie has to share in terms of her career journey and what it's like to run her own business in the Highlands and Islands. So great to have you Jackie.

Jacky:

Okay, thank you for having me. As Katie said we've been running out of business for about 15 years, and we recently moved to the Highlands. We'd worked all the way from Land's End right up to Shetland. And so we decided that it was a good place to take the business forward, and perhaps start doing tours, taking people out to the highlands, giving them an experience and also photographing the wildlife. So we have a very diverse range, we both have very different backgrounds, we started our business due to redundancy. My husband was made redundant from his job as a commercial photographer, and within three months, I was made redundant from my job. I had a very varied background, but my father and grandfather were both photographers so I always think, maybe it was meant to be. And we just went from there, we both had a love of nature wildlife photography and we both wanted to run our own businesses so it was sort of the catalyst for getting us to do something different. It's a combination of skills and people often say, well how do you work with your partner in life as well as your business partner. And that's, I think all about knowing each other's skills, and working together and working with those best ones. We've both got combined skills but creative is as it says, it's very much a creative thing, everybody sees things slightly differently. And for us, it's also a lifestyle choice. We chose to do the business. We love what we do and we have a passion for what we do. If you've got a passion for what you're doing, it comes through in your work. And we've had lots of lovely comments from people, testimonials about courses we've done and people we've worked with. Everybody sees it differently and it's not just the camera that is taking the picture, it's the person that's taking the picture. We've utilised our skills that we've had from previous jobs and experiences, and then brought that in together to make a business that we're both so very proud on and lucky to work in.

Katie:

That's actually such a really nice thought that maybe applies to a career in a way too. That you may all be on a similar career trajectory or path, or have a similar background, but it's the person at the end of the day, a bit like the person behind the camera, that makes the success or makes things work, so yeah, no that was really interesting. Wow, certainly sounds like you've figured out your kind of dream team set-up but I guess a lot of that comes from knowing your own skills as well as those

that are working around you. Intrigued to hear a bit more about your varied career background I guess so. I don't know if you want to give us an overview of kind of how you got to where you are today?

Jacky:

Yeah, I mean, I've had I've had very varied career, some of it through personal circumstances. I had a head injury, right in the middle of my GCSEs, so that really was basically a big blow for me, but you get through these things, you do different things. I went on, rather than re sitting exams, I went on to a Business College, which was really great. I then spent a year in America, and that was just absolutely brilliant after college. I think also for life skills as well, you pick up an awful lot when you're travelling and doing different things. And after that, I did various bits and pieces, I was a trainee veterinary nurse, so I've always had a love of animals and tried to help them. And I became a very successful PA working at CEO level, slightly sideways still doing a bit of the PA work, but I also did legal. I was a legal assistant, and through that I have done bookkeeping, I'm a trained bookkeeper, but I've always done photography as a hobby and things and really interested in it. That's where I am!

Katie:

A really fascinating journey Jacky. So, is there anyone in your mind that really sticks out having helped you along the way? so I know Mark is clearly a solid element of that, but is there anyone else that you feel throughout your career journey has really supported you?

Jacky:

I think friends and family have always been very supportive. Networking, certainly since we started the business, has been a great support. We might have an idea here in business but then you've got somebody who's got nothing to do with your business whatsoever, and you can bounce ideas off, and it's good to get other people's opinions. There's lots of people out there that are in the same position as you. I find Highland Business Women, very helpful, very useful and feel very supported there. But also I'm a member of FSB.

Katie:

Yeah, having that sounding board I guess is really important as you kind of progress things and take things to the next level. It's just interesting to know, because the Federation small business and Highland Business Women, is quite daunting for a student or recent grad to put themselves out there and in front of lots of new faces and try and explain who they are and what they do and they're kind of elevator pitch. So was there a way in which you first engaged with those groups Jackie? Were you invited in or? And how did you kind of prepare for those networking sessions? Because, I guess everyone's been in that position where they feel quite uncomfortable at first.

Jacky:

My first sort of networking things, I went along to one, you sort of you tend to navigate towards one particular person,. If you can, you build a relationship with them and then they start introducing you to other people. But I think it's also knowing yourself, and preparing. Do it in front of the mirror. That's what I do. You do it in front of the mirror, you do your pitch or whatever and write it down and just practice. It will change, my pitch changes depending on how I feel and you get in and you gauge the room, but that only comes with experience.

Katie:

If there one thing in your mind that's been a key lesson you've had, a key takeaway, that you'd like

to share? something that maybe has gone wrong, or has gone really right, that has stuck out in your mind in your career journey, that you have kept with you as a lesson along the way.

Jacky:

I think the big thing that I've had is having self-belief, belief in yourself and your own abilities. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, but it's believing in yourself and having the courage you know that you can do it, it's taking that big step and going yes I can do it, I do know that I can do it. Having a little bit of trust in your own abilities, in your own confidence. Somebody once said to me somebody I worked with, you have a wise head on young shoulders, and a wisdom beyond your years, and that's stuck with me forever.

Katie:

Thank you Jacky, that's a really great quote to finish on. So appreciate you taking the time to speak to us.

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