

Not many of us expected a global pandemic and even fewer foresaw the impact it would have on hard-won gains of working women. But as the nation pivots to adapt to the new economic landscape, one business hero is clear on how it should look ...

“ We have to collaborate to survive ”



“Facing the floods is one thing; you get on with it and you know what measures you have in place to deal with it. You get through it. But this situation is just something else. I have no idea.” Alison Bartram, 57, owner of Hebden Bridge’s Heart Gallery is musing on the impact of Covid-19 and the West Yorkshire town’s chances of survival as a shopping destination. Catastrophic floods in 2015 temporarily closed many local businesses - Alison, herself, had to shut down for six months to deal with five feet of waste water in her gallery that sells artisan jewellery, ceramics and contemporary art - but as yet, the legacy of this year’s nationwide lockdown is still to be revealed.

And no one, it seems, can give a definite answer on how it will all play out. But current forecasts don’t make for comforting reading - particularly for women. According to research from The Institute for Fiscal Studies and the UCL Institute of Education, nearly 50% of mothers are more likely to have lost their jobs, quit or been furloughed. There are warning cries that we are heading back to the 1950s, such is the expectation that women will pick up the bulk of the care and domestic work. And when the furlough scheme ends and the inevitable widespread redundancies come, it will be women - the ones who have taken the back seat, who have been absent from the Zoom calls in order to pick up the slack of homeschooling, cleaning and feeding - who will find themselves facing the workplace guillotine.

Not only that, hospitality and retail - sectors which both employ a disproportionate number of females - are the two industries that have been hardest hit. A recent report by global business consultancy McKinsey has stated that while grocery and online retail has, not surprisingly, increased during lockdown, this increased expenditure has not managed to outweigh the number of closures in non-food retail - clothes shops, homeware, or galleries, like Alison’s. Accommodation and

catering are next in the firing line, services vulnerable because it’s difficult to see how they can be performed remotely or with strict social distancing in place.

RETHINKING THE FUTURE

Anyone skimming such reports would be forgiven for thinking the worst. But unprecedented times can give way to unprecedented thinking and one figure who has been a vocal advocate of a fresh approach to business is Kate Hardcastle MBE, known also as television’s Customer Whisperer. Kate, 43, founded business consultancy Insight With Passion (IWP) in 2009 after a stellar career in marketing, which saw her turn around the fortunes of bed manufacturer Silentnight during her time as its head of marketing (“I developed a leading international online retail business in 2004, so still very early in that respect, and that gave me a lot of knowledge about how to help businesses transform,” she explains), train in strategic alliances at global business school INSEAD and win a seat at the boardroom table by the age of 30.



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Her time working across Asia in global sourcing - sometimes being the first Caucasian woman many of the factories had seen - and learning both about international business, but also more functional skills such as manufacturing techniques, has meant that she can overlay the operational with the commercial and find common ground. It has proved to be an extremely fruitful mix. "What's unique about IWP is that I can use my experience in operations, international trade and buying, for instance, and then apply them with the customer-facing side so we find a bridge," Kate explains.

IWP is, in essence, a transformation business that works with clients across the globe to restructure their current set-up. By reimagining the relationship with the customer (and by walking the shop or factory floor in addition to driving strategic changes), Kate and her team pride themselves on getting to know each organisation they work and its supply chain and customers, finding creative, workable, and ultimately successful, solutions.

Insight with Passion also looks to transform businesses by also using Kate's

training in strategic alliance and partnerships - often bringing together complementing businesses with similar target audiences to help ideas and projects thrive. "The idea of working together collaboratively has always been our direction when many others would do the opposite," she says. "We do things differently and it works."

The facts support this statement. Kate has won countless awards and accolades (including Yorkshire Business Woman of the Year in 2018, the same year she was honoured by the Queen for her services to business) and IWP's in-built corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme, Access For All, which requires her employees to give 20% of their working hours to start-ups and charities free of charge, is also making waves.

Access For All means that micro-businesses and not-for-profits - often founded by women - get exposed to expertise allowing them to grow and develop, which might otherwise cost them thousands - perhaps best framed as a B2B mentoring scheme. We hear a lot about sending the ladder back down and anyone having heard Kate's keynote

speeches or seen her talk knows she's a champion for women in business. Access For All is her walking the walk, not just paying it lip service.

Of course, it's notoriously hard to measure the monetary value of guidance and mentorship but Savannah Roqaa, 24, knows first-hand how useful a guiding hand can be. The Leeds-based make-up artist and part-time nanny found herself stripped of half her revenue stream as social distancing became paramount and to fill the time, began baking, leaving brownies or the ubiquitous lockdown favourite, banana bread, on her friends' doorsteps.

What happened next takes some believing, but to cut a long story short, Savannah, with the help of various friends' kitchens, fortuitous sharing on some Leeds United players' Instagram accounts, and all-night cake-making sessions, has found herself sole founder of a highly successful baking business - The Savvy Baker - all within two months. But it hasn't been without pitfalls.

"Leeds Council called me and asked if I'd registered the business at Companies House. And I was like, 'Companies what?'" recalls Savannah. "Tax. Packaging. Premises. I've literally no idea." So when Sara Hassan, 33, Kate's protege messaged Savannah offering help to start mapping out a long-term business strategy, it couldn't have been more welcome. "I was just bobbing along so when Sara came out of nowhere... no one has ever done that before, just offered help free of charge. Not unless there's been an underlying agenda. And it's so welcome because I think you can have a brilliant idea and a successful business, but make one mistake and it can quickly go south."



inspiring indie
THE SAVVY BAKER

20%

of working hours dedicated to start-ups and charities for free through Insight with Passion's Access for All scheme

Similarly, Kate - a proud Yorkshire woman who lives outside Wakefield with her husband and three children - has previously given an enormous amount of her time to Welcome to Yorkshire, the county's regional tourist board. Working with her during that time was Laura Kirk, 34, former Head of Membership, whose job it was to put together free events and workshops for her members to add value to their annual subscription fee. Kate's sessions focusing on the customer experience - given free of charge as part of Access For All and delivered the sole intent of helping businesses improve their customer offer - were attended by marketing managers of Yorkshire's big attractions along with proprietors of the smallest seaside B&Bs.

"When Kate spoke you could see people ferociously making notes and action points," says Laura. "A lot of the businesses simply wouldn't have had access to that sort of support otherwise - free help for which they'd normally have to pay hundreds of pounds. And Kate broke it down into achievable points, so attendees could go away and implement a couple of changes, then perhaps a couple more. It was practical and inspirational. Kate's guidance was invaluable."

ACCESS FOR ALL

Corporate social responsibility is often regarded as something only the largest of organisations can accommodate and even then, the amount of time given over to socially conscious programmes is often minuscule compared to IWP's remarkable pledge of 20%. It's common to find that employees are given three days a year to volunteer or that a certain amount of monthly revenue goes to a local charity.

"For micro-businesses and start-ups, there really is a need for pro-bono help," explains Laura, who has seen first-hand how tourism and hospitality ventures can thrive

with the right advice. "I'm not sure how all businesses would be able to afford the 20% that Kate has built into her Access For All model but she makes it work."

Kate and her team have spent a lot of their Access For All quota in places like Hebden Bridge, assisting small independents find their feet again after the floods. "I've definitely followed Kate's mantra and implemented things that she's said in the past," says Alison. "She talks about passion a lot and I fully believe that the businesses that survive are the ones where the owners are passionate about what they do. She's always had that passion and always been really positive."

Kate, again, has shown she's ahead of the curve here because for a long time, CSR was merely considered a nicely polished trophy on the corporate mantlepiece. However, increasing amounts of research are pointing towards it being a vital component of customer trust and relationship-building, and equally a surefire way of attracting young, ambitious talent. In 2011, a survey by Deloitte found that 70% of millennials listed their company's commitment to the community as an influence on their decision to work there. For Sara Hassan and Laura Kirk, and their peer group, giving something back to the communities in which they live and work is as important a part of their job as is their monthly wage.

And let's not forget that despite the hardships of the last few months, there has been a renewed and welcome onus of the power of community; shopping locally or just checking in on neighbours, offering services and sharing goods, be it a bag of self-raising flour or a dozen hard-to-come-by eggs. And while many are keen to cherish and nurture this focus on community action, it remains to be seen if it can transcend the everyday and move into business, with organisations incorporating the community in their plans, collaborating and partnering with like-minded ventures to share skills and resources.

Certainly, Alison, who as well as running the gallery in Hebden Bridge is chair of the Hebden Bridge Business Committee, is adamant that everyone contributing to improving the town freely and willingly and therefore encouraging a greater trade, is the only way small, independents - and therefore high streets - rejuvenate after Covid.

"We've got to work together to survive. By that I mean not just the business community but also the community in general," she explains. "In the past,



businesses were happy in their own bubble but now our survival - and the survival of the town - depends on us collaborating and partnering up. And people staying loyal to local, as they have in lockdown."

And it's this approach - the strategic alliance approach that Kate was advocating 15 years ago, the sharing of skills and data and budget - that might just prove the most successful and sustainable way out of the Covid slump. And hopefully her attitude to giving back, and helping the little businesses survive and thrive, will spread too. As Sara so succinctly says: "Working alongside Kate to deliver great work and good deeds is really inspiring. And she proves on a daily basis that success always leaves room for kindness."