

Downloaded from www.bbc.co.uk/radio4



PROGRAMME: "NICE WORK"

PRODUCER: BARNEY ROWNTREE

PRESENTER: PHILIPPA LAMB

BBC REPORTER: MIKE JOHNSON

DATE: 15 NOVEMBER 2005

Tape transcript by MAREE SHILLINGFORD

LAMB: Hello. The media mogul, Ted Turner, once quipped that an entrepreneur was what you're called when you don't have a job. Well it's one way of looking at it but the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, sees them rather differently. Marking the start of Enterprise week yesterday, he called for Britain to inspire and support a new generation of risk takers. In fact the UK already has a pretty good record on the enterprise front, better than much of the rest of Europe, but only half that of the United States. Growing numbers of young people are being bitten by the entrepreneurial bug, including a lot more women than in the past. But what else could, or indeed, should be done to persuade more people to take the leap and turn their business dreams into reality. Well one woman who's already done just that, is Michelle Mone. Back in 1998, she invented the cleavage-enhancing Ultimo bra. Now her Glasgow-based company, MJM International, which she runs with her husband, is valued at over £20 million. Michelle, I think it all actually started back in 1996, didn't it? You were, what about 24 years old then, and a mother of two? You went off, as I understand it, to a dinner dance with your husband wearing a particularly uncomfortable bra.

MONE: That's right, yes. It was just so uncomfortable and I just got made redundant and I just had my second baby and I took the bra off because it was so uncomfortable and always, always, always wanted to be an entrepreneur but I just couldn't think up of what I was going to do. So I went back to the dinner table at the Hilton Hotel in Glasgow and I said to my husband, "I've got it, I'm going to design a bra" And he says, "well what do you know about bras?" I says, "well I've got boobs and I'll work it out."

LAMB: Enough.

MONE: That was it. And 3½ years later I invented Ultimo, which is now one of the biggest brands in the UK. The Mutual hunters are a model and it's for sale in all the department stores like Debenhams and we now own seven of some of the biggest brands around and...

LAMB: It's an amazing story. I know you spent a huge amount of money on development before you began production. I believe it was nearly a quarter of a million

pounds before you actually produced a single bra. Didn't that scare you? I mean given your domestic circumstances as well, a couple of kids. How did you cope with that?

MONE: Do you know, I've never really had a lot, and for me, yea, it was a risk. When I look back and I think I had two kids then and I put my house up to the bank. It was just a wee flat the south side of Glasgow. But for me I just believed in this idea so much and I think when you start a business you've got to firmly believe in your idea and if you do you will keep going and it's the people who don't believe in their idea all the way, and people who are not prepared to take a risk who will never make it.

LAMB: Where do you think that motivation came from for you? Because I know, I mean you grew up in a Glasgow tenement, you left school at 15, I believe?

MONE: Yes, yes.

LAMB: Is that where it came from, that you could just see where you wanted to be and it wasn't where you were at?

MONE: Yea I was just sick of having nothing and always sick of seeing other people having things and I wanted to help mum and dad. My dad got very sick when I was 15. Woke up one day and he couldn't walk, he was paralysed from the waist down. I just lost my wee brother as well to terminal illness, and I was just sick of having nothing in my family, having nothing and that's what really drove me. No qualifications, nothing, to be honest, that was it.

LAMB: Well, we'll hear more from Michelle later in the programme, but first as I mentioned this is Enterprise week. It's a national campaign run by Enterprise Insight which is a body founded by the CBI, the Institute of Directors, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses. It promotes the idea of enterprise to young people. Now Kevin Steele is the CEO and he's with me. Kevin, what's happening during this week, what exactly are you hoping to achieve?

STEELE: Well Enterprise week is part of a national campaign called "Make your Mark" which is about inspiring young people to be enterprising and for us Enterprise fundamentally is about having ideas and making them happen. And so there

are more than 2,000 events all over the country this week. It's double what it was last year, so we're clearly hitting a nerve. There are competitions, there are challenges, there are debates, they're in schools, colleges, cafes. There's an event at Manchester United Football Club, at the Eden Project in Cornwall, H on HMS Raleigh, there's all kinds of funky venues. We expect something in the region of a quarter of a million young people to take part and the events are all about encouraging and inspiring them to turn their own ideas into reality.

LAMB: This is fascinating stuff. Looking at the bigger picture, how does Britain compare to other countries on the enterprise front?

STEELE: Well as you said in your introduction, we have a reasonable level of entrepreneurial activity in the UK, we're sort of middle pegging compared to most European countries, but when you look at economies like America or Australia or New Zealand where they have a culture that is less rules based than our own, maybe more pragmatic, their level of enterprise is around double ours.

LAMB: Is that what you think it is, it's a cultural thing?

STEELE: There is no doubt that it's a cultural thing. I mean people say if you are 19 years old in the UK and you want to start your own business, or maybe not even a business, but you've just got a community project or even you're working in an organisation and you've got an idea that you want to get off the ground, all of which for us counts as being enterprising. In the UK people are likely to say, oh well, wait until you're older, get a few more years of experience, get yourself a proper job, be careful, what happens if it all goes wrong? Whereas in somewhere like America, they're more likely to say, oh yea if you've going to do it, do it now, before you've got a mortgage and a family and a professional track record to worry about.

LAMB: Well if the idea of striking out in business on your own appeals to you, there is a growing industry in the shape of books, CDs and conferences to encourage and inspire you. Our reporter, Mike Johnson, joined a flock of aspiring Richard Bransons at a London Conference called "Mind of an Entrepreneur."

MAN: Good morning. I've got some fabulous speakers for you. There's quite a few of them.

JOHNSON: It's 10 o'clock in the morning and around a hundred would-be entrepreneurs are about to be whipped into a state approaching frenzy by a succession of inspirational speakers. Be determined they're told, be passionate, above all don't be discouraged. Hereto are a variety of business people who've made it on their own, who've single handedly set up cosmetics companies, theatre groups, solicitors and fashion labels. People like conference chairman, Alexander Omosu. He made his first million at 25. He set up businesses which hire sound systems, clean people's homes and publish magazines. Now 30, his really big success was launching a mobile phone ring tones company. I caught up with Alexander during the morning coffee break.

OMOSU: I was in university and I did a search on the internet and realised that the two ring tone companies at that time were only doing pop and rock and obviously I'm not into pop and rock, I'm more into R & B and I just couldn't believe that nobody would be interested in doing R & B. So I decided to create an R & B ring tone site myself.

JOHNSON: Do you think you can generalise about what makes a successful entrepreneur? Where do you stand on the whole "born or made" argument?

AMOSU: I mean, this is the whole point why I'm doing this event. In our lives everyone's sort of got an entrepreneur moment and I think sometimes we think about great ideas and then suddenly we're watching TV we'll say, oh, I've actually thought about that and we don't act on our entrepreneurial instinct.

JOHNSON: Do you think there's anything about your background that made you more likely to strike out on your own in the way that you have?

AMOSU: I would say most definitely. Coming from a council flat, you know, Kilburn, what I had to do was basically fend for myself.

JOHNSON: Did it give you more hunger?

AMOSU: Definitely, without fail. I think you've got to be in a difficult situation to want it. I was hungry because I needed to pay my bills, I needed to look after myself, and I needed to be successful.

JOHNSON: Among the audience anxious to learn from the experience of speakers like Alexander was 17 year-old Vincent Bado Low. He's travelled from Bristol to attend the conference with two friends also 17. Keen as mustard each had paid a £55 entrance fee and were among the very first delegates to arrive. As I heard, they have some pretty big plans for their future.

LOW: I run VP Entertainments Ltd and it's an all youth company hoping to create youth products for youth.

JOHNSON: What kinds of products are you talking about?

LOW: Okay, we're talking about kind of events, that can be musical events, that can be sporting events and in most cases kind of like a little mix of both and it's also the product side as well. So we're talking music, music videos, films. If it's entertaining, if it's something that you would talk about with your friends, you want to create it and create it properly.

JOHNSON: Big ambitions.

LOW: Yea very big, but I mean it's up to us to take control and create our own stuff and know that people are going to like it.

LAMB: That report by Mike Johnson. Kevin Steele, it seems to me entrepreneurialism has become very fashionable lately, hasn't it? We've seen various government initiatives, we've seen TV programmes like Dragons Den and the Apprentice all feeding into that. It's now being promoted to young people almost as a career option. Is that a good thing do you think?

STEELE: Well the campaign is called "Make your Mark" because all the research shows that young people are hungry to make their mark in the world by using their own creativity to achieve success and recognition. So people certainly want the

fundamentals here and of course there is no greater buzz than turning your own personal vision into something real out there in the world. But this goes very much further than setting up your own business. The key message of the campaign to young people and indeed their parents and teachers is you will need this stuff. The old certainties of a structured career are fading. In the future your passport to security will, in fact, be a sense of adventure. Employers will need innovative employees that they will want to hire. So feel the freedom of your own creativity and regard yourself as an agent for change in the world because the global economy is going through the biggest restructuring since the industrial revolution. The competition is ferocious. The statistics show that someone born in the UK today can expect 19 changes of job during their working life. You are going to need to be enterprising and armed with that attitude, that can-do approach to life and the confidence and the skills, you're then equipped over the course of your lifetime to maybe set up your own business and then also maybe go and work for someone else because you'll be the kind of person that they'll want to employ.

LAMB: Okay, well let's hear from a woman who's done that. Kelly Atkins is a young entrepreneur. She started out on a conventional enough career path. She read Applied Arts at University, but thanks to a Eureka moment really when she was doing the ironing, she went on to create a business off the back of what she learned there and now three years down the line, "Carpet Burns", as it's called, has won her a string of awards. Kelly, what is this material that you've created, it's made out of recycled carpet, I understand?

ATKINS: Yea hi, that's right. Yea it's like a plywood style material, hard sort of durable material that can be applied to furniture, flooring, all sorts of applications really.

LAMB: So how did you get that idea off the ground?

ATKINS: With a lot of support really from different enterprise agencies and particularly a lot of support from my family and friends, but particularly the Prince's Trust, Nesta and sort of business-linking people like that. My local enterprise agency have been really helpful. There is a lot of support to tap into at the moment.

LAMB: Where did the money come from?

ATKINS: Money. I was refused a bank loan because of my student debts and things. So I went directly to the Prince's Trust, got a £4,000 loan from the Prince's Youth Trust and have recently been successful in securing £35,000 through Nesta which is national lottery money. But it doesn't go very far unfortunately, so.

LAMB: I'm intrigued because obviously you sound like a very enterprising person, but did you plan to be an entrepreneur, did you actually plan to take a job with someone else when you left university?

ATKINS: It wasn't something I'd always set out and dreamt of doing, being my own boss, so to speak. However, I didn't actually see myself being particularly good at working underneath anyone or for anybody else. So after leaving university it was either go away and do an MA, go into teaching, but luckily I'd come across this idea and didn't want to miss the opportunity and let that slip by. So pretty much grabbed the bull by the horns, went to the Prince's Trust and it all started from there really.

LAMB: What is your day-to-day working life like now? I mean how do you actually go about marketing this material of yours?

ATKINS: Day-to-day, it's not so much every day's the same which is one of the reasons I do what I do, that's one of the things that motivates me. Marketing the material, we do a lot of trade fairs, we've got a lot of trade press through the awards we win, the website does great things.

LAMB: Obviously, it's an environmentally friendly product, isn't it, and I know you're hoping to see it in DIY stores in due course.

ATKINS: Yea that's right. It's 100% recycled material, fully ecological and my aim is within sort of three to five years have the material within a major DIY retailer competing with materials like plywood, MDF and setting up the UK's first carpet collection scheme. So we've got big ideas really.

LAMB: Do you see yourself as a serial entrepreneur, do you think this is your idea and that's what you're going to do or do you expect to have other bright ideas like this in the years to come?

ATKINS: No, not at all. Carpet Burns is merely a stepping stone to much bigger and better things. Ultimately, I want Carpet Burns to be the umbrella for all sorts of things. In five years time I don't want to be doing this, I want to create an environmental revolution or something much bigger. So it's quite exciting, very exciting times for the company really.

LAMB: Big ambitions. Well interestingly, research suggests that it's not long hours or problems raising money that holds most would be entrepreneurs back in this country, it's fear of failure and apparently we are particularly prone to it. Americans, for example, are far less likely to let it stand in the way of a business idea than we are. Now Michelle Mone, I know you came within literally 15 minutes of losing your company Ultimo about four years ago when the bank called in the overdraft. Do you worry about failure, about the possibility of failure, is it always sitting on your shoulder?

MONE: I just take a day at a time. You never know what's round the corner. But you know you've got to take a risk if you want to make it in life and I think there's a lot of people in the UK that are really really scared and I think we are to blame for that because if you were to fail in America you would be applauded, well done, at least you tried, why don't you up and try again. Whereas here, oh, my goodness, you would be the talk of the steamy, as you would call it.

LAMB: That's it. Kevin Steele, do you find that that holds people back, the fear of failure. As Michelle says, we're very intolerant of failure in this country, aren't we?

STEELE: I think you're right that failure is something that is seen by many people in Britain as something to be avoided at all costs.

LAMB: Even if it means not trying at all?

STEELE: Well I was at a conference yesterday where indeed someone from America said, “in America we don’t have failures, we have learners” and consultants Grant Thornton talked about how in America failure is a right of passage, whereas here it’s seen as a black mark. So I think there is a lot to be said there, but I think also in a way we’ve changed the culture to a large extent in Britain. Now is a very good time for people to get a project off the ground, whether it’s a business or community activism or something in an organisation. We need to say to people, look, you’re living in a society that values creativity and individualism, no-one denies that. You’re living in a society with the biggest social safety net in history and the research shows that as well as failure, a big block for most people is that they said they don’t know where to start. So, for example, our campaign runs a website starttalkingideas.org and it’s called starttalkingideas.org because any entrepreneur will tell you the first step to take is to start talking about your idea to other people because that will enable you to refine it and develop it.

LAMB: It’s interesting you talk about knowing where to start because many entrepreneurs don’t feel that their education played much part in their success, indeed some of them questioned whether the education system, because of its emphasis on conformity and exam results has much of a role to play at all. But in September the government decided to add enterprise to the national curriculum and from now on all teenagers will receive five days of lessons about it before they leave school. Now Judi Cotton used to run the enterprise arm of Durham University business school. Now she advises government and the business community about enterprise issues. Judi, teenagers are going to get this 5 days of enterprise education but I don’t know about you, I’ve already seen a survey saying that teachers are worried about it because they don’t feel qualified to deliver these lessons. How useful do you think they’re going to be?

COTTON: Well hello everybody. I think that they can be interesting. I think they can be useful in terms of developing an awareness in students and maybe a little bit of interest, but a little more than that. It can’t be done in a week, it’s not something that should be a one off experience. I think in terms of teachers feeling not qualified to deal with the whole thing, they certainly need some relevant resource materials, I think they need some training to use these effectively, and the challenge is to develop the capability of the teachers to develop these approaches within their own subjects in the curriculum. That would be my view.

LAMB: As you say, I mean Kevin, still the research from the charity, Business Dynamics, said, that teachers, they're keen, you know, they want to teach their pupils about enterprise, but 55% of them Kevin said their knowledge of business was pretty vague. I mean that's a bit worrying, isn't it?

STEELE: I think it would be a very good thing if teachers knew more about business.

LAMB: But they don't, do they, at the moment?

STEELE: But what I do think is that a really crucial issue here, which goes right to the heart of the way in which we approach education, is that if we think that the answer to these kinds of issues is for teachers to fill themselves full of more knowledge and they then take that knowledge in packages and try and transfer it into the heads of their students, we're on a hiding to nothing because the amount of knowledge in the world is increasing at an exponential rate and the only way in which we can help encourage, enable young people to be enterprising is if teachers see themselves not as gurus, but as facilitators, as gate keepers, as people who introduce their students to the world.

LAMB: Okay, we're going to talk a bit more about that later on. First though, let's hear from Paul Abbott who's a former teacher who now runs a unique centre where children can go to use state-of-the-art technology to help them experiment with new ideas. It's called the Bolton Technical Innovation Centre, or the Bolton TIC for short and our reporter, Mike Johnson's, been along to find out what goes on there.

JOHNSON: This is the research and development hall of a place called the Technical Innovation Centre here in Bolton. The centre opened just last year. It describes itself as a purpose-built academy for young inventors and entrepreneurs. A place where young people from 9 to 19 can and I quote, "make their technical dreams come true." Well it's all the brain child of a former teacher, Paul Abbott, he's the centre's director. Paul, first of all, what's this machine here, it looks like a laser machine, bit of smoke coming out of it?

ABBOTT: Well it is, it's a laser cutting machine, it's cutting through a piece of material. We can cut profiles on some marked surfaces. It's just one of many pieces of equipment that we have in the centre.

JOHNSON: Well moving over to another corner of the research and development hall, this looks to me like models of space rockets here, is that right?

ABBOTT: Yes, you are right. Yesterday we had some youngsters from a local school. They were 11 years of age. We had one group making rockets, they will launch them next week. If we're not allowed to experiment to make, we will continue to lose this most precious national resource, bright young people. They'll go and do something else.

JOHNSON: Paul Abbott was a teacher for 20 years before getting the idea for the centre. To make it happen he's had to discover some entrepreneurial qualities of his own. It costs around 2½ million to set up. Most secured from the north west England regional development agency. Students come during or after school hours. They're met by staff including a rocket scientist and a sculptor and they have access to the kind of machines most schools could only dream of. Now the centre needs more revenue to stay open and that's proving a real struggle. It relies heavily on members of local groups like photographic societies and modelling clubs to donate their time and knowledge for free. Despite the lack of funding, Paul still wouldn't want to go back to his old life as a technology teacher.

ABBOTT: I have to say that I did become frustrated. I was increasingly required to constrain and constrict the opportunities of my children to force up grades, and I think it came to a head when I went to a examiner's meeting and I was told that I should limit the number of circuits that my children looked at to just four or five and to limit the number of components that we used. I couldn't do it. It did feel that we stifled creativity and it's not good enough.

JOHNSON: One person feeling the benefit of Paul's new approach is 17 year-old Kayley Crampton. She's studying for 'A' levels in biology, art and design. Kayley heard about the centre and came down with a group of friends. They were challenged to come up with ideas for new products. With the help of a sophisticated high-definition 3D

printer at the centre, one of only a handful in Europe, Kayley's designed a prototype for a solar powered egg boiler.

CRAMPTON: Okay, I've got it here. It's basically a dome shape and it comes in different parts. You've got the lid and the base and then in the middle you've got a tray with holes in that you fit the eggs into. The water goes in the bottom and then you use the solar power. If we could design it properly, they could be made properly, it would be solar powered and that would boil the water and then boil the egg.

JOHNSON: What do you think you get here that you couldn't have got at your local school?

CRAMPTON: One of the main things is the machinery, because there's no way that a school like mine or any of the other schools will be able to afford any of the machinery and there's computer work stations in different programmes that we have to get licences for that you can't get at college. It's just miles better.

JOHNSON: So have you thought about maybe setting up your own business, being an entrepreneur, as they say in the past.

CRAMPTON: I've never thought about it before but it's definitely given me something to think about. It could be a really good start for what I want to do.

ABBOTT: It's wonderful, it's wonderful to see them smiling and getting excited because of things they've created. The children are making things happen that they just couldn't do anywhere else. We might just have the Dyson in here or the Frank Whittle or the Richard Branson.

JOHNSON: That will be your ambition?

ABBOTT: It would because I believe they're there. There could be a Bruno or a Branson in any school, in any town. All we want to do is to inspire our young people to innovate and to be enterprising.

LAMB: Paul Abbott of the Bolton TIC ending that report. Judi Cotton, the Bolton TIC sounds like a fantastic resource for children but I was interested to hear Paul Abbott saying he thinks that schools actually stifle creativity in pupils because they're so focused on the whole exam grade thing. Is that your experience?

COTTON: Yes I think that's true but I would go a bit further and I would say that it's not just creativity that schools stifle, it's actually the whole range of enterprise and skills and behaviours. There's very little opportunity, for example, for students to practice thinking on their feet, persuading, negotiating, which are equally important in living an entrepreneurial lifestyle.

LAMB: Kevin Steele, in fairness I know you're aware of schools are doing great work in the area of enterprise.

STEELE: What they take is the kind of spirit of the thing, rather than trying to teach the mechanics of business, they say we want our children to take an idea and turn it into reality. There's a primary school in Fort William, for example, which runs a project called "Room 13" which is essentially an art and craft workshop. It's got a management team of 8 to 11 year-olds, they run budgets of tens of thousands of pounds, they've got a rule that no adult is allowed to write the cheques. They do their own accounts, they employ their own artist in residence, they run their own profit making galleries. Their latest venture is with local businesses in Fort William to develop part of the Fort William waterfront and turn it into a cultural centre and this is a primary school and they've spread it to six other primary schools in the area. So these are people who are making their mark by turning an idea into reality. There are schools that bring it, rather than teachers trying to do it all themselves. Teachers bring in young entrepreneurs. There's someone, for example, I met recently called Georgie Francis who had set up her own greetings card company in her bedroom when she was 21 and now employs 30 people supplying 900 shops all over the UK including Harrods and Selfridges and she's just signed a deal with WH Smiths, she's turning over a million pounds and even now she's only 25.

LAMB: Now that's an interesting point. I want to put that to Judi actually because, from what I've seen, young people do have this idea that being an entrepreneur

equates to celebrity and wealth making millions and of course that isn't the reality, is it, for most self-employed people. They make a living, if they're lucky.

COTTON: Absolutely, and I think that's the important thing. I think that if young people can be brought into contact with plumbers, with self-employed hairdressers, with the guy who runs the car repair shop. These sort of people, then the young people can think, well if he or she can do that, I can do that. And that's what is the real motivation.

LAMB: Now Judi, what about university, obviously more and more people are going, we'll be talking about the implications of that in next week's programme actually, but do you feel that's likely to channel people into traditional jobs, you know, working for other people and perhaps squash any entrepreneurial spark they might have or indeed the reverse?

COTTON: Well it depends on whether there are opportunities to practise enterprising skills and behaviours. Educational achievement, I would say, particularly at the level of higher education, has little, if anything, to do with entrepreneurship. It's much more likely, that there'll be success in encouraging an entrepreneurial spirit if students are involved in a range of approaches from an early age actually, preferably in primary schools. Don't wait until they get to university.

MONE: Can I just say, this is the best time if you want to start a business, because this "make your mark" campaign is fantastic and I think the government are doing an amazing job and I just wish that this all happened when I started my business.

LAMB: Well it's interesting to hear you say that because I wanted to ask you, we're almost out of time, but I wanted to ask you, would you encourage your own children to take the sort of risks that you've taken, Michelle?

MONE: I would back them 100%.

LAMB: Well that's the point, you would back them wouldn't you?

MONE: Bin driver, whatever. Whatever my kids want to be, I will back them.

LAMB: But they're in the comfort zone, aren't they, because you're there with the cheque book with the advice and the expertise. It's different from when you started.

MONE: It's different from when I started yea but, you know, I know that I was brought up with nothing and I'm not going to let my kids be spoilt and sometimes they have to fall and get up again. It's the only way they're going to learn.

LAMB: Well it's a fascinating subject. I'm afraid we've run out of time. But many thanks indeed to all my guests. Next week we're going to be looking at what the future holds for the new wave of graduates. British universities are producing more of them than ever before. But what sort of jobs await them and will higher education actually pay off for all of them in the long run. That's Nice Work, same time next week. Join me then.