

Hi

It is a pleasure to be here and I would like to thank Equalitec for the opportunity of talking with you today.

Right first of all a little bit of my personal background. I was born in Ireland but my family moved to the UK when I was 17. I'd always wanted to work in the City so I started work for a merchant bank moving from secretary to Eurobond sales in 10 years. I then met my husband and as we know choices are then made! The coin fell on the side of marriage together with three children and a move to the wilds of Norfolk - a pretty tall order and quite different from 10 years in the City! However after the thrill of three young children, nappies and housework I got itchy feet to return to work or start up my own company. At that stage computer technology was just beginning to take off with the internet in its infancy but it was fairly obvious that high speed connections and particularly Broadband was quite literally going to completely change the way that companies worked.

It was then that in 2000 whilst idly reading a newspaper article that I first read about digital recorders. This got my mind buzzing - a Eureka moment and I started researching the market. Actually I was already typing for some clients that I had brought with me from London and so I set about forming a pilot secretarial service that relied on the very primitive form of dial-up internet connection to transcribe sound files and deliver completed WORD documents back to the client. The trick was being able to 'instantly' receive a sound file - even quicker than someone physically picking up a tape, walking down a corridor and giving it to a secretary to type up - also these sound files could be uploaded from anywhere with an internet connection so I could see that this meant dictators could send work from home, on a business trip abroad or, if they wanted, even on holiday. This new way of working meant that we could offer a quite literally 'virtual' secretarial service whereby clients just paid for work as and when required.

Actually at this point I ought to clarify the name OutSec - a combination of Outsource and Secretarial which was the original name. That was a bit wordy so we shortened it to OutSec although that too has not always been simply understood. And actually I have a bit of a funny story to tell here... when any secretary has been with the company for a year we send them a bouquet of flowers thanking them for joining, saying we hope that they have enjoyed the year and that they will be with us for years to come... anyway on this occasion we got a rather amusing email back following delivery of the flowers. Jackie told us that the Interflora man had been flirting with her outrageously as he handed the flowers over - rather nice she thought but it was only when she read the message she realised why - the message read - Congratulations on being WITHOUT SEX for a year.

Having said that its one thing to have a business idea and quite another to turn it into reality. It was clear that this was going to be an enormous market;

there was potential demand from the clients and a real supply from the legion of disenfranchised disillusioned but highly qualified women who made up our team of internet secretaries. Our business model was quite simple - it was the role of OutSec to bring the two groups of client and secretary together and design an IT infrastructure that would enable fast easy management and transfer of files between them.

In the early days there was huge resistance from potential clients for a number of reasons; firstly it was still very much a theoretical rather than a practical proposition given the very slow internet speeds that were still around. Secondly outsourcing had a very bad reputation and was often seen to be either an unconventional or desperate choice for companies in a drive to save money and thirdly here was I, a woman, telling predominantly men of a certain age how they could actually run their companies better. This, as you can imagine went down like a lead balloon and to say I encountered a degree of sexism would be putting it mildly. However I am afraid it would take more than that to put me off and if I am honest I do love a challenge so this was really music to my ears! I redoubled my efforts to market the benefits of outsourcing to as many potential clients as I could find. By 2002 the message was finally getting through as we started to sign up some quite big and well known clients. Having created the momentum required for the business on the marketing side I then began to address the IT issues that were arising from our dramatic growth. The brief I gave was a simple one - I needed to find a server based system that would allow clients and typists to access areas on our website and we needed to develop a management interface that would allow our heads of department to orchestrate the flow of work. FileManager was the response and it took just four months for us to develop and test it before it was rolled out to our clients in Sept 2003. FM is the single most important factor in the growth of our business in the last 4 years and I am extremely proud to have been able to develop this with no prior knowledge or experience of IT. In this respect I had to listen to a great number of other people and learn from what they say but I don't mind that at all. It has resulted in my being able to put together a global team of secretaries who are able to deliver my vision in a clear and concise manner to our clients

As someone who never had any formal education I think there are some very important lessons that I have learnt in my business career so far. The most important thing you can ever do in setting up a company is research. I have a hunger for knowledge that is insatiable and those who know me will say that I never stop asking questions. Don't be afraid to ask questions and don't be afraid to look stupid. If you don't know the answer someone else will just make sure that you learn from what they say. I don't have any specific role models but one of the most influential, certainly in the creation of OutSec was Peter Mulhall who was my Business Link representative. Quietly spoken but very impressive he was often very much a mirror for me to hold up to myself to assess in impartial terms how we were doing.

Being a woman in a man's world need not be a disadvantage but neither can it be an advantage. I much prefer a level playing field where people are assessed on ability and performance rather than gender, age or colour. I think you just have to accept it but If I were to give one piece of advice to any budding entrepreneurs in the audience here it would be in business you need to be flexible. The way we deliver our service to our clients now is completely different from the one we started with and will no doubt be completely different in 5 years time but the key essence of the business - delivering a high quality service to the client in a professional and cost effective way - never changes.

Being a woman in business is not the easiest option but, personally, I wouldn't want it any other way...

Now, as I draw to a close - I think my time is up - I just want to share one other thing with you. I have here a book that has been written by a brilliant girl, Michelle Rosenberg who spent about 18 months researching and identifying key women entrepreneurs who all had common traits - she came up with 26 of us who, she felt had passion and principles whilst also being women all working in business. The book will be available from Waterstones, Bookers and other leading bookshops on Friday 23 November rrp £12.99. If you would like to read about other entrepreneurs to inspire you in your business perhaps you should pick up a copy; you will find a voucher offering you 40% discount in your folders.

bookshops..

Thank you very much for listening to me today and may I wish you the best success in your existing or potential business venture.

Vanessa Phillips