



# Choose to challenge

International Women's Day 2021

**ced** Cranfield  
Executive  
Development

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## Introduction: why challenge?

“Choose to challenge” is the theme for the 2021 International Women’s Day movement. It is also rather apt for the way in which we work here at Cranfield Executive Development, writes Dr Stephanie Hussels and Carol Foussat, Director and Programme Lead of the Business Growth Programme.

What does choosing to challenge mean to us? Well, it’s about challenging ourselves as executive education providers to deliver high quality programmes that match and keep pace with the needs and expectations of industry. It’s about the people who come on our programmes challenging themselves and their business to deliver the change they need to see.

We also seek to challenge expectations and perceptions, particularly around gender bias.

Over the years, we have had the privilege of working with some fantastic female entrepreneurs, and we are pleased that the number of women business leaders completing our Business Growth Programme (BGP) has risen steadily and is now three-times higher than it was four years ago. Of our most recent cohort – the first to complete the programme online – female entrepreneurs made up a third of the participants.

Another challenge for us is to grow those numbers even further. Businesses led by female entrepreneurs contribute more than £105 billion to the UK economy each year, and yet evidence shows that women in business consistently face challenges specific to their gender in making their business a success.

The 2019 Government-commissioned Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship has estimated that up to £250 billion could be added to the UK economy if women were able to start and scale new businesses at the same rate as their male counterparts.

At Cranfield Executive Development, we believe this is more than possible – it is an ambition we absolutely must strive to achieve.

For this special publication, we spoke to past BGP participants about the challenges they have faced in their careers, how they have overcome them, and why it’s important to face challenges head on. We hope you find hope and inspiration in their stories.



**Dr Stephanie Hussels,**  
Programme Director, Business Growth Programme.

**Carol Foussat,**  
Programme Lead, Business Growth Programme.

## Chapter 1

# A choice between safety and growth



**Liz Male,**  
Director, Liz Male Consulting,  
a specialist PR and communications consultancy working in the construction, property  
and built environment sectors - BGP (online), 2020.

“I’ve loved my non-exec career that has developed over the past 10 years or so, and I was very proud of being awarded an MBE in 2015 but, most of all, I consider my success in business to be creating a small, specialist business that has done great work for 20 years, is now growing fast, has a genuine life of its own now, and a team that blossoms and flourishes at every turn.”

“I’m proud of creating something that continues to have such a positive impact on the built environment and the people who work in the construction industry, and I hope I have shown the future business leaders in my team that entrepreneurship and career success in this sector does not have to be testosterone-fuelled; we can lead with a growth mindset, with curiosity, collaboration, kindness, prudence, psychological safety and respect, laughter and love.

“Women in business still have to prove themselves over and over again. They know they’ll always have to work that much harder to be accepted, recognised and respected for their intellect, experience and skills. It’s confidence-crushing.

“Toxic behaviour in the workplace must be called out, challenged and made utterly socially unacceptable. We should treat everyone as we ourselves would want to be treated.

“Doing the Business Growth Programme at Cranfield gave me the time and structured framework I needed to look again at every part

of the business, to scrutinise with fresh eyes and see what we could do better. On a personal level, it challenged me to articulate why I do what I do, and what I want for my life, which triggered some very important conversations with my family and my colleagues.

“Even after 20 years running my business, I still face professional challenges: transitioning into a stronger, healthier leadership role that facilitates my continued growth and the growth of my wonderful team, learning to guide and mentor more effectively rather than jumping in and doing it myself, and – of course – ensuring I safeguard the time and energy to do all the innovation stuff that I also want to pursue.

“I’m not a traditional risk taker. But – the way I see it – in life, we have a choice: to challenge ourselves to grow, to stretch tentatively out of our comfort zone and see what is possible, even in the face of adversity – or to sit tight, play it uber safe and, quite possibly, stagnate. I know which I’d prefer.”

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## Chapter 2

# The difference between leaders and employees



**Caroline Southgate,**  
Managing Director, Doris Jones,  
an Essex-based care services provider - BGP, 2019.

“As a leader in the social care sector, my challenge is keeping up the morale of my incredibly devoted team, while planning and focusing on the business opportunities that will emerge after the coronavirus pandemic we are currently living through.”

“I think one of the biggest challenges women in business face is having confidence in themselves. I have seen so many capable women hesitate and doubt their capacity to achieve success. I hope my daughters and granddaughter will see in themselves the greatness that they have within them. Previous generations of women have paved the way and we own them the success too.”

“The highlight of doing the Business Growth Programme at Cranfield, for me, was realizing that I already had a successful business, by pulling all the elements apart and learning to be objective about it and other businesses. It gave me a huge boost in self-esteem and allowed me to reflect on what I want within and outside the business. I spent several weeks trying to answer the question: ‘What do you want?’ It’s not as easy as it sounds to articulate exactly what that is so that you can create a strategy to get it.”

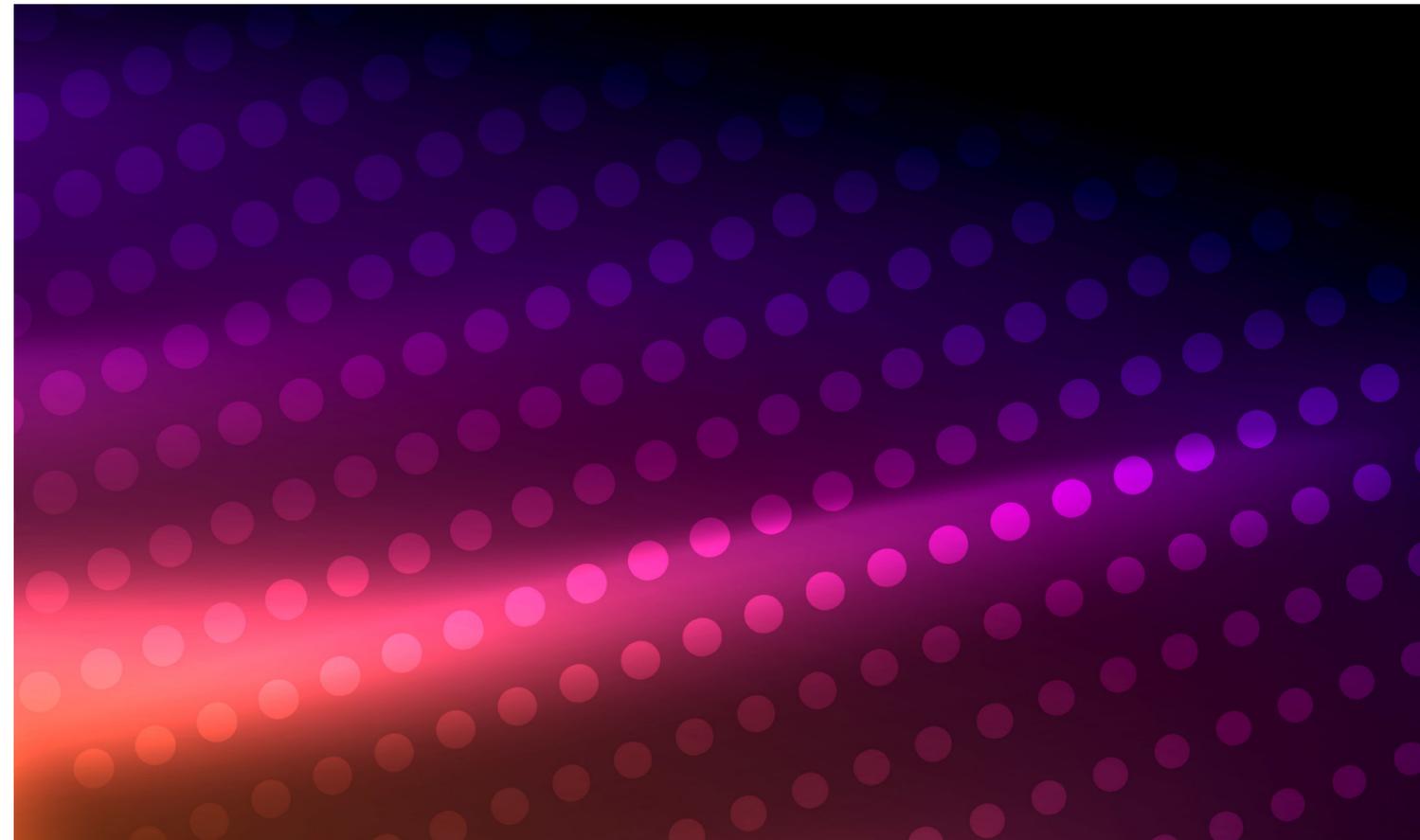
“My biggest career success has been following my instinct and taking my career out of the familiar – somewhat safe – environment of health into setting up a business which has now been rated outstanding by the regulator for our sector, the Care Quality Commission (CQC).”

“I think it is essential, as a business leader, to challenge yourself. Otherwise as the business owner your role just becomes that of another employee. The business is not going to tell you what to do, and it won’t thrive.”

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## Chapter 3

# Unavoidable, inescapable, growth



**Geeta Sidhu-Robb,**  
Chief Executive Officer and Founder,  
at women's health and wellbeing service NOSH Detox Delivery Ltd - BGP, 2013.

“My biggest career success would have to be just staying in business and staying profitable throughout a global pandemic. We’ve managed to successfully pivot to manage the changes pushed through by the pandemic and have controlled our costs really well, despite one of our businesses having to close down in every lockdown really affecting our bottom line”.

“The Business Growth Programme showed me how important it was to get to grips with the numbers. I was a lawyer, and preferred words and marketing and strategy. I really didn’t understand numbers, but the programme showed me I had to, and eventually I did. I cut costs significantly in the business and came out with a supportive community and a plan to keep us alive and well.

“I believe you inevitably, inexorably grow through every single challenge you face. For women in business today, it’s so insidious the kind of push-back you face – so you don’t know if it’s because you are a woman. But a few regularly faced challenges for all women CEOs are raising finance, getting banks to give you overdrafts, becoming financially confident, feeling your authority, leading teams of men, working in all-male industries. The hardest, though, is actually feeling successful.”

“The hardest thing  
is actually feeling  
successful.”

## Chapter 4

# Keep up with a changing world



**Cheryl Thallon,**

Founder and Managing Director Viridian Nutrition,  
an ethical vitamin, mineral and supplement business Viridian Nutrition - BGP (online), 2020.

“Our current challenges in the business include adapting to and engaging with a digital world, managing growth within our business and industry, developing staff to meet future challenges, succession-planning, and helping restore joy in our customers post-COVID and beyond Brexit.

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“In business, I’ve always been taken seriously.”

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“It’s good to challenge yourself. The world is changing at an incredible pace, and you have to push, push, push yourself to keep up, or you get left behind.

“Completing the Business Growth Programme at Cranfield has honestly been one of my biggest career successes, alongside starting my own business and recruiting and developing talent. It challenged me to really dig deep for evidence around my beliefs. I had formed some concrete beliefs about the business, and BGP challenged me to prove – and in some cases disprove – those assumptions.

“A big highlight for me was recognizing that my success plan would involve my daughter coming into the business, which was a massive surprise and bonus.

“What challenges do women in business face? None, other than ensuring that home is always clean and tidy, the washing is done, etc, etc, on top of running a business. In business, I’ve always been taken seriously.”

## Chapter 5

# Multi-tasking: A benefit or a curse?



**Annika Bosanquet,**  
Co-Founder and Director of Sustainability,  
at packaging manufacturer Wrapology - BGP, 2018.

**“Multi-tasking is a skill which many women excel at, and maybe why we are particularly good at starting businesses, but maybe also this is why female-founded enterprises statistically have less chance of lasting beyond five years than their male-founded counterparts”.**

“Never has multi-tasking been so relevant and important as in the current climate, but it is also our challenge. How do we be expert at our passion whilst not being distracted in picking up the pieces and supporting others, and still have the time and energy for our own personal development, be that reading, music, exercise, learning a new and unrelated skill, time for

friends and fun, time to clear the mind, the ability to ditch the job list without guilt. How do we avoid collapsing in a heap in the evening with sheer exhaustion then waking at 1am remembering a birthday or unpaid bill. We need to work on switching off, on leading not managing, and on staying true to our original purpose.

“Keeping up the energy is my biggest challenge. I have to keep a step ahead to lead with a clear head, anticipating what may lie on the horizon for the business climate – operationally and personally for the team – as well as driving momentum around innovation internally and for our clients. I also have to maintain that same energy in my personal life with children at home during lockdown and their own anxieties to manage.

“My biggest career success is without doubt the fact that Wrapology is still here, 20 years on. We have won awards that I’m very proud of,

Cranfield. The biggest challenge was identifying our weaknesses – I didn’t like what I saw. “It’s good to challenge yourself, as it helps you to grow. Learning to take the right kind of risks and knowing when and how to stop is a critical part of improvement.

“For me, building a business is matched to my passion for gardening. There’s gardening and there’s landscaping: both are necessary, but both bring their challenges. The ultimate challenge is to take the time to stop, celebrate the entirety and work out what went well and what had to be weeded out.

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have a portfolio of wonderful clients and the way in which our global team has pulled together during the coronavirus pandemic with positivity and commitment is the greatest testimony to our core values.

“Identifying the purpose and values of the business was one of the highlights for me from doing the Business Growth Programme at

“I like reflecting on what my challenges delivered. Every plant, flower and corner has a story; from those that didn’t make it through poor choice or bad luck, to others still in their infancy for which there is excitement for what is hoped may come, and parts which are simply glorious, with strong roots delivering wonder almost independently, which in turn inspires more growth on which to build.”

## Chapter 6

# The enabler of change



**Kate Lester,**  
Founder at Diamond Logistics,  
which provides delivery and storage solutions to SMEs - BGP, 2018.

“Without challenge, there is no ability to expand your knowledge base, no ability to facilitate that change that is essential to properly scale.”

“Participating in the Business Growth Programme gave me clarity on what I needed to do to build a business of scale, but scaling that business remotely is a constant challenge.

“As women in business, frankly, we have to be twice as good to achieve half as much. There is institutional sexism in my industry, and in getting finance to support my business it has been a barrier. However, it’s not insurmountable.

“My biggest career success has been scaling my business ten-fold without external capital. The Business Growth Programme challenged me by showing me how much I had to do to build a better business. I looked at the enormity of the task and thought: ‘That’s five years to add to my exit plan’.

“But it’s good to challenge yourself. Without challenge, there is no ability to expand your knowledge base, no ability to facilitate that change that is essential to properly scale.”

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## Chapter 7

# Women in business: the challenge

Research shows that women in business often face more challenges than their male counterparts, particularly when it comes to starting and successfully scaling their own business.

Inequitable access to funding, primary care responsibilities, a perceived lack of entrepreneurial skills and lower risk appetite caused by a lack of self-esteem were among the barriers to female entrepreneurship in the UK identified in a report by the 2019 Government-commissioned Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship. The same review found that an estimated £250 billion would be added to the UK economy if these barriers were removed and women were able to start and scale their new businesses at the same rate as their male counterparts.

At almost every stage, women are less likely to make the entrepreneurial journey than men. However, once established, both male and female-led businesses are equally likely to be successful.

Karren Brady, Samantha Cameron and Mary Portas are among the high-profile names who have called on the UK Government to do more to support female business leaders. The ratio of female to male entrepreneurs in the UK has declined in recent years, and we lag behind many of our peer nations.

Cranfield School of Management is proud to have worked in women's leadership development for more than 25 years, and we remain committed to ensuring equitable access to education and development for all, regardless of their gender. We continue to strive to provide the very best in leadership and development for women entrepreneurs and their teams.

## Chapter 8

# Women in business: the numbers

**5%**

The percentage of women in the UK who run their own business. (1)

**£105b**

The amount of money those businesses contribute to the UK economy each year. (2)

**<1p  
in every £1**

The proportion of venture capitalist funding given to all-female business teams. (3)

**9%**

The proportion of the annual funding for UK start-ups awarded to women-run businesses. (4)

**24%**

The percentage of female business founders who believe investors have been less willing to invest in their business because they are a woman. (5)

**74%**

The number of self-employed women who say their earning potential has been limited by a lack of access to childcare. (6)

**£250b**

The amount experts estimate would be added to the UK economy if women leaders were able to start and scale new businesses at the same rate as their male counterparts. (7)

1. Source: Natwest,

2. Source: Natwest,

3. Source: 15 UK VC & Female Founders report, February 2019,

4. Source: The Entrepreneur's Network,

5. Source: The Unilever Foundry: Scaling up Diversity at Startups | The Unilever Foundry,

6. Source: Pregnant Then Screwed campaign group survey of 20,000 women,

7. Source: The Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship, 2019: The Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship (publishing.service.gov.uk).

## Chapter 9

# Supporting entrepreneurship

Over the last 30 years, the Business Growth Programme has helped more than 2,300 owner-managers achieve their business and personal ambitions.

This programme unlocks profitable growth with the development of a robust and thorough business plan, reviewed, challenged and tested by peers and experts.

**This programme will help you to:**

- Manage rapid change or growth.
- Develop a robust growth strategy and/or exit plan.
- Develop as a leader.
- Clarify drivers of your business.
- Get renewed energy and enthusiasm for the business.
- Become part of a life-long business growth community.

## Supporting businesses for the decade ahead.

For more information about the Business Growth Programme, please contact Alison Cutland on;

T: +44 (0)1234 754502

E: [A.R.Cutland@cranfield.ac.uk](mailto:A.R.Cutland@cranfield.ac.uk)

[www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/bgp](http://www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/bgp)

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Version 1. March 2021.

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