



Interview Behiye Hassan

My business life Julie Deane

The CEO of leather goods manufacturer The Cambridge Satchel Company founded the business in 2008 with £600. Today the £13m turnover firm employs more than 130 people and sells in 120 countries. Here, she reveals her inspiration...

No one in my family had been to university before. My schoolfriend's sister was my inspiration to get into Cambridge. When I was about six I heard that Fiona had got into Oxford and the way everyone spoke about her after that made me think 'I want to get into Oxford or Cambridge because I want them to speak about me that way.'

My first job taught me the importance of customer service and listening to what people want. I was a waitress for three months at a taverna in Greece, between A-levels and going to university. It was next door to a small supermarket – so if somebody asked for something that I knew wasn't on the menu, I would say, 'yes, we can do it' and dash out the back door into the supermarket to get it. Today, if somebody really wants something, we will bend over backwards to make it happen.

Belief is essential. There's no shortage of people who will say, 'well, if that was a good idea somebody would have done it already'. My mum was involved with the business from the start and has been a huge support. It's incredibly helpful to have somebody in your corner who believes you can succeed.

I self-funded at the start. Many private equity and venture capital firms then approached me, but I wanted to wait until the right person came along. I settled on Index Ventures [in 2014] because

CV

Born Swansea

Position CEO, The Cambridge Satchel Company

Previous business roles None. Deane was a fellow of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge University, before becoming a full-time mum to children Emily and Max.

Did you know? In 2013, she was the first woman to be named Entrepreneur of the Year at The European Business Awards

they really seem to understand the importance of brand and they also have an incredible portfolio.

Being in the Google Chrome ad was transformative. Suddenly we weren't this well-kept secret anymore. The long-lasting effect after that was the number of people contacting me asking for advice on starting a company or seeking my opinions on their business idea. At times it was overwhelming, but it goes to show that there is a need for a clear set of unbiased information and resources for people wanting to set up their own businesses.

I thought I was a good judge of character. My biggest setback was when my manufacturer at the time tried to launch their own brand with my leather. I had helped save their business and they stabbed me in the back. It was a massive disappointment.

'It's just a phase.' That was the best advice I've ever been given. We all go through these difficult phases in business and in our personal lives but if you tell yourself it's just a phase you'll work through it, you'll move on to something else. When a challenge comes up, deal with it, don't put it off, get it over with so you can just move on and get to the next thing.

I love the variety of my job... from embossing customers' initials on the bags, to preparing labels to dispatch them, to doing live chats with customers on the website.

I don't want to hear 'It's not my

job'. It's important to me that the people I hire – I don't care how senior they are – never, ever come out with those words. I'm CEO, but I will still pack a bag or drive something to the post office to get it there on time.

I'm proud of achieving what I set out to do. My mum and I set out to find a way to be able to afford to send my children to a great school – that was the big aim and we did it. I have so many other things to be proud of too, including working with Comme Des Garçons and Vivienne Westwood.

If I wasn't a CEO, I would be a wildlife photographer. My dad had a huge passion for photography. When he died, he passed on his camera collection to me. For the first three or four years of the business, all of the photographs on the website I took with his cameras.

I've got a chance to make a difference. Last year the prime minister asked me to carry out an independent review of self-employment in the UK. Start-ups are a part of the self-employed community, so if we manage to make things clearer for them, it would be an honour to think I've had any part in making that better.

Before I retire... I would love for The Cambridge Satchel Company to be seen as an enduring brand – a business that people look and think 'There's somebody who did something and if she can do it, I can do it.' 📌

“ Mum and I set out to find a way to be able to afford to send my children to a great school – that was the big aim and we did it”

To find out more about the company, visit cambridgesatchel.com

@CamSatchelCo