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9% of European workers telecommute, compared to 27% in the Middle East



26%

of British SME owners say they no longer enjoy running a business

SOURCES: IPSOS/AVIVA

From bags to riches

ENTREPRENEURSHIP How one entrepreneur made an eco-friendly business out of rubbish

Debbie Watkins was looking for a little respite from the hustle and bustle of corporate life in London, so she booked a trip to Cambodia. Images of Buddhist temples, lush jungles and warm smiles intermix with a history of conflict and a unique Southeast Asian cuisine for an experience sure to contrast with the grey cloud cover over the UK. But that was 11 years ago and, as is so often the case with entrepreneurs, the destination actually became the starting point.

NEW DIRECTION

Some combination of wanting to deeply engage with the culture of Cambodia, wanting to create economic opportunity and social progress in the region and meeting the man of her dreams turned Watkins' respite into resolution. Over beer one evening with her future husband Marc Lansu, the pair imagined a venture that could animate Watkins' aspirations, and thus was born Carpe Diem, a nonprofit tour operator providing small group excursions in Cambodia. Instead of checking off a list of top local photogenic spots, Carpe Diem would facilitate tourism deeper into the country, exchange with local people and cultural interaction.

TERRIFIC TRIP

Carpe Diem Travel has delivered on Watkins' aspirations and more. The organisation has expanded to employ more



than 20 people today, including Willemijn Wellens who bears the title of 'Wheelchair Travel Specialist', and is a wheelchair traveller herself. The firm has expanded into Laos, and has created trip elements that educate and engage visitors on issues including conservation and social welfare. But this article is not about Carpe Diem Travel. Carpe Diem is but a waypoint on the journey of an entrepreneur who, during her travels with the company, could not help but continue to see problems and opportunities everywhere around her.

LITTERED LANDSCAPE

Many who have travelled to interesting destinations in emerging parts of the world

have seen what caught Watkins' eye: the pervasive plastic bag. Dealing with waste in the developing world is hardly a systemic activity – most often it is handled by individual entrepreneurs who extract whatever value they can from the refuse of others. Glass and metal can be resold. Organic waste goes to feed livestock or fertilise fields. But plastic bags, because they have no value once used, cover more and more of the countryside. Cheap and non-biodegradable, they are more than eyesore, harming animals that eat them and clogging waterways and drains.

TRASH TRANSFORMATION

And so was born Watkins' next venture. In 2009, she formed Funky Junk Recycled (funkyjunkrecycled.com) in order to weave those plastic bags into something valuable. And not just something

valuable for her clients, though they appreciate the colourful and eco-friendly floor cushions, laundry baskets, sun hats and shoulder bags she manufactures at Funky Junk. But value in cleaning up the environment. Value for her local Cambodian employees, who she trains, manages according to fair-trade best practice and, of course, compensates. And value to entrepreneurs in other parts of the world with whom she 'franchises' her model in order to enable more people and more progress.

THE JOB OF CREATING

Watkins also provides value to us. She illustrates for us the job of the entrepreneur. Indeed, that job is not to wait in the bath for the moment of divine intervention, but rather to get out in the world and create. That the process of creating is not something that happens in isolation, but is a function of interacting with others, using mundane resources already at hand, resources that may be as unattractive, as common and as valueless as the plastic bag by the side of the road. Until those resources get into the hands of the entrepreneur and are transformed from foul to funky. Glamorous? You decide. Valuable? Absolutely. ●

Fantastic plastic

Discarded bags are turned into eco-friendly gifts by Funky Junk, run by Debbie Watkins (below)



details

By Stuart Read, professor of marketing at IMD, and Nick Dew, associate professor at the Naval Postgraduate School; co-authors of the textbook *Effectual Entrepreneurship* (Routledge, £35)

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