

# PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS



Commercial Education Trust

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These are tough times for anyone entering the labour market, starting a business or trying to progress in their chosen career. Young people, in particular, have been badly affected by political, economic and technological turmoil, with already high levels of youth unemployment expected to rise still further. In these challenging conditions it is clear that workplace success will go to those who can demonstrate not only technical know-how and transferrable “soft” skills, but also a basic understanding of how business works. How, then, can all these very different qualities be nurtured? The stories of the business owners and social entrepreneurs featured on these pages point to some possible answers.

When Sarah McBriar was growing up, there were few signs that she would one day become a successful entrepreneur. She was not interested in joining her school’s Young Enterprise programme, choosing instead to spend her free time playing sport or just having fun with her friends.

By the time McBriar went to university, however, she was sufficiently drawn to business to take a degree in international management. After graduating from the University of Manchester she had a variety of jobs, including a succession of project management roles at Manchester City Football Club where she spent a total of six years. She also found time to work behind the scenes in various festivals, doing everything from marketing to ticketing. All this diverse experience paid off, and McBriar now heads her own production company, Up Productions.



*“Winning the CET Entrepreneur’s Award, gave Sarah McBriar the funding to produce her first festival. The award also funded a mentoring programme that helped her through the launch of her festival business.”*

“Up Productions develops culture, arts and music from the ground up, so it’s very much about emerging talent, right through to established talent,” she explains. A brand within the company known as Audio Visual Arts or AVA produces annual festivals in London and Belfast, as well as events in locations ranging from Dublin, Glasgow and Amsterdam to Mumbai.

The business has grown year on year since McBriar set it up in 2014 – success she puts down to a combination of factors, including a grant from the Commercial Education Trust (CET) to run her first festival in Belfast, and a set of attitudes nurtured by parents who gave her “the freedom to explore and experiment”. Her boss and mentor at Manchester City Football Club was another key influence, teaching her how to take risks, a lesson McBriar showed she had learnt when she left the security of full-time employment to start her own business.

Arguing that commercial success depends on both acquired skills and innate qualities, such as resilience, she says: “There are definitely some core personality traits that I think an entrepreneur has to have in order to survive, but I would say that fundamentally I’ve had people and opportunities that pushed me to make a leap, and the CET grant was certainly a major one.”

The funding she received was part of a CET grant to the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama where McBriar took a master’s degree in Creative Producing after leaving Manchester City Football Club. Some of her fellow students also benefited from the £25,000 grant, which covered the cost of providing them with employability training.

But winning the “CET Entrepreneur’s Award” as it was called, gave McBriar the funding to produce her first festival. The award also funded a mentoring programme that helped her through the launch of her festival business.

While the funding she won and the support of her mentor, a businesswoman who remains a friend, gave McBriar what she calls “a solid starting point” for building her own business, she thinks that schools need to provide commercial education and help young people find out early on if they have the right qualities to become entrepreneurs. “I took a management and business degree, so I did that at university,” she says. “What was really great about that for me was the network of people I built. The course itself was important, but the network was equally valuable.”



*Sarah Gardner*

People and networks also loom large in Sarah Gardner’s journey, which has taken her from teaching in a primary school to running Action Through Enterprise (ATE), a charity that works with communities in Lawra, Upper West Ghana to reduce poverty through education, enterprise and social change.

After studying for a degree in education, Gardner taught in primary schools until, feeling ready for an adventure, she applied to be a VSO volunteer. Posted to Lawra, she was given the task of improving teaching and learning in 96 primary schools - a tall order for a volunteer working largely on her own. Then, eight months into what was turning into a lonely and difficult year, she joined her family for a holiday, and over lunch one day they worked out how they could use the business skills in their own group to make a difference to the people of Lawra. Within eight weeks, ATE was a UK-registered charity and an NGO in Ghana.

The charity runs three key programmes: EducATE, which provides free school meals and learning materials to encourage children to attend school; BizATE, a small business development programme funded by CET; and SNAP, which supports marginalised disabled children.

Gardner initially worked for ATE as a volunteer, splitting her time between the UK and Ghana. In 2014, when the board of trustees of the now well-established charity advertised for a chief executive, Gardner applied and got the job.

She describes the broad education she had at school and university, together with the transferrable skills developed during her teaching career, as good preparation for many aspects of this role. “I can craft presentations in dynamic and interesting ways, I’m good at planning and I’m very confident,” she says. “I didn’t feel out of my depth running a charity because I had run a class with 30 children.”

*“Communication skills, teamwork, project skills and resilience, these are all crucial skills, and they need to be documented so that people can put them on their CV’s to show employers that besides their formal qualifications they have done other things.”*

A master’s degree in international business studies that Gardner started while working for ATE has also been helpful, even though she did not finish the course.

Modules in rural finance that covered how to get business grants were especially relevant to the chief executive’s job. That said, there were aspects of this role that proved challenging, especially those relating to the financial side of running the organisation. “Over time, I feel I’ve got a better understanding of that,” Gardner says, “but I did not have enough commercial education.”

To illustrate just how valuable this type of education can be, Gardner points to Tanye Hermas, who went through the BizATE programme. Hermas, a 28-year-welder had the skills and tools to make gates and furniture but had to ask customers for payments upfront before he could buy materials to make these products. It was a business model that left him struggling to support himself - or even eat every day.



*Tanye Hermas*

Life began to change for Hermas when, after a long process of supported business planning, he received a grant from ATE. One of just five small business owners from over 100 applicants to win a grant in the 2019 round, Hermas attended 12 monthly mentoring sessions with local ATE manager Rexford Benon, who helped the young welder analyse his competitors and draw up monthly action plans.

Hermas also joined a group of small business owners for training that enabled him to learn and apply new business skills and come up with ideas for generating more income. After a session on marketing, for example, he produced t-shirts promoting his business, which by the beginning of 2020 had taken on two apprentices and doubled its monthly profits.

Even when the Covid-19 pandemic hit those profits, “The commercial education that Hermas had received gave him the knowledge and resilience to keep his business afloat.”

In the UK, only the relatively small number of young people who choose to take business studies courses at school or university have the chance to develop the business know-how, attitudes and skills that underpin success in the workplace. The majority receive no commercial education, apart from whatever they pick up from the careers education that schools now offer. As a result, they enter the workforce with little understanding of how business works. That needs to change, according to Michael Mercieca, who was until recently Chief Executive of Young Enterprise. Criticising the state education system for favouring academic subjects over financial education and commercial skills, Mercieca says: “communication skills, teamwork, project skills and resilience, these are all crucial skills, and they need to be documented so that people can put them on their CV’s to show employers that besides their formal qualifications they have done other things,”

Now a business development consultant with JA (Junior Achievement) Worldwide, the international arm of a group of charities that includes Young Enterprise, Mercieca tells how he developed his own business knowledge and skills both by studying for an accountancy qualification and in his subsequent career, first in industry and then in media organisations, including BBC Worldwide and Sky Television. Along the way he discovered that he wanted to be involved in developing and growing businesses, rather than auditing them, and he urges young people to try to find out early on what they like - and, more importantly, what they don’t like.



*Michael Mercieca*

# Lessons Learned

Commercial education can give learners opportunities to start on the journey of self-discovery that Mercieca describes, while also helping them develop the soft skills they need in the workplace. But at its best, commercial education does more than that, says David Coughtrie, Chairman Emeritus of CET, which is currently exploring how to improve the business knowledge and skills of new entrants to the labour market.

“Commercial education aims to give young people an understanding of the basics of business,” Coughtrie adds. “That means ensuring they have enough knowledge of commerce and trade for the work role they hope to perform, as well as guidance on how to make a positive contribution in that role and to enjoy it.”



Learn • Apply • Achieve

The Commercial Education Trust is an independent charity which works with employers, educators and policy makers to promote a better understanding of the knowledge and capabilities young people need so that they can prepare for employment, self-employment and enterprise. It carries out research, provides grant funding and convenes like-minded individuals and organisations in support of programmes which help young people develop the skills they need to thrive in work and in society more widely.

To find out more go to: [www.theCET.org](http://www.theCET.org)

***With thanks to the following current and past CET grant beneficiaries:***

*Sarah McBriar (AVA Festival and Up Productions)*

*Sarah Gardner (ATE – Action Through Enterprise)*

*Michael Merceica (ex-Young Enterprise, Junior Achievement Worldwide)*

*Text by Anat Arkin, designed by Nice Chaps Ltd.*