

Edinburgh Reporter chats – Emma Little of ExecSpace

☒ Sometimes you meet people you just know will be a great success. Emma Little is one of those people. She is very self-effacing and grounded, but you can see that she is also imbued with a determined streak.

“I fell into sales at 19, and had a really successful sales career, predominantly in technology and telecom. I worked for Microsoft Partner at one point and then Vodafone. I eventually managed the RBS relationship for Vodafone.

I did particularly well in new business. I had a mentor on the board and he helped me progress within Vodafone. My ambition was to be at the top of a big company by 45. That was why I was getting up at 4 and working really, really hard. I have this constant burning desire inside me to achieve that!

That is my ambition and that has always been at the forefront of my mind. Vodafone pretty much told me that I would have to move down south, or I would struggle to get any more senior positions within the organisation. We had lost a few of our big plcs in Scotland. I started to think that if I was to achieve my ambition, and because I’m too soft to ever leave Edinburgh, my best bet was that I should start my own company from scratch. There is a huge amount of passion behind my business. I never wanted to build a lifestyle business. I wanted to build a really big business that Scotland can be proud of, so that we can be the best conference agent in the UK. I never ever want to leave Edinburgh. It is a beautiful city, and also I am very close to my family who live here.

I know I won’t be satisfied until I achieve my professional ambitions on top of that.

I decided in October 2007 that I would do it. I left Vodafone

on 29 February. I gave back my lovely BMW and bought a bus pass. I hadn't had a bus pass since I was 10! I started ExecSpace from an ex vending machine cupboard in Morrison Street, with no natural daylight.

We now have five people in the company. We use serviced offices in Leith at the moment, but we are looking to double the size of the business by the end of February, subject to investment. We are looking to recruit!

If you just manufacture a widget, then you need a bigger factory. But if you are a services business, focussed on customer experience, then ultimately the only way to grow the business is to increase the head count in management and customer care.

They have got to be absolutely focussed on customers. My philosophy is that if a customer wants something then you can make it happen. If America can put a man on the moon then we can do whatever our customers want. The people I employ have to have a can do attitude. They have got to love customers and be driven. They have got to be hard workers and bright and intelligent. Preferably more intelligent than me!

I didn't go to university: I don't really like studying. I was actually going to be a professional violinist. I got the grades at Higher and had a dead-end job, but, then I answered an advert in the Evening News to sell hoovers door to door. I did make the salary that they told me I would. I stayed in the job for about eighteen months, although the average was about two weeks. My violin is now under my bed and I don't even play any more – don't tell my Mum!

I don't have any hobbies that I am particularly passionate about. I love my friends and my family. My passions in life are therefore ExecSpace and my friends and family. Nothing more exciting than that really. I spend most Sundays with my family.

When you have your own company, you don't have a boss that is going to coach you every day and who looks at your development plan or whatever. But I set my goals at the start.

My goal is one knowledge share session each week with someone who knows more than me about business or my industry. I can sit down and quiz them about business. I still have a shed load to learn, and that is the only way I am going to develop: by speaking to people who have done it already.

I have mentored at least three or four younger people over the last couple of years. As for my team, I have six-weekly mentoring sessions with them. I am trying to teach them in two years everything that I have learned in 10 years in sales.

I had to personally fund the start-up of my business. There is little available in the way of funding for services businesses. That has taken a lot of guts and has made it quite scary at times. I also go to at least one networking event a week.

My typical day follows the same pattern. I get up at 4 and I am in the office with a strong coffee at 5. I do emails till 6 and then I do the banking. I check it every day. I think it is important not to bury your head in the sand about finances so I like to check it daily. I then do the sales figures. I will be fairly relaxed by 8.30 when my team arrive. I want to be the best for my team and my customers during business hours.

I chat to my team to make sure they know what they are doing that day. I brief Sabrina who pretty much runs everything in my absence, we look at opportunities that are not yet closed, and discuss how we will close them. It is a sales driven culture. Then I spend the rest of my day out and about with my customers. I meet existing clients and new prospects to understand how we could do business with them.

Sometimes I finish at 6, sometimes 10. It just depends!

I think when we first started off we got really small events, but now the average spend has gone up. The biggest we have organised is a five day residential conference in London, during Wimbledon week, for the finance division of a large company. We are conference agents so we source the venue, Audio Visual equipment and the bedrooms and we get the best rates. We act as a single point of contact for the customer, who is usually the PA to the chief executive.

ExecSpace Extra is the newer part of the business which allows us to offer a presence on the ground at conferences, but this is still a very small part.

What I am keen to do to drive a sizeable business is to grow a volume business. I would rather do a kind of transactional kind of business.

The company is UK wide for the moment. I don't believe in doing things until you can do them properly. We are restricted to events on UK Mainland at the moment. We would be winging it if we went abroad at the moment..... (but you have the feeling she is looking to do this really soon!)

My best business book is the life story of Theo Pathetis who is the guy on Dragon's Den He bought the stationer's firm, Rymans. I love his book.

Edinburgh is a good place to live and work. I think it is a beautiful, romantic city. It has an air of mystery and magic about it. You can see why JK Rowling would write her books here. I like the nostalgia of remembering things from my childhood here. I love it so much!

You can find out more about Emma's business on [her website.](#)

