

Britain's new entrepreneurs: young guns go for it

Today's internet-savvy students are starting their own businesses and forging their own path in life... and here are seven prime examples

Why a growing number of twentysomethings are doing it for themselves

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Poppy



NICKO WILLIAMSON, 27: Founder of Climate Cars

Nicko Williamson's office is in a state of organised chaos. The shelves are filled with an assorted jumble of stuff – two BlackBerries, a copy of the *Economist*, a Jamiroquai album, piles of loose change and the novel *One Day* by David Nicholls which he has yet to read. "No time," he explains, looking wistfully out of the window at the Battersea heliport in south-west London. "I need to go on holiday to read books."

It's no surprise that Williamson is busy. In 2007, he launched the carbon-neutral cab company, Climate Cars, after graduating in modern history from Bristol University. Three years on, the business employs 14 full-time staff, runs a fleet of 70 cars and has a £2.4m annual turnover, generating £1.6m in profit.

"I was always obsessed with starting businesses when I was little," says the 27-year-old, who grew up in the Dorset countryside. "It's sad, but I remember I used to get excited by Richard Branson."

During his degree, Williamson had a couple of internships with various hedge funds in the summer holidays but "it didn't click with me, just watching other people do things". He had the idea for Climate Cars after driving past a garage in Bristol that offered environmentally friendly car conversions. "I always loved cars but felt guilty about loving them," admits Williamson, whose great-grandfather, William Watson, was a racing-car driver (his portrait is propped up against one office wall). "Then I thought: why not make taxis greener? That's where it all came from."

He sought investment from his family and friends and put together a business plan while writing his dissertation on American slavery in Florida. "I'd be in the British Library and when I was bored of case studies of another slave, I'd do a bit on Climate Cars."

A rival green taxi company launched just as he had put the finishing touches to the

business plan. "But we're different and aimed more towards the corporate market," says Williamson, whose drivers are told to open doors for passengers and offer them bottled water for the journey.

The global financial crisis has, he believes, made entrepreneurship a more attractive career option for his contemporaries. "Lots of people have been laid off and putting their redundancy pay-offs towards setting up a business... they're realising that working punishing hours for someone else isn't that rewarding. One of my friends has started a taco chain and another has started a fashion website."

What are his ambitions for the future? "To grow this business into one of the biggest car companies in London and introduce more electric cars to our fleet." And, presumably, to

find the time for that David Nicholls novel.

The age of the self-starter

A million young Britons are out of work and prospects for many others are grim. But across the UK a growing number of twentysomethings, fired up with a new spirit of entrepreneurship, are using their laptops to start their own businesses

Meet the new entrepreneurs forging their own path in life

Elizabeth Day

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Young entrepreneur Edwin Broni-Mensah photographed with his 'Give Me Tap' bottles. Photograph: Richard Saker for the Observer

When she was growing up, Ella Bitton had two heroes. One was her father, Paul, who set up his own bathroom and kitchen design company. The other was Richard Branson. "I do love Richard Branson," she says with a dreamy sigh. "But seeing my dad do it all from scratch –he was my real inspiration."

Ella is 20 years old, petite and professional in appearance: her hair is glossy and blowdried, her outfit neatly accessorised. She is studying for a business management degree at King's College London and talks animatedly with one eye constantly on her iPhone, checking it for Twitter updates or text messages.

A few years ago, one might have expected a person such as Ella to join a bank, a hedge fund or a management consultancy on graduation. One might have assumed she would be lured to the big corporations by the prospect of job security, a pension and team awaydays. But, for Ella, this holds little appeal. She wants to be an entrepreneur. "I definitely want to start up my own business," she says, nodding her head vigorously. "I'd like to do something in design, related to what my father already does."

I meet Ella at the finale of an *Apprentice*-themed competition organised by a group of university entrepreneurship clubs. The preceding weekend, three fresh-faced undergraduate teams in suits had battled it out in a series of business-related tasks inspired by the popular BBC series. At one point, teams were asked to design the office of the future; then they were taught how to barter on the street with a paperclip. Now, at a time of night when most students are probably downing three-for-two alcopops and takeaway kebabs, these budding young businessmen and women are clad in pinstripes, watching PowerPoint presentations and patiently waiting to find out who will win. What is more, they seem genuinely excited about it.

"Oh yes," says Ella, earnestly. "There's a real optimism about the future for young entrepreneurs, a determination to do something for ourselves." Still, I say, she's probably got plans for later, hasn't she? A school-uniform-themed disco, perhaps, or a pub crawl in pyjamas? Ella looks at me levelly. "Actually," she replies, "there's a business networking event after this."

Ella is part of a new generation of wannabe entrepreneurs. After being weaned on a television diet of *Dragons' Den* and *The Apprentice*, a growing number of young people are starting their own businesses. According to government figures, the number of selfemployed university leavers has jumped 46% in the last six years. A survey by Hiscox

Insurance found that four in 10 London undergraduates were either managing their own businesses or setting up companies while still at university –in Hull, the proportion was 36%, followed by Glasgow (32%) and Cardiff (22%) –while research by Enterprise UK last month revealed that more than half of 14- to 19-year-olds would like to be their own boss.

David Cameron has already hailed the next decade as "the age of the entrepreneur" and universities are swiftly responding to changing demands: the National Consortium of University Entrepreneurs was founded in 2008 and now represents 70 student enterprise societies. The King's College London Business Club, to which Ella belongs, has 2,700 members who gather under the motto: "Business. It's in everyone's genes".

According to Mark Prisk, minister for business and enterprise: "There is a real passion for being your own boss, making your own fortune. What I encounter on a daily basis is

the recognition that actually enterprise isn't for the already rich and famous. It's open to all."

The recession, too, has had a noticeable impact. In an era when university students are no longer guaranteed a job on graduation, and 2.5 million are unemployed, people in their 20s and 30s are exploring more innovative ways of making a living. "One of the features of a recession is that it is a good time to be an entrepreneur," says Tom Bewick, the chief executive of Enterprise UK. "The compact that has existed for the last 20 or 30 years –this idea of doing well at school, then going to university, getting a degree and almost being guaranteed a job –is no longer the case. There is 20% youth unemployment. On average, employers are saying there are 70 graduates chasing every one job. Meanwhile, there's a bigger debate about tuition fees tripling in the future. All these things are putting the pressure on. People can make a decision to get into debt and go to university or they can take a risk. I think there is an increasing correlation –a calculation in young people's minds –saying, 'Actually, I've got this idea. Can I do it?'" More and more twentysomethings are doing just that. There is Nicko Williamson, 27, who set up the carbon-neutral taxi company Climatecars which now has an annual turnover of £2.4m. Or there is Gérard Jones, who founded a highly successful football coaching academy two years ago when he was 19 and still studying for his degree. Then there are those, like Ella, whose determination and focus are buoyed by a refreshing enthusiasm for the future.

Almost all the young people I talk to are internet-savvy and adept at maximising the potential of social networking sites to build a loyal customer base. "You can communicate with a vast number of people immediately," says Nicko Williamson. "I started a Facebook page for Climatecars and even before the company launched there were 800 people on it."

The expansion of the internet means that ideas can be exchanged more fluidly than ever before and that there are fewer bureaucratic barriers to setting up on one's own. "These days, what do you need to set up a business that can reach the world?" says Prisk. "You need a laptop. It's a much less complex process than 20 years ago."

Martin Bright, the founder of New Deal of the Mind, a charity that helps people into work in the arts and creative sectors, says the younger generation "seems turned on by the idea of entrepreneurship in a way people of my generation weren't –it was almost a dirty word for us". Bright, a former *Observer* journalist who recently co-authored the report *Make a Job, Don't Take a Job*, which looked at how to encourage a resurgence of creative entrepreneurship in the UK, says there has been "a combined effect of TV programmes and the fact that the old political alignments don't necessarily hold any more. Entrepreneurship used to be seen as somehow Thatcherite, but the New Labour years broke down the idea that business is a bad thing. The other element is necessity: there just aren't old-style jobs any more. If you're coming out of university, you need to create a job."

The coalition government has been vocal in its support for startups and, in October 2010, launched the new enterprise allowance scheme which provides mentoring and financial support for unemployed people wishing to set up their own business. For the first three months, applicants receive payments equivalent to the typical jobseeker's allowance. For the next three months, that amount is halved and a loan of £1,000 is made available for initial costs. "There's great enthusiasm out there among young entrepreneurs," says Prisk. "We're trying to foster that with help, advice, financial support and mentoring so that there is a synergy of new ideas and old hands."

But critics of the scheme say it does not go far enough –Bright points out that "forcing people to languish on the dole does not foster enterprise" –and that there needs to be a more profound shift in our cultural mindset. In the US, there is a far greater awareness of, and exposure to, business startups at a higher education level, while in the UK graduate "milk rounds" are still dominated by big corporations. "There's a huge amount we can learn from the US model," agrees Bewick. "It's a mindset shift our universities have to go through. We've had centuries of this outdated attitude –that the only role of university is to give you a job at the end. But we'd like to see universities offering a business support service as well. There are a few good individual examples out there but it's nothing like on the scale it needs to be."

Back in the lecture hall at King's College, the winner of the London Apprentice Challenge has just been announced. The team from Imperial College, who designed an office

featuring remote-controlled desks and who generated more than £100 by bartering on the street with a paperclip, file on stage to collect their awards. Sarah Chen, the briskly efficient president of the King's College London Business Club, takes to the podium. "This shows what we can do," she says, "with even a simple paperclip." Today, the paperclip... tomorrow, who knows what?