

Why do female business owners doubt themselves compared to their male counterparts – especially when starting out?

THAT CONFIDENCE TRICK

Anna Jordan believes that in business, people are often measured by the confidence they project, and not on the competence they have demonstrated. The 27-year-old is a co-founder of Alchera Technologies, a transport focused AI start-up based in Cambridge. She says she has always found public speaking hard, and struggles to feel confident when presenting to a room, or talking on a panel. “Even with evidence that I’ve done well – when we’ve won commercial contracts or built new partnerships from my presentations – I still can’t help but think, would my co-founders [she has two, both men] have done a better job?”

“There remains this niggling idea that there is some secret that other entrepreneurs know, some magic they have learnt that lets them go out confidently and build something.”

The term “imposter syndrome” was coined by the clinical psychologists Pauline R Clance and Suzanne A Imes in their 1978 paper “The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: dynamics and therapeutic intervention”, and was described as “an internal experience of intellectual phoniness” that affected some ostensibly highly successful women. Despite awards, praise and recognition, they believe their success was only achieved because their abilities have been overestimated or the selection process was incorrect.

Imposter syndrome isn’t limited to women, but according to the government-backed Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship, published last year, it is more prevalent among women like Jordan, who head up start-ups and SMEs, than among their male peers. Only 39 per cent of women are confident in their capability to start a business compared to 55 per cent of men, found the report, which also stated: “This is a perceived

gap in ability, rather than an actual gap in skillsets,” and that, in addition, many women “often credited other people for their success and dismissed their own achievements”.

This is more than simply a self-esteem issue, according to Dr Sandi Mann, author of *Why Do I Feel Like an Imposter?* It is a fear of being exposed as a fraud, and can even become a self-fulfilling prophecy, further knocking self-worth and confidence and damaging mental health and relationships.

“It’s something that a lot of people feel when setting up their own business,” says Mann, who has also seen an increase in its prevalence as working patterns have shifted away from large workforces towards more widespread entrepreneurialism. “It can be very isolating setting up on your own, and it’s so competitive. Watching others who are already set up leads many to believe they’re not as good as them.”

“It certainly holds people’s income back, because, in not believing themselves to be good enough, they don’t charge enough for their skills or services,” she continues. “And that definitely slows their careers down.”

This chimes with the findings from social media research commissioned by Dell and conducted by Storyful, which found that some female entrepreneurs struggled to set boundaries and did not charge enough because they lacked confidence about their own worth. But, the research also found, when they did charge according to their true value, it led to greater success. Self-promotion was another factor the Storyful research identified as a sticking point for some female entrepreneurs; highlighting their own success in front of peers was seen as particularly challenging. For many women, the lack of experienced voices offering validation feeds into this.

“When you strike out as an entrepreneur,

Cloud cover:
Anna Jordan, co-founder
of AI data start-up
Alchera Technologies

Clear your vision with inspiration and affirmation



Enterprise Nation is a UK-wide network of SMEs offering support and advice. Founder Emma Jones has these tips for building a strong mindset:

- Surround yourself with positive people: get a network of friends, family, advisers and peers who cheer you on. Whenever you feel lacking in confidence, this group will tell you different.
- Read about role models: taking time to find out more about those who have already succeeded in your industry will help to give you confidence that your vision is achievable.
- Have a daily mantra: start the day with a positive habit. Borrow from Steve Jobs, who reportedly would look in the mirror each morning and ask himself: “If this was your last day on earth, are you doing what you should be doing?” This will set you off with a spring in your step.

‘Women often credit others for their own success’

there’s nobody for you to check in with, or who will say yes, what you are doing is right, or no, what you are doing is wrong,” comments Jordan. “There’s no boss – it’s just you. You don’t have that validation or support from a network.”

“And how can you feel confident and secure if you are the only person you know who’s ever tried to do it?”

For her, the international network of female business leaders, DWEN – the Dell Women’s Entrepreneur Network – has become an invaluable place to access that support, and to find peers and sounding boards. DWEN enables its members to connect to a global community of women entrepreneurs and gain knowledge through face-to-face events or virtually.

“They are open in sharing their successes and failures and they give each other the confidence to try new ventures,” says DWEN’s global director Ingrid Devin. “They can also find role models and mentors who can guide them on their entrepreneurial journey.”

“You hear true and honest stories about other people’s struggles, and how they overcome them,” agrees Jordan. “And that really helps you go out and solve your own problems.”

Find out more at dwen.com

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