

Keeping On Top Of Things: Creativity, Wellbeing and Business with Monica Davidson, Founder & Director of Creative Plus Business

Monica Davidson is the Founder and Director of Creative Plus Business, an Australian-based social enterprise that educates creatives about business skills so they can find their feet in what can often feel like a minefield. A huge part of creating

and sustaining a successful career in design is having a solid foundational understanding of best business practices. But, there is an unsung hero in the business game—the concept of wellbeing. We can all agree that finding the right balance is not always easy to do alone, especially amidst the global pandemic.

We caught up with Monica to talk about how our personal wellbeing is intrinsically connected to that of our businesses, how you can make setting short term goals the key to your success and why scheduling in regular Mental Health Days will keep both you and your business thriving and, importantly, sustainable.

Before starting Creative Plus Business you worked as a self-employed writer, performer and filmmaker. What inspired you to start Creative Plus Business and how did your experiences as a freelancer influence your vision for the company from the offset?

I've been freelancing since I was a teenager (hundreds of years ago) and everything I learned about business, I had to learn the hard way. I made lots of mistakes and, as I developed my own business skills, I started trying to help my friends and fellow creatives. After a while, I started running workshops and offering advice sessions, very informally and only as a side hustle to my film and writing work.

I decided to close my production company in 2013, mostly so I could focus on a growing need for business skills development in the creative industries. I went back to university and obtained my Master's degree in Screen Arts and Business so I had the right kind of qualification and Creative Plus Business was born in 2015. I really wanted it to be a one-stop-shop for any creative who needed business skills development because, had I been given that kind of support when I started my own creative business all those years ago, I would have been saved A LOT of hassle and heartache!

What does the concept of wellbeing within the context of business mean to you?

Creative practitioners need to take care of their mental health and emotional wellbeing, because creativity is a physical expression of the mind and heart.

If our brains and bodies aren't doing well, our creativity suffers. Add to that the stress and complication of running your own business or being freelance and wellbeing becomes of paramount importance. It's at the centre of everything we do here, whether that's running workshops and webinars or providing personalised advice for creative practitioners. If the mind and heart aren't doing so well, creative business will always suffer.

Particularly for recent graduates starting out in their careers, what are a few key business skills they should lock down from the beginning to build stable as well as sustainable businesses?

I would suggest firstly becoming comfortable with the idea that you're running a business.

It may not feel like it and that may not be your goal, but to work professionally in a creative field means getting comfortable with the idea of freelancing, whether you like it or not. Freelancing is also known as being a 'sole trader' and it brings all the rights and responsibilities of business ownership, if on a small and personalised scale. Ignore that concept at your peril!

Getting comfortable with business means educating yourself about all the things you don't know. It means slowly but surely building up your confidence in topics like working out what to charge, invoicing, a little bit of marketing, client management and managing your own time. You'll learn as you go

and as you need more information, but you can also embrace self-employment and learn more about how to do it well—so you can enjoy all the freedom it can give you!

Creative Plus Business has a huge amount of resources for creative professionals of every level. Can you tell us a little bit about the types of support you offer creative professionals?

We educate creative people about business in every way we can think of. That includes workshops (we have 26 unique offerings!), which we run online and in person across Australia. We have free webinars at least once a month and a nifty online program called Deadlines, Dreams and Goals. We also offer confidential and personalised advisory services for

creatives who want to speak with an expert about all the things they should be doing to get their creative business right. I have a team of 14 people, including 10 creative industries business specialists who are also practitioners. We're all focused on helping creatives learn the basics of business in the most practical and fun ways possible.

Creative Plus Business recently secured funding to carry on your free webinar series into 2021. Can you tell us more about the webinars and your plan for the series?

Our series is called Creative Resilience and features panel-style interviews with a few fabulous creative professionals discussing their approach to their creativity, especially during Covid times, and how that impacts on their professional and financial lives. So far we've featured the broadcaster Benjamin Law, artist and designer Frida Las Vegas, actor/musician Joel Jackson and artist Jeff McCann. We have more coming up, so stay tuned!

Out of the webinars, which have been your favourite so far and why?

I Will Survive has been my favourite. That was our response to the Covid-19 crisis and it was very early. 'Black Friday' was 13th March and we ran that webinar on 25th March, 12 days later. Over 600 people have watched it so far and so many people have told us that it really helped them cope in those first few weeks when everything went mad. It's still available to watch on our Crowdcast as well!

We love that Creative Plus Business works to make the webinar series more accessible with Auslan interpretation. How did this come about and why? Also, can you share your thoughts on how more businesses can make their offerings more accessible?

We value inclusion and diversity more than anything and that includes people living with accessibility issues. Delivering online made it easier for us to offer that support, so we

always try to offer Auslan interpretation for live webinars and workshops, Closed Captions for our recordings and audio description for people with low eyesight.

If you want to include everybody equally, I think it's imperative to make sure that you offer as many different methods of access as possible.

And, in all honesty—once a business makes that commitment, it's not too hard to figure out the practicalities and find the money to make it happen. I think more businesses just need to make the commitment and step up. If Creative Plus Business can do it as a small social enterprise, anyone can!

Networking is a huge part of making a creative career work. We

love that networking is encouraged during the live webinar sessions. Alongside attending events like yours, what are some ways for new designers to generate strong networking connections in their industry, especially right now?

Networking is hard right now, but it's not impossible (and we no longer have to put up with gross sweaty handshakes, for which I am very grateful!) I would suggest joining as many online groups as you can, especially on Facebook and LinkedIn and making the time to stay in touch with people that you've already met in your career. Join lots of mailing lists from industry organisations so you can find out what's happening. Accessing online education, webinars and workshops is also a great way to make connections with people. Even a simple coffee can help! I wrote a blog post on our website about that recently for more information.

Can you suggest some resources for freelancers and creative professionals who are trying to not only maintain the solvency of their businesses right now, but also to move towards growth for the future?

I am a huge fan of regular habits and processes to bring a business-like approach to your creative work.

I would suggest two things to begin with—coming up with a clear and practical set of short-term goals (3 months is a good start) and instituting some kind of regular check-in with yourself to practising better business habits.

We have two free webinars that people can access for more information: The Goal Matrix and Monday Morning Meeting.

We all know that even though having a strong business is important, we must also consider our personal wellbeing. What are some fun or unexpected ways you like to keep a sense of balance and wellbeing in your life?

I have regularly scheduled Mental Health Days and I urge all creative freelancers to do the same.

I try and have one day per fortnight, one a month if we're busy. On that day I don't answer emails, or my phone or do any work. I just do whatever my mood dictates. Sometimes I lie in bed all day bingeing TV, other times I have lunch with friends or just play in my house. It's always on a weekday so I feel especially privileged. It's magic and I always feel rested and rejuvenated afterwards! I'm also an avid gym-goer and I will take any chance I can get to hang out with my hilarious family and drink too much wine.

Do you have anything else coming up at Creative Plus Business that you would like to share? Surprise us!

Yes! We have a super exciting online program launching called Creative Start-Up. It will be a free online course specifically designed for people who are completely new to creative freelancing, and it will cover all the basics in an online and accessible way. We can't wait to bring it to the world. So stay tuned!

A huge thank you to Monica for sharing so many incredible resources and insights with us on how to maintain, boost and diversify your business during challenging times.

Head over to the Creative Plus Business website to find out more about their business resources and explore their webinar series and follow them on Instagram.

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