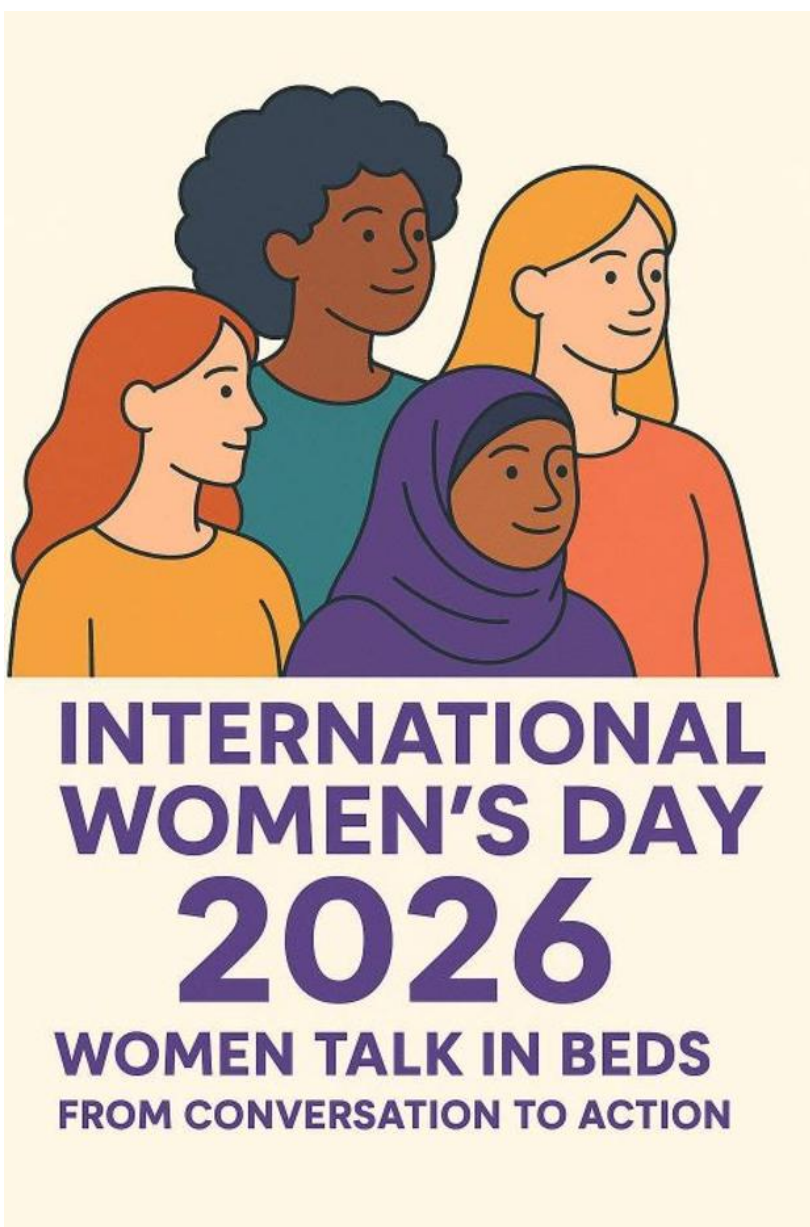


IWD 2026
eBook
Leaving a Legacy



Foreword

Celebrating IWD Thursday 5th March 2026 was an evening shared and enjoyed by many business women.

I feel privileged to have been part of the small team who curated the event, which I loved hosting at the Woodyard, on the Luton Hoo Estate.

The legacy Pauline had curated with her wonderful eBook is very exciting whilst I already look forward to Women Talk in Beds 2027.

I am hugely grateful to Pauline Stewart at Inspirati for all her marvellous designs, ideas, stimulating and moving speech on the day.

Her infectious humour and most of all the warmth of her friendship.

To the tireless and delightful Paula Devine and the Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce membership team, to Justine Maroudias, from Talk UK Telecom Limited whose generous Sponsorship helped us create a Women Business Support Fund.

And not least of all the fun and driven women who attended.

Viviane Vayssieres

**Managing Director
Chef and Butler Ltd**





International Women's Day 2026 – Legacy Story

Name: Helen Christopher

Business: Beansprout Consultancy Ltd

E: helen@bean-sprout.co.uk

What My Business Does

Beansprout Consultancy supports business owners to understand the financial side of their business so they can make better decisions and build something sustainable.

As a chartered accountant and business mentor, I work mainly with small and growing businesses who are brilliant at what they do but often feel overwhelmed by the financial and operational side of running a company.

Many business owners start with a passion for their craft, but quickly realise they are also responsible for finances, tax, pricing, systems, and planning. My role is to help them make sense of the numbers, understand what is really happening in their business and use that insight to move forward with confidence.

Through practical advice, financial insight, and supportive conversations, I help founders step out of firefighting mode and start building businesses that give them both stability and freedom.

Challenges I've Overcome

Like many women in business, my journey has been shaped by different stages of life and the responsibilities that come with them.

In the early years of my career, the challenge was balancing professional ambitions with raising a young family. Building a career in accountancy requires commitment and long hours, and like many working mothers I had to find ways to manage competing priorities while still progressing professionally.

When I started my own business, a new set of challenges appeared. In the early stages of entrepreneurship, it is easy to feel like you must do everything yourself. From delivering work for clients to marketing, systems, administration and planning, there is a huge amount to juggle. Learning that you cannot do everything alone and recognising when to ask for help, collaborate with others and build the right support around you was an important lesson in my journey.

More recently, life has brought a different set of responsibilities. As my mother has grown older, my role has shifted again, and I have found myself balancing work with supporting and caring for her. Navigating the emotional and practical demands of caring for ageing parents while continuing to run a business can be incredibly challenging, and it is something many people experience but rarely talk about.

These experiences have given me a deeper understanding that behind every business owner there is often a complex life being managed alongside it. Businesses do not exist in isolation from family, health or personal responsibilities, and resilience often comes from learning how to adapt as life changes.

The Outcome

Navigating these different stages of life has shaped not only how I run my business, but also how I support the people I work with.

Today, Beansprout Consultancy supports a growing community of business owners who want more clarity, control and confidence in their businesses. Having experienced first-hand the pressures of juggling family responsibilities, business demands and the expectation to “do it all”, I understand that business owners need practical support, not just technical advice.

What began as traditional accountancy support has grown into something much broader. My work now focuses on helping business owners truly understand their numbers, plan and make decisions that align not only with their business goals but also with the life they want to create.

One of the most rewarding parts of this journey is seeing people move from feeling overwhelmed and uncertain to feeling empowered and capable. When someone understands their finances, it unlocks confidence, opportunity, and growth. Alongside this, I am passionate about building community and encouraging collaboration between business owners. Running a business can feel isolating, particularly in the early stages, and creating spaces where people can share experiences, learn from one another, and feel supported is incredibly powerful.

For me, success is not just about business growth. It is about helping people build businesses that work alongside their lives, not at the expense of them.

Lessons I've Learned

If there is one lesson I would share with other women in business, it is this: you do not have to have everything perfectly figured out before you move forward. So often we wait until the plan feels complete, the timing feels right, or we feel fully confident. Progress rarely works that way. Growth comes from curiosity, learning as we go and taking the next step, even when the path ahead is not completely clear.

Building a business is rarely about one big breakthrough moment. More often it is the result of consistent small steps, resilience through challenges and the willingness to keep adapting along the way.

Over time I have also learned that growth often happens just outside our comfort zone. Some of the most valuable opportunities come when we are prepared to try something new, ask for help, or step into situations that feel unfamiliar. Becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable is often where the real learning happens.

International Women's Day is a powerful reminder of the strength, determination and creativity women bring to business and our communities. It is a privilege to be part of a network of women who are building, learning, and supporting one another as we continue our journeys.

END



International Women's Day 2026 – Legacy Story

Name: Jennie Bayliss

Business: Letterbox Cocktails Ltd

What My Business Does

I am the founder of Letterbox Cocktails, an award-winning, family-run cocktail brand based in Bedfordshire in the United Kingdom. We create handcrafted, ready-to-drink cocktails designed to be delivered through the letterbox, bringing a premium cocktail experience directly to people's homes. Our range includes cocktail gifting, corporate gifts, wedding favours, subscription experiences, and seasonal collections, alongside non-alcoholic options.

The idea behind Letterbox Cocktails was simple: great cocktails shouldn't be limited to bars or restaurants. They should be accessible, beautifully presented, and easy to enjoy anywhere. Our products are designed to feel like a small moment of celebration arriving through the post. What started as a creative idea quickly grew into something much bigger. Today we work with individuals, companies, and event organisers across the UK, creating memorable cocktail experiences for celebrations, corporate gifting, and special occasions.

Our brand has grown through a mix of creativity, determination, and a willingness to try things differently. We have developed a loyal community of customers, and, in November 2024, we were proud to win the Business Show VIP Launchpad business competition, which gave us both recognition and confidence that our idea had real potential.

Challenges I've Overcome

Building a business always comes with challenges, but launching and growing a drinks brand as a small independent company requires resilience from day one. One of the biggest hurdles was simply getting started in a competitive industry. The drinks market is crowded, and standing out requires more than just a good product. It requires a strong brand, clear positioning, and constant innovation. In the early stages there were countless practical obstacles: product development, packaging challenges, regulations around alcohol, logistics, and the financial pressures that come with starting a business.

Like many founders, I also experience moments of doubt. When you build something yourself, every setback feels personal. Delays, unexpected costs, and the uncertainty that comes with entrepreneurship can test your confidence by the hour! Another challenge has been balancing growth with staying true to our brand values. As opportunities appeared - whether through

partnerships, events, or corporate orders - it was important not to lose sight of what made the brand special in the first place: quality, creativity, and a customer-first approach.

There have also been the everyday realities of running a small business: long hours, constantly switching between roles, and learning new skills along the way. From product creator to marketer, negotiator, and strategist, a founder often has to wear many hats. Often the day doesn't turn out as planned either – something comes up that requires your attention and so the plan for that day is out the window. The feeling of overwhelm is constant and it can be hard to keep positive and keep going when you feel like that. Sometimes I just have to chuck it in the f*** it bucket and move on.

The Outcome

The key to navigating those challenges has been a combination of persistence, creativity, and collaboration. Rather than trying to compete with large drinks companies, I focused on building something distinctive. Letterbox Cocktails has become about the gifting experience, storytelling, and thoughtful design, not just the product itself.

Winning the VIP Launchpad competition was a defining moment. It validated the vision behind the business and provided the momentum to keep pushing forward. It also opened doors to new opportunities and partnerships.

Another important lesson has been the power of community and collaboration. Working with other founders, business owners, and partners has helped the brand grow in ways that would not have been possible alone. I know that I can always ask for help – and that is essential as I feel like I always need help with something!

Letterbox Cocktails continues to evolve. We are always reviewing and expanding our product range, developing new ideas, and exploring innovative ways to create memorable cocktail experiences for our customers.

Lessons Learned

If there is one message I would share with other women starting or growing a business, it is don't wait for perfect, or you will never move forwards. The journey is often unpredictable, and success is built through persistence rather than overnight breakthroughs.

Having a bad day? Never give up – just take some time out and start again the next day if you need to. Stay committed to your vision, trust your instincts, and surround yourself with people who support and challenge you in equal measure.

Find people who can be your safe space and allow you to share your problems, worries, stresses without judgement – this is one of my basic needs and knowing I can share problems and ask for help without people thinking I am doing a terrible job is essential to my wellbeing. Challenges will come, but they also shape the resilience and creativity that every entrepreneur needs. Building a business is not just about creating products or services.

It is about creating something meaningful, learning constantly, and having the courage to keep moving forward. And sometimes, it starts with a simple idea - like sending a cocktail through the letterbox.

END



International Women's Day 2026 – Legacy Story

Name: Justine Maroudias - Director

Business: Talk UK Telecom Limited

E: justine@talkuktelecom.co.uk

Resilience, Choices and Building a Business the Right Way

What My Business Does

Talk UK Telecom provides business connectivity solutions, including mobile, broadband, Phone systems and energy, built on strong relationships, trust and doing the right thing.

Challenges I've Overcome

At 16, I got on a train from the Lake District to London with no plan, no certainty, and no one knowing that I had left home.

My childhood was challenging and included experiences that no child should have to navigate. Growing up, I experienced circumstances that taught me resilience far earlier than most people.

I knew I wanted a different future for myself, and at 16 I made the difficult decision to leave and start again.

My dad lived in London, but I didn't know what I would be walking into. I remember standing at Euston Station, terrified and alone, wondering what I had done. That moment was a complete sliding doors moment in my life.

Thankfully, my dad did come to get me, but things didn't settle there either. When I refused to go to secretarial school, I was thrown out. So at 16, I had to find a job and somewhere to live.

I found an admin job, which could have been in any industry, but it happened to be in a telecoms company in Vauxhall called Millicom. That one decision changed everything forever.

I started as an assistant working on what was then called Cellnet, now O2, supporting dealers and learning the industry from the ground up. It was when I moved into sales that everything clicked. I loved it, the pace, the energy and the people. I worked hard, progressed quickly, and found my real strength.

By 19, I was running teams. By my early twenties, I was managing major accounts, including working with brands connected to Simon Cowell, I also handled the BBC's first live mobile phone contract used on the EastEnders set by Ian Beale, one of my little claims to fame.

Telecoms became more than a job to me. It became my career.

Years later, I co-founded my first business, DM Telecom, from a room in our house. We built it quickly, won strong contracts and grew fast. Like many growing businesses, we expanded rapidly and took on significant commitments. When a number of challenges hit at the same time, we found ourselves overextended.

We had a choice. We could keep fighting or make a difficult decision and start again. We chose the latter, sold the business and moved to our holiday home in Cyprus to rebuild.

That experience taught me one of the most important lessons in business: sometimes moving backwards is actually the first step towards moving forwards.

There, we started again. We built a lead generation company, employed around 30 people and ran two offices. But while it looked like a great lifestyle on the outside, it wasn't where we wanted to raise our family long term. So we returned to the UK and started again, this time buying into and building what is now Talk UK Telecom.

The biggest challenge of my journey came in 2018.

My ex-husband was also one of my business partners, and a situation arose that challenged values I was not prepared to compromise on, both personally and professionally. It led to some very difficult decisions, the breakdown of my marriage, and a major change within the business.

I had a choice. Ignore it and keep the peace, or stand up for what I believed was right, knowing the consequences would be significant.

As a woman, I believe you cannot ignore or accept behaviour that is not right towards you. You have to stand up for yourself and for others.

I chose to stand up.

As a result, he left the business.

What followed were more than four years of legal battles, pressure, difficult negotiations and repeated attempts to unsettle the business, damage relationships and undermine what we were trying to rebuild. It tested me in ways I never imagined.

The lesson was simple, but not easy: values only matter when they cost you something. It would have been easier to stay quiet. It would have been easier to avoid conflict. But I learned that protecting your integrity is worth the price.

Through it all, I stayed true to my values.

The Outcome

We rebuilt the business from the inside out, focusing on our people, our culture and our customers. We created an environment based on respect, honesty and accountability, and slowly things began to change.

Today, we have a strong team, happy customers, and a business that is growing organically and sustainably. More importantly, I feel like I can truly be myself, and I can honestly say I've never been happier.

Lessons Learned

Today, Talk UK Telecom supports businesses with their telecoms and connectivity, built on relationships, trust and doing the right thing.

As I've got older, I've spent more time reflecting on the experiences that shaped me and the people who helped me along the way. It's also made me passionate about supporting others who find themselves in vulnerable situations.

I am proud to support both Azalea, an anti sex trafficking charity, and Stepping Stones, a domestic abuse charity. Looking back, I can see just how differently life could have unfolded at various points in my own journey. Having witnessed and experienced difficult situations growing up and through life, I understand how important it is for people to have somewhere safe to turn, someone who believes them, and the opportunity to build a better future.

Both charities do incredible work helping people find safety, support and hope, and supporting them is something that means a great deal to me.

If there's one thing I've learned through this journey, it's that your character and your values are everything.

Businesses grow and change. Circumstances change. People come and go. There will be setbacks, disappointments and moments when the easier option is to compromise what you believe in. But in the end, all you really have is your character and integrity.

Doing the right thing isn't always easy, but it is always worth it.

I've also learned the power of resilience. I've been knocked down many times in my life, but my mindset has always been the same: you get knocked down, you take five minutes, and then you get back up and go again.

Every challenge I've faced has given me a choice. Leaving home at 16 was a choice. Building a career was a choice. Starting a business was a choice. Rebuilding after setbacks was a choice. Standing up for my values was a choice.

Those choices have shaped the person I am today.

My journey hasn't been straightforward. It's been challenging, emotional and at times incredibly tough. But I'm proud of where I am today, not just because of what I've built, but because of how I've built it.

And if my story proves anything, it's that where you start in life does not have to define where you finish.

END



Name: Beverley Dowsett
Business: Bond and Hope
E: BondandHope@outlook.com

What My Business Does

Bond and Hope exists for one simple reason: to give Small and Medium Enterprises the clarity, calm and confidence they deserve. We provide bookkeeping and payroll with a personal touch — the kind that comes from 40 years' experience in industry, we have lived it just like you are doing now! No judgement. No jargon. No fear. Just clarity, support, and the space to breathe again. We can help you put proper systems, budgets, and processes in place, explain the financial language that can feel overwhelming, and give you the confidence to make informed decisions. We know that when you pour your life and soul into your business, you deserve a finance partner who treats it — and you — with the same respect.

Challenges I've Overcome **My Journey in Focus**

"Four-eyes," they'd call out.

"Four are better than two," I'd say back.

It hurt, of course it did but it also made me tough. I was an only child — quiet, lonely but full of imagination and determination. Looking back, I realise I was destined for an administrative life long before I knew what that meant. I would sit for hours playing with a hairbrush as if it were a phone, reading out telephone numbers from the Yellow Pages as though I were running an office of my own.

My parents always had family around, so I learned to mix with all types of people and ages. For an only child, it was a gift although I learned early how to keep myself company it taught me how to observe, how to listen.

I didn't realise then that these quiet skills would become the foundation of everything I would later build.

When I left school, I stepped straight into an admin role. I'd had enough of school — endless copying from the board, the old-fashioned teaching style that never sparked anything in me.

The job was in an all-male company, which could have been intimidating but instead it became my proving ground. I was given autonomy, responsibility and trust — rare gifts for someone so young. I thrived.

The company grew, expanding into two other offices, including one in the US. I grew with it, taking on more and more responsibility, learning as I went along and discovering accounts too. I became the Company Secretary, Finance and Administration Manager and had a team helping me.

While working full-time, I studied for a degree in Accounts and Finance via distance learning with the ACCA. It was a huge undertaking, especially as the company went through a very bad cashflow period for years. I bore the brunt of the suppliers chasing their money. It was stressful, exhausting, and at times overwhelming but I pushed through and again learnt a lot.

Persistence had become my superpower.

Life shifted again when we moved counties and I found myself once more the outsider, struggling to make friends. Still, I kept going.

During this time, I got married and had children, moving to part-time work from home.

From the outside, it looked like stability. But inside, the cracks widened. Years of anxiety and panic attacks followed, slowly wearing me down until my health truly suffered. Eventually, I found the courage to ask for a divorce. It wasn't a moment of breaking — it was a moment of choosing myself, perhaps for the first time but carrying a lot of guilt too.

When I stepped back into full-time work again, also carrying the weight of my dad's cancer diagnosis, I remember crying in the toilet on my first day. I was terrified, anxious and convinced I wasn't capable anymore. Thankfully though I met some incredible lifelong friends there who supported me through my divorce. But life, as it often does, offered an unexpected turning point. While helping my then-15-year-old son look for a job, I stumbled across an advertisement for a Financial Controller. It felt like a sign — a doorway back to the career I had once loved. I stepped through it, rediscovering my confidence, my competence, and my sense of purpose. I rebuilt my life and my career from scratch, again.

But life had another challenge waiting. My daughter's health began to decline. EDS, POTS, and other conditions brought constant pain, exhaustion and frightening unpredictability. Dislocations, fatigue, days lost to symptoms most people couldn't see or understand. As her mother, I didn't hesitate. I realised I needed to be home more, to be present, to be the anchor she needed.

And so I adapted again.

The Outcome

From this turning point, my business Bond and Hope was born. I built a service rooted not just in skill, but in lived experience.

Today, I offer bookkeeping, financial management, and administrative support — but what I really provide is clarity, structure, and reassurance. I help people make sense of the parts of their business that feel overwhelming. I bring order where there is chaos, calm where there is stress, and understanding where there is uncertainty.

My work is not just about numbers; it's about giving others the stability I fought so hard to create in my own life and hand over the experience to help support and move their business forward.

Lessons Learned

The challenges I've faced were never small. They came in waves — loneliness, responsibility, stress, illness, heartbreak, reinvention. But each time, I navigated them with the same quiet strength I

carried as a child. I learned to bend without breaking, to rebuild without bitterness, and to grow without losing the softness that makes me who I am.

Today, I stand not as the lonely girl with the hairbrush and the Yellow Pages, but as a woman who has carved out a life defined by courage, compassion, and competence. My journey is not one of dramatic leaps, but of steady steps — each one taken with intention, resilience, and heart.

And although the road ahead will still have its challenges, I know now that I can meet them. I have already lived through storms and come out stronger. I have built a business, raised a family, survived heartbreak, and found my voice.

My story is not just about what I have overcome, but about who I have become.

A woman who sees clearly — four eyes or not.

END



International Women's Day 2026 – Legacy Story

Name: Viviane Vayssieres

Business: Chef & Butler

E: catering@chefandbutler.co.uk

What My Business Does

Chef & Butler Ltd was launched in 2023, originally with a clear focus on private events, corporate functions, and “at home” catering. That remains a core part of what I do today and it continues to be something I’m incredibly proud of.

From the very beginning, my aim has been to bring together great food and genuine hospitality, creating experiences that feel personal, warm and memorable. My French background naturally shapes my style — I like food that is beautifully prepared but never overcomplicated and service that feels effortless and welcoming.

Later in 2023, we were appointed catering partner for The Conservatory at Luton Hoo, delivering their full programme of Christmas events. That was a real milestone for us and confirmed that we were building something with strong reputation and trust.

In 2024, I took on a new challenge with my fellow directors when we took over The Woodyard at the Luton Hoo Estate. It’s a beautiful wooden building with so much character and we transformed what was originally a coffee shop into a brasserie-style destination restaurant.

Today, The Woodyard offers a blend of contemporary British and European dishes, influenced by my French heritage and a real focus on seasonal, high-quality ingredients. We are open seven days a week, with Sunday lunch becoming something we are now well known for and our monthly Steak Night with live music has quickly become a real highlight for our guests.

Challenges Overcome

Taking over The Woodyard in 2024 was both exciting and demanding. It required a complete transformation of the space, the offering and in many ways the perception of what it could be.

It wasn’t just about changing a coffee shop into a brasserie - it was about building identity, consistency and trust with both new and returning customers. There were a lot of moving parts: developing the menu, building the team, refining the service style and making sure the experience felt cohesive from day one.

Balancing this alongside our existing catering business required focus, resilience and a lot of hands-on leadership from all three directors.

The Outcome

What we have now at The Woodyard is something I am incredibly proud of. It has become a true destination and a place people come to not just for food but for the experience, the setting and the welcome they receive.

The space itself is intimate and warm, with honey-coloured wooden interiors and a relaxed elegance. We seat up to 55 guests and are able to host everything from breakfasts and lunches to afternoon teas, family celebrations and business gatherings.

We've also developed strong guest favourites, particularly our Sunday lunches and monthly Steak Nights, which combine food, atmosphere, and live entertainment.

We've invested in making the space as accessible and welcoming as possible, with parking, outdoor seating, family-friendly facilities and a carefully curated wine list that complements our menu.

At the heart of everything, I've stayed committed to using local suppliers wherever possible and I believe strongly that good food starts with good relationships.

Lessons Learned

If I reflect honestly, the biggest lesson for me has been about staying true to my values while being brave enough to grow.

Bringing my French influence into a British setting has helped shape something unique, but it has also required confidence — in my vision, in my standards and in the experience I want to create.

I've learned that consistency matters just as much as creativity, that people are at the heart of everything in hospitality and that building something meaningful takes time, resilience and trust in the process.

Most of all, I've learned that when you lead with authenticity and care, people feel it and they come back for it.

END



International Women's Day 2026 – Legacy Story

Name: Amanda Knight

Business: Cognisco and Principal Business Psychologist

E: aknight@cognisco.com

Curiosity, Courage, and the Balance Between Family and Career A Journey of Purpose, Resilience and Leadership

Balancing family and career has been one of the most defining and challenging aspects of my journey. In my twenties, at a time when many people focus on advancing their careers, I made the choice to step away from my trajectory in sales and finance to raise my family. Although this was not a step back, it was a pause that required me to rebuild my career later, drawing on determination, resilience and a renewed sense of purpose.

During this period, I reflected deeply on what motivated me. I realised that my lifelong curiosity about people, how we think, behave and make decisions—was more than just an interest. It was a passion I wanted to pursue professionally. This prompted me to study psychology at Luton University (now Bedfordshire), followed by an MSc in Applied Occupational Psychology at Cranfield University.

Alongside my return to education, my marriage came to an end. Oddly, experiencing these significant life changes simultaneously seemed to soften the impact of each; the challenges of rebuilding my career and managing personal upheaval almost balanced out, making the stress more bearable.

Returning to education while raising a family was not easy. It required discipline, sacrifice and support, and involved constantly juggling priorities. Yet it also brought a renewed sense of identity and direction. I am forever grateful to my mum and my sister for their encouragement and providing occasional after-school childcare, which enabled me to pursue my studies and ambitions while ensuring my children were cared for and loved.

What My Business Does

Today, as CEO of Cognisco, I lead a business dedicated to helping organisations make better, safer decisions about their people. We work with organisations, particularly in highly regulated sectors. Our work involves assessing competence, supporting workforce safety and helping individuals make better decisions in critical moments. By combining psychology, data and technology, we empower organisations to reduce risk, improve performance and foster environments where people can thrive.

For me, this work is deeply personal. It reflects my professional expertise and my belief in supporting people to be their best.

Challenges Overcome

Unexpected challenges have often arisen when least expected. Returning to work after time away required rebuilding my confidence and credibility. Progressing into leadership roles brought new pressures as I balanced responsibilities at work and at home. When my son was diagnosed with a chronic illness, I had to juggle priorities in ways I had never imagined, and the guilt of not being able to be everywhere at once was hard to bear. Later, my mum's cancer diagnosis and the rigours of treatment plans diverted my attention and energy, but I am deeply grateful for the unwavering support of my family during these demanding times.

There were moments of doubt and exhaustion, when keeping everything in balance seemed nearly impossible. Each challenge, whether expected or not, taught me resilience and adaptability.

On a personal note, I lost my mum in 2019 and, just last year, my sister Nicky. Both were incredibly supportive and proud of my achievements. I doubt they ever realised how much their encouragement influenced who I am, even as my career took a different route that combined both academic pursuits and commercial experience.

My mum, especially, instilled in us the importance of independence and courage. Her entrepreneurial spirit and resourcefulness were constant examples, showing me the value of hard work and creativity in everyday life, principles that have guided me throughout my journey.

Reflecting on their lives reminds me that success isn't about following a single path. Their encouragement and example taught me that creativity and passion can shape any journey, no matter how unexpected or challenging.

The Outcome

Over time, I progressed through roles at Cognisco, from Research Consultant to Head of Consulting, Director of Expertise and now CEO. What I value most is supporting others, helping leaders build and calibrate confidence, helping organisations manage risk and helping individuals perform at their best.

I am passionate about sharing information and insights to empower businesses, enabling them to build capability and confidence within their teams. By fostering a culture of knowledge-sharing, organisations can unlock potential and drive meaningful improvement across their workforce.

Leadership is not just about competence. It's about humanity, flexibility and creativity, and recognising that people bring their whole lives into their work.

Lessons Learned

Balancing family and career is not about perfection; it's about choices, trade-offs and persistence. Careers are rarely linear. They pause, pivot and evolve. And success is not just about professional achievement but about creating a life that reflects your values.

International Women's Day matters to me because I have been shaped by strong women. Sharing our stories helps others see what is possible, even when the path is not straightforward.

Final Thought

To any woman balancing family, ambition and uncertainty: your path does not need to look like anyone else's. It just needs to be yours.

END



International Women's Day 2026 – Legacy Story

Name: Pauline A Stewart

Business: Inspirati Ltd

E: ps@inspirati.org.uk

A Journey in Conscious Leadership and Sustainable Performance

What My Business Does

Inspirati was created fifteen years ago to support leaders, founders and teams who want to lead and work in a more intentional, grounded, and human way.

At the heart of my work is what I would describe as my dharma - a commitment to living and leading in alignment with values such as integrity, clarity, compassion, responsibility and right action. These values are not separate from the work; they shape how I show up, how I hold space and how I support others to lead themselves more consciously.

My work is about helping people make sense of complexity - in themselves, in their leadership, and in the organisations they are trying to build or grow. I work with individuals and teams who are often capable, committed and under pressure and who need space to think clearly, reset direction and strengthen how they show up in a way that feels aligned and sustainable.

Alongside professional development, I also support deeper reflection on identity, purpose and behaviour under pressure, helping leaders move from reactive patterns into more conscious, values-led leadership. This is where real change happens: when people begin to align what they do with who they are, especially when it is difficult to do so.

Through coaching, leadership development and facilitated conversations, I help people build clarity around decision-making, strengthen boundaries, improve communication and develop the confidence to lead difficult conversations well, without losing themselves in the process.

A core part of my approach is creating a safe psychological space where people can reflect honestly, be stretched thoughtfully and leave with practical ways forward that are grounded in both action and alignment and remain standing in the upright position.

Challenges Overcome

Much of my work both personally and professionally sits in the reality of navigating pressure and recovery.

One of the most significant challenges I have faced is understanding burnout and its impact on my body, health and overall sense of capacity. It has been a process of learning to listen differently to myself, to rebuild balance and to redefine what sustainable performance actually looks like.

That experience has not taken away my ambition it has refined it. It has made me more intentional, more aware and more grounded in how I approach both work and life.

In my coaching work, I also see how common these patterns are in others: high-functioning individuals operating under sustained pressure, often pushing through without space to pause or recalibrate until something forces change.

As an Accredited Burnout Informed Coach I regularly work with is helping leaders make sense of complexity without losing themselves in it especially when demands, expectations and responsibility begin to accumulate faster than clarity can keep up.

The Outcome

The outcome of my work is clearer, more confident and more grounded leadership with a stronger sense of sustainability behind it.

Clients often describe feeling more in control of how they think, respond and make decisions keeping the appropriate level of balance. Not because their workload disappears, but because their internal clarity improves and their patterns of reaction begin to shift.

They develop more practical tools for managing pressure, stronger boundaries and a more honest relationship with what they can realistically carry and what they need to adjust.

At an organisational level, this often leads to more aligned leadership, healthier communication, and teams that are better able to navigate challenge without fragmentation or overload.

For me personally, the outcome has also been about preparing for a broader role and one that includes continued leadership development work alongside evolving civic contribution. I remain confident and positive in that direction, shaped by experience but not limited by it.

Lessons Learned

One of the most important lessons I continue to see and live — is that making progress is not about pushing through at all costs. It is about awareness, adaptation and the ability to reset without losing direction.

Burnout taught me that capacity is not just physical or mental; it is relational, emotional and environmental. When any of those are out of balance, performance eventually reflects it.

I've also learned that clarity is not something people arrive at once, it is something they continually return to, especially under pressure.

And perhaps most importantly, I've learned that when people are given space to think properly and supported to lead themselves with more honesty and care, they are capable of rebuilding not just their performance but their confidence, identity and direction.

That is the space I now work in - with others, and in my own continued evolution.

END