

# My Business Growth Programme experience

**Phil Gibson**

**Owner, Reverberate PR**

Business Growth Programme  
September 2019 cohort.

**ced** Cranfield  
Executive  
Development

**"I'd definitely recommend the BGP. I had been to Cranfield before, knew Cranfield was great, and this programme was exactly what I was looking for. I would say that anyone running their own business ought to be doing it at some point."**



Years ago, when I worked in house, I did the General Management programme, so I was familiar with Cranfield and the way they work and had found that course beneficial. We'd started our own business back in 2007 and I guess we had just got to that point where I felt I needed some space and

external input to focus on what we were going to do with it. It had been growing steadily and I felt I was a bit trapped in working in the business rather than being able to focus on the business and move it forward. It had got too big for that to be the case. We're still only a small business, but I was neither doing the leadership role nor the 'doing' role properly really, so I felt that we needed to have a bit of a review. I went on the Cranfield website, came across BGP and thought: 'That's pretty much exactly what I need right at the moment'. As I say, I knew Cranfield, so I knew that the output would be good. I was

lucky enough to get a bursary from the Worshipful Company of Farmers, which covered a proportion of the fees.

**"It met my expectations – exceeded them probably. The teaching was great and exactly what I thought Cranfield would deliver."**

It was useful and stimulated a lot of thought, and the counselling groups give the opportunity to apply that learning to your own business straight away in a really meaningful way. Getting to know the others in your counselling group also meant that you could be challenged and indeed challenge others in a very safe, supportive way and I think that leads you to look at your business in a way that was much more objective than you would do otherwise, because you're too close to it.

I think the format works well. You come out of it with a) a huge amount more knowledge, b) having created the space to step back and really look at your business and what you want from it and where it fits in the market, and where the opportunities

are, and c) then an actionable plan saying 'having learned X and applied X, I can now do X'.

The common golden thread from all the people on the course was that we were all running our own businesses. So, you found that not only in the counselling groups but also in informal conversations over a beer in the evening or over lunch you would speak to people who would be talking about something in their business, and you would realise you have the same issue and that you're not alone. I think sometimes it can be quite lonely running your own business. Knowing that all those things that you worry about, other business owners are worrying about too, does help. It's very easy to get imposter syndrome a little bit and think: 'Everyone else appears to be doing this without any hassle and I'm here fretting about it'. You realise quite quickly that it doesn't matter what the business is; business is business, and people are people, and some of those challenges and opportunities are the same for everybody and you can learn from others' experiences and equally they can learn from yours because we've all come at it from a different place.

**"From a personal point of view, the main thing it gave me was the space to stop and think about the business and the challenge to really think about what we want out of it."**

It was beginning to feel a little bit like – and this is something that others echoed – that you had almost got over the initial few years of proving you could do it and then it had grown, but you felt a bit like you were almost running the business for other people. You sort of lost direction a little bit. I think what I gained most from BGP, personally, was just that space to actually sit back and really explore what we want from the business in the future, what I enjoy about my role and what I don't enjoy about my role, what I'm good at and what I'm perhaps not so good at, and really think about what is the best thing for the business but also what is the best thing for us and where I fit in that space in the future. That was useful.

I run the business with my wife and most contacts that I might speak to about the business are too close – either a family member or a friend – so they are always going to have a perspective that's skewed by that relationship.

**"What was really good about BGP from a personal point of view was that it was other people in the same boat. You were able to ask why they were doing or thinking something and any comments they made were impartial."**

I came out of it with much more clarity about what I want out of the business – I don't mean financially, I mean in the round – what do I want to spend my time doing? Where do we want

the business to go? What do we stand for, even? I also have more motivation, having had the time to stand back and take a breather – not that BGP is a breather by any means – away from the day job you were able to think. It reinvigorated me.

We're a service business, ultimately, in consultancy and we're deadline-driven. In PR and marketing, it's always: 'We need this now'. I think in that environment it is always really difficult to justify, in my head anyway, booking time out to work on the business in business hours. So, inevitably, the kind of discussions we had about the business were sat in the evening with a cup of tea when really you don't want to think about work at all, or when we were on holiday. I never gave myself permission to let the leadership of the business and direction of the business have a space I guess, because we were busy and I never felt I could turn around to the team and say: 'Look, I can't help you with that deadline. I know you're under pressure, but I've got something else to do and it's important'. A big thing for me was realising that the value I add to the business now, and the security I provide to my employees, is in driving the business on. My contribution is beyond simply doing client work and, when I do client work, I need to be picking and choosing where I can add the most value over and above someone else in the team. So, whilst I will still 'do the doing' – write that press release or whatever – really, if there's someone else in team that can do that more efficiently, that's not where I can add the most value to client accounts. It should be helping them set their strategy and all those sorts of things. With newer clients we've taken on since BGP, we are changing the way the relationship is structured with members of the team, and so my relationship with new clients is different to how it is with long-standing clients, where I'm perhaps a bit more involved.

**"I think the main thing was having real clarity over what we stand for, what we do and what we don't do, and having a clear plan for the next five years that can underpin our decision-making."**

I feel more empowered now to get on and make decisions. We did our business plan review in December 2019, and three months later we were dealing with COVID and lockdowns, and I think it gave me the confidence to make decisions faster than I probably would have done in the past, which meant that we were able to adapt and recover quicker.

From a business point of view, it's given us clarity of purpose and clarity of what we're here to do. We had a business plan before, but it was a bit rough and ready. We always budgeted annually, but we didn't take it out to 3 or 5 years so whilst in the back of our mind there was always that feeling that we want to grow, we didn't have clarity on it. Now we have a five-year plan; we know where we want to be in five years, and I think that has helped us in our decision-making and in just having a bit more energy in the business and moving it forward.

I remember when we started BGP and they challenged us to save the cost of the BGP programme by the end of it. Certainly, within a couple of months we had paid for it just in terms of focusing more on costs and charge out rates and getting a bit more financial discipline into the business. I wouldn't say we were bad before, but it definitely sharpened us up. I think the main benefit financially has been that we have a clear plan. With COVID, it's been hard to quantify, but we kept moving forwards and because we had a plan, and we knew what we needed to achieve and had perhaps got more confidence and decisiveness, we were able to adapt to what came at us in COVID and work round it. I'm confident we reacted to that in a way that was much better for the business than we would have done previously. I'm very confident that if we hadn't done the BGP at that point, we wouldn't be in as healthy a position today having been through the last 12 months of COVID.

We did a growth accelerator programme a few years ago, which was a Government-funded local mentor scheme to help encourage growth. It was good but, in hindsight, we didn't deliver or follow through on some elements of it in the way that we perhaps should have. So, I think there was a little bit of scepticism in the team when I said I was doing the Cranfield course. But the reality is that it has given us a clear focus and we're delivering on our plan. I think the team has realised that we're serious about it and I think it's changed their views a bit in

terms of how we communicate, because we refer back to the plan, we're delivering the plan, and some of the things we've put in place I think they will see a benefit from.

I'm certainly more confident about the future. Particularly after the year we've been through, I'm confident we can navigate what may come along, both positive and negative. I'm pretty optimistic. We've got a much clearer picture of where we fit, what our customer base will be in the future, what we offer them and equally what we don't do and where we don't fit. That's been useful, and I think has resulted in, certainly personally and I think across the team as well, more motivation because we've got that clarity of purpose. I think having a clear plan and knowing what that means for the business and for us individually has been great because we have something to aim at and we're not going to be deviating from it. If something happens, we'll find a way around it.

**I'd definitely recommend the BGP. I had been to Cranfield before, knew Cranfield was great, and this programme was exactly what I was looking for. I would say that anyone running their own business ought to be doing it at some point.**