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# A DAY IN THE LIFE

**Linda Jane James** gave up a lucrative career in management consultancy to become a practicing artist and creative agent. She tells Penelope Rance about how she's learned to value time over money

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBIN PALMER



“There’s a lot of procrastination” says Linda Jane James of how her working day pans out



### HOW I CHANGED CAREER

I didn’t have a maths O-level or a degree. I’d studied part-time for a HNC in business studies, then did a foundation course in accountancy. When I joined KPMG I was the only non-graduate entrant, which was quite intimidating. But then I discovered I was on the same pay as my peers: that was a fundamental moment in my career, the idea that you might be treated equally, despite coming from a different background.

I joined the KPMG IT consultancy in London and stayed until 1997 before becoming a freelance management consultant. I soaked up the whole of what London had to offer, drawing courses, theory courses... I used to go to the Tate at lunchtimes. Then one day I came back from a stressful client, and bumped into an ex-KPMG partner who asked how I was, and I said: “I’m going to become an artist.” I did a five-year part-time fine art degree.

I also work as a creative agent, using the arts to get kids to learn maths, science, geography, so it perfectly combines my art career and my consultancy work. The arts is suffering cuts, but Wales, for now, understands that creativity is going to give them their future economy. It’s helping young people to capitalise on their

creative abilities. I’m trying to get head teachers to see that you have to get kids to be entrepreneurial, to be creators, not passive consumers.

### MY RESPONSIBILITIES

As an artist, I take all the responsibility for what I decide I want to contribute to the world. I’ve got a voice, and I’ve gained skills and experience in being able to express that voice, but what do I want to say? It feels like a big responsibility to say something that people might find of benefit.

People are really struggling with austerity, so how do I justify sitting in a beautiful place in the middle of Wales, doing what I love, when there are people who can’t afford to eat? I satisfy that by using my creativity in order to support kids, and anybody who wants help to find a voice, and experience the world in a different way.

As a creative agent, I am given two or three schools over two years to manage by Arts Council Wales, and engage with the head teacher and senior leadership team on their development priorities. I take responsibility for how I direct and guide the schools. We are trying to educate the next generation of kids and having to fight for creativity to be taken seriously.



**“I’m trying to get headteachers to see that you have to get kids to be entrepreneurial; creators, not passive consumers”**

#### **MY TYPICAL DAY**

It depends if I’m being the agent or the artist. Being the artist is harder because there’s always some sort of admin that gets in the way. I tend to prioritise that over art, which is not a good thing. I read around my subject and I write a lot. Once I’m in the swing of things, I’ll go straight into the studio. And once I start I don’t tend to stop.

My studio’s at home. My husband is an artist as well, and if it’s a nice day we’ll have breakfast outside, let the chickens out, take it quite slowly. He likes to go for a run, but I like to go in the evening, and then I’m too busy working and don’t go. If I’m in the thick of painting I’ll keep going until 6pm or 7pm. I’m running classes and we have people come on courses so part of the day is getting ready. In the winter I spend more time in the studio because it’s dark, but in the summer, it’s lighter and I want to move around a lot more, getting out, spending time in the garden with the materials, growing things, wildlife.

#### **THE CHALLENGES I’VE OVERCOME**

My philosophy is to live the richest life you can on the smallest amount of resources, so I am a make do and mender. Do I make enough money to live on? This year’s been hard, it’s the first time I’ve had to manage an overdraft, which is humbling, but I’m entrepreneurial, I know how to make opportunities happen.

As a creative agent, a lot of head teachers think you’re just some arty person. The government have given them a bit of cash, but they’ve got to put up with this person coming in. But I am that auditor, that critical friend, saying: ‘This is 15 grand of taxpayers’ money and we are going to use it well. This is not just another initiative, it’s going to make a difference.’ We don’t get that amount of money very often, and it’s crucial to these kids’ lives.

#### **INDUSTRY QUIRKS**

Art doesn’t fit in the standard economic model. I’m managing my costs, setting them against tax, making a loss because the selling part is complex.



**“I can’t charge much for an art class because my local gallery will give one for free. Part of me wants it to not be free so we stand a chance”**

You have to speculate to accumulate; trust the process and yourself; allow the time it needs to happen, and forget about making a profit in the short term. I can’t charge much for an art class because my local gallery will give one for free. Part of me wants it not to be free so that we stand a chance. But a lot of people do not have the money, so it’s a difficult one.

It’s a weird transactional space. How do you price it? By what people are prepared to pay? The kind of people I would like to own it can’t afford it. I can’t apply an hourly rate to my making - a small piece would cost £2,000, but there is a market price that doesn’t equate to time.

**HOW THE ACA HELPED MY CAREER**

I’m not phased by putting in funding bids or knowing how to make a business case. Because of that fellow artists see me as someone to align with. I can get head teachers to take me seriously. I had meetings with senior directors of companies when I was 25 years old; I can challenge schools’ senior leadership teams to open up to greater involvement and see that we are using the arts as a catalyst for change. I couldn’t deliver my creative agency well if I didn’t have those skills.

**THE HABITS OF AN ACCOUNTANT**

Process has been a massive thing for me, that’s what I give to schools. That comes from being an auditor; it’s helped me to understand business, to run my business, to look at what people’s processes are, and how to make change by intervening. Change management and transformation stems from everything an accountant does. I’ve been the poorest I’ve ever been and yet I feel the richest, the happiest; I’m making the biggest difference to people’s lives. If you put the right ingredients in at the beginning, something good will emerge. ●

James loves what she does, but describes the economics of making a living from it as occupying “a weird transactional space”