



**RSM
ALUMNI
TELL**



WHAT IT TAKES TO BE AN ENTREPRENEUR

Starting your own business is the stuff of capitalist dreams, with multitudes leaving behind the comfort of their salaried positions each year to attempt it. These RSM alumni are lucky enough to be able to call themselves successful entrepreneurs – and to share with our readers the secrets to their success.

Text: Stephen Hoare, Rebecca Morris. **Photography:** Alice Kalis

Few occupations radiate the glamour and seduction of the successful entrepreneur. While the company executive is oft-viewed as the button-down conformist, the entrepreneur is the haloed maverick: the creative, strategic genius who spotted an opportunity and had the energy, guts and brainpower to strike out on their own and turn it into reality.

It's an image frequently maintained and fuelled (conveniently but also sincerely) by the crowd-rousing rhetoric of those who've done it. As infamous Dutch entrepreneur, Jan Baan, puts it: "You need to have that attitude: the attitude that sometimes you will give up your holiday, give up your wealth, give up your

time ... to pursue your life's dream. An entrepreneur is a person for life."

This mythic representation of entrepreneurship is two-part allure and two-part deterrent for those considering taking the leap. We interviewed a group of RSM alumni who have gone on to pursue successful ventures after leaving RSM about the reality of entrepreneurship: what they've achieved, how they achieved it, and what it demanded. With entrepreneurship coming in so many different flavours, from consultants and freelancers to company directors, their stories portray a range of diverse qualities that, in their words, paved the way for their success.

A man with dark hair, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, is sitting on a black office chair at a large, dark wood conference table. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The room is elegantly decorated with a large, multi-tiered crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. In the background, there is a large painting on the wall and a television set on a white mantelpiece. The lighting is warm and focused on the man.

BLOOD & SWEAT

Name: Bas Verhart, MScBA

Age: 36

Company founded: Media Republic

Years as an entrepreneur: Twelve

Snapshot bio: Bas founded Media Republic, an agency that sells advertising in digital new media, in 2002. Founded with four partners and a capitalisation of 200,000 euros, Media Republic turns over 5.5 million euros, employs 44 full-time staff, and has a blue chip client base that includes Heineken, Phillips, KPN Telecom and Tommy Hilfiger.

Why start your own business? Five years ago I saw that new media was going to be a strong growth area. I wanted to develop a company that combined entertainment content with interactive technology.

What did it take to get off the ground? Blood, sweat and tears. Hard work 24/7, plus a couple of lucky breaks such as when we landed our first big client, Heineken.

Has it paid off? For me it's really exciting to build something from scratch. And the company's done really well so far.

Biggest challenge faced? Two years ago I changed the management structure and separated from my founding partners, that was challenging.

Best advice? Get the right people on the bus. Hire the best possible people. And so long as you are confident in your own abilities, you can lead a business.

No. emails answered in a day? Around 200. I try and answer them all even if it's just a one word answer like 'OK'. If you flag them and do nothing you might as well delete them.



VISION

Name: Sukhbir Jasjua, MBI (Class '98)

Age: 34

Company founded: ITpreneurs

Years as an entrepreneur: Seven

Snapshot bio: Sukhbir launched educational e-learning and software portal company ITpreneurs in 2001. He and his partner invested 120,000 euros. The business now turns over 10 million euros, employs 120 people, and has offices in twelve countries.

Why start your own business? Working in a training and development role for a multinational company I realised the model could be improved. I wanted to offer an anytime, anywhere learning experience that used quality interactive e-learning and gaming technology.

What did it take to get off the ground? Vision. But also perseverance; creativity; ownership. We had a good start-

up team with a mix of complementary skills. Despite that, it took us five years to stabilise the business model.

Has it paid off? Every moment. I have the best job I could ever want. The past seven years have been a powerful experience of self-discovery and personal growth.

Biggest challenge faced? Building and influencing company culture. As soon as a company gets too big to be overseen by one person (say, thirty staff) then company values start to play an important role.

Best advice? Avoid knee-jerk reactions in a tough situation: there will be another day tomorrow.

Air miles logged each year? This year I will log more than 150,000 air miles.

How did your RSM degree help you achieve your goals?

It was the most influential learning period in my life prior to starting ITpreneurs.



PASSION

Name: Simen Schimmel & Johan van Vulpen, MScBAs (Class '02)

Ages: 33, 32

Company founded: Greetz

Years as entrepreneurs: Six

Snapshot bio: Simen and Johan founded online greetings card company Greetz in 2002 with a bank loan of 100,000 euros. Based in Rotterdam, Greetz now employs 45 staff and has sent over 4.5 million greeting cards in four years. It recently launched in the UK and has plans to expand into France, Germany, the U.S. and Japan.

Why start your own business? An enterprise we started as students at RSM demonstrated that there was a huge demand for personalised messages delivered to people's doors.

What did it take to get it off the ground? It took hard work

and enormous passion. We breathe that passion now, and with us the whole team.

Has it paid off? The business is growing at a rate of 100 per cent a year, so yes. We are really enjoying it and the energy we get from the people around us.

Biggest challenge faced? People, definitely. In a fast growing business you need to keep a balance between managing resources and growing the business. You really need the right people in place.

No. emails answered in a day? 50-70. Only some are all important with attachments that require careful reading.

Air miles logged each year? Masses. This week we are in London, then Armenia, Germany, Holland, Sweden and finally the U.S.

Most inspirational figure? Johan, my business partner. We started this together.



EXPERIENCE

Name: Frank van Ormondt, EMBA
(Class '01)

Age: 44

Company founded: Frank van Ormondt
Advice and Education

Years as an entrepreneur: All my life

Snapshot bio: After 20 years as international business manager at Philips, Frank started his own consultancy company in 2006. Frank van Ormondt Advice and Education offers strategic advice and training workshops in developing new products, strategies and business start-ups.

Why start your own business? Enterprise is in my blood – it's my passion. I like to help clients solve complex problems.

What did it take to get it off the ground? My experience and networks. These are the basis of my company and what I bring to customers.

Has it paid off? Definitely. Running my own business has given me freedom. Part of the enjoyment comes from being able to choose my own assignments – those that I find challenging and interesting.

Biggest challenge faced? My biggest challenge lies ahead: how to grow this one-man company.

Best advice? Master the art of doing three things at once, and be good at everything. It is not enough to be good in your own narrow field, you need to be able to manage your company, run your networks of customers and suppliers, and market yourself.

How did your RSM degree help you fulfil your ambitions? My background is in engineering, so my MBA gave me the commercial skills and knowledge I needed.



BELIEF

Name: Maria van der Heijden,
Parttime Opleiding MSc/drs.
Bedrijfskunde (Class '00)

Age: 47

Company founded: Women on Wings

Years as an entrepreneur: Seven

Snapshot bio: Maria launched Women on Wings in September 2007 with 150,000 euros of her own income from a communications and change management business. Her aim is to create a million jobs for women in India and to be entirely self sustaining within a three-year period.

Why start your own business? I was inspired by an exchange programme involving experienced managers and entrepreneurs. I realised that women in the West have all the opportunities in terms of education and I wanted to share my knowledge and give Indian women and their children a better future.

What did it take to get off the ground? It's about believing in something: having a mission and a vision. You also need to be flexible in how you work with partners.

Has it paid off? Women on Wings has created 300 jobs for women in Rajasthan working in crafts. I find it incredibly rewarding.

Biggest challenge faced? Formulating a healthy long-term business model. I am setting up a company alongside Women on Wings as a vehicle for business in the West to create money for volunteers to share knowledge in India.

Best advice? Be flexible in how you achieve your goals.

How did your RSM degree help your ambitions? It inspired me to fulfil my dreams and to take chances.

PERSISTENCE

Name: Nanda Schilperoort, MScBA

Age: 38

Companies founded: NAN Holding, NAN Retail and NAN Label

Years as an entrepreneur: Seven

Snapshot bio: Nanda opened her first fashion outlet for business women in Rotterdam in 2002. NAN Label was launched in January 2007. Now the leading brand for business women, NAN Label distributes to more than 50 retail outlets in Holland.

Why start your own business? When I was working in London I saw there were a lot of stylish choices for business women that weren't available in Holland. I had worked in fashion retail and knew the market.

What did it take to get off the ground? Persistence. You have

to really believe in your idea and persevere to get things moving.

Has it paid off? It has paid dividends in terms of my personal development. Starting a new business is a steep learning curve and develops your knowledge enormously.

Biggest challenge faced? Cash flow management. As a fast-growing company we need to invest in our label, our shops, our magazine, our people and our systems.

No. emails answered in a day? Not too many. I prefer using the phone.

Air miles logged each year? I fly often to Milan and Paris for buying and inspiration. We are expanding our collection into Germany, Belgium and France.

How do you unwind? I spend time with my three children: Maartje, 6, Nicky, 4, and Bob, 2. They take my mind off things.





INSIGHT

Name: Vincent Kouwenhoven, PhD
(Class '91)

Age: 44

Company founded: eVentures Europe

Years as an entrepreneur: Ten

Snapshot bio: Vincent founded venture capital fund eVentures in 2000, just before the dotcom bubble burst. Vincent's business survived the crash and he has since been involved in ten internet-based start-ups, four of which have been exited already.

Why start your own business? I was inspired by the rapid development of the technology, business models and new ways of working connected to the internet.

What did it take to get off the ground?

When I was working for telecoms firm KPN as strategy manager, I could see the technological opportunities of the web. Later, being director of Nolan, Norton & Co. (KPMG's strategy boutique), I realised the vast business opportunities in internet-based business. This combination of technological and business insight proved invaluable in starting up my own company.

Has it paid off? Being able to create your own team, set your own agenda and being accountable for your own bottom line is highly stimulating.

Biggest challenge faced? The dotcom bust hit almost as soon as we had launched, followed by the general recession post 9/11. We cut costs, sold assets, killed non-profitable activities and stabilised the business within six months.

Best advice? Set your targets high but be realistic about what you can achieve. Start-ups always take longer and cost more than you think.



mxi mendix
NO CODE. JUST BUSINESS.

PEOPLE

Name: Derek Roos, MScBA (Class '06)

Age: 28

Company founded: Mendix

Years as an entrepreneur: Three

Snapshot bio: Derek and fellow RSM alumni Derckjan and Roald Kruit set up software company Mendix in 2005 while still students. Initial capitalisation came from pooling their student loans. An innovative product ensured rapid growth and a solid corporate client base. Today Mendix has 40 employees and offices in Rotterdam and Boston, the U.S.

Why start your own business? We spotted a gap in the market. There were no tools available commercially for business analysts to build their own software for automating business processes. We designed our own and started the company.

What did it take to get off the ground? A really strong belief in our core vision and customers prepared to take a risk with a new venture. And you need to partner with the right people.

Has it paid off? Yes. I get a tremendous amount of energy from working in a great team and seeing the company grow and our vision becoming a reality.

Biggest challenge faced? Managing our growth rate while continuously aligning the internal organisation is our biggest challenge. Given the fact that we are growing 300-400 per cent annually it is hard to standardise our systems.

Best advice? Stay loyal to your vision no matter what others say. If you move into the unknown, people tend to pull you back into familiar territory. ■

ENTREPRENEUR'S BOOKSHELF

When we asked each of our alumni entrepreneurs which book every entrepreneur should read, their responses were diverse – as was to be expected. What was unexpected were some of their choices. Veering from the purely practical to the sublimely spiritual, each of the books provided something special – from inspiration to entertainment – to those we interviewed.

GOOD TO GREAT BY JIM COLLINS (COLLINS, 2001)

**Recommended by Derek Roos
(MScBA alumnus)**

Excerpt: “The good-to-great leaders did not pursue an expedient ‘try a lot of people and keep who works’ model of management. Instead, they adopted the following approach: ‘Let’s take the time to make rigorous A+ selections right up front. If we get it right, we’ll do everything we can to try to keep them on board for a long time. If we make a mistake, then we’ll confront that fact so that we can get on with our work and they can get on with their lives.’”

THE DISCIPLINE OF MARKET LEADERS BY MICHAEL TREACY AND FRED WIERSMA (BASIC BOOKS, 1997)

**Recommended by Sukhbir Jasjua
(MBI alumnus)**

Excerpt: “A decade’s worth of technological advances have repriced the value of time and, in turn, reset customers’ expectations. Customers now penalise suppliers that infringe on their time,

whether through delays, mistakes, or inconveniences. People are tired of waiting around for service. They fell head over heels for the fast-food, drive-through lifestyle long ago. Now they find even that’s too sleepy. Today’s customers demand operations that are airborne, on-line, and real-time. ‘Soon’ is not the answer they want to hear when they ask ‘When?’”

ATLAS SHRUGGED BY AYN RAND (RANDOM HOUSE, 1957 - ORIGINAL DATE)

**Recommended by
Vincent Kouwenhoven (PhD alumnus)**

Excerpt: “It was a sunburst of sound, breaking out of hiding and spreading open. It had the freedom of release and the tension of purpose. It swept space clean, and left nothing but the joy of an unobstructed effort. Only a faint echo within the sounds spoke of that from which the music had escaped, but spoke in laughing astonishment at the discovery that there was no ugliness or pain, and there never had had to be. It was the song of an immense deliverance.”

THE SEVEN SPIRITUAL LAWS OF SUCCESS BY DEEPAK CHOPRA (NEW WORLD LIBRARY/AMBER-ALLEN PUBLISHING, 1994)

**Recommended by Maria van der
Heijden (PTO alumna)**

Excerpt: “Self-power, on the other hand, is permanent, because it is based on the knowledge of the Self. And there are certain characteristics of self-power. It draws people to you, and it also draws things that you want to you. It magnetises people, situations, and circumstances to support your desires. This is also called support from the laws of nature. It is the support of divinity; it is the support that comes from being in the state of grace. Your power is such that you enjoy a bond with people, and people enjoy a bond with you.”

THE POWER OF NOW BY ECKHART TOLLE (NEW WORLD LIBRARY, 1999)

**Recommended by Bas Verhart
(MScBA alumnus)**

Excerpt: “The word enlightenment conjures up the idea of some super-human accomplishment, and the ego likes



'The attitude that you carry around makes an incredible difference in your life. It can be a powerful tool.'

to keep it that way, but it is simply your natural state of felt oneness with Being. It is a state of connectedness with something immeasurable and indestructible, something that, almost paradoxically, is essentially you and yet is much greater than you. It is finding your true nature beyond name and form."

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING BY JEFF KELLER (INTERNATIONAL NETWORK TRAINING INSTITUTE, 1999)

Recommended by Simen Schimml (MScBA alumnus)

Excerpt: "For me, attitude can be defined in one word: life. The attitude that you carry around makes an incredible difference in your life. It can be a powerful tool for positive action. Or it can be a poison that cripples your ability to fulfil your potential. Your attitude

dictates whether you are living life or life is living you. Attitude determines whether you are on the way or in the way."

INFLUENCE: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSUASION BY ROBERT B. CIALDINI (WILLIAM MORROW AND COMPANY, 1984)

Recommended by Frank van Ormondt (EMBA alumnus)

Excerpt: "A well-known principle of human behaviour says that when we ask someone to do us a favour we will be more successful if we provide a reason. People simply like to have reasons for what they do. [Harvard social psychologist Ellen] Langer demonstrated this unsurprising fact by asking a small favour of people waiting in line to use a library copy machine: 'Excuse me, I have five pages. May

I use the Xerox machine because I'm in a rush?' The effectiveness of this request-plus-reason was nearly total."

LOSING MY VIRGINITY BY RICHARD BRANSON (THREE RIVERS PRESS, 1999)

Recommended by Nanda Schilperoort (MScBA alumna)

Excerpt: "They say that a dying man reviews his life in the final seconds before his death. In my case this was not true. As we had hurtled down toward becoming a fireball on the Atlas Mountains and I thought that we were going to die, all I could think of was that if I escaped with my life, I would never do this again." ■