



Imogen Mitchell, Guy Mitchell Design

Enterprise mentoring for artisan tile company

Imogen Mitchell approached the IOEE on the search for a mentor just two months ago. She was soon matched up with Barclays Bank Leadership Performance Coach Ann Ratcliffe, who enjoys mentoring small business owners as a contrast to the corporate professionals she works with day-to-day.

Imogen Mitchell and her husband Guy run two businesses from their home in Redcar. The first, [Guy Mitchell Design](#), launched in July 2015 and is an outlet for Guy's high-spec, handmade ceramic tiles. The second, newer business is an online store called [Arcane Interiors](#), which sells carefully selected designer homewares. Mentor Ann, who is based in Sunderland, mentors small businesses voluntarily, often applying the skills she's honed in her working life as a business coach, as she explains:

"There's a real crossover between my job and my mentoring. It's the ability to help people solve problems for themselves. Rather than me coming up with the solution, which would be the wrong thing to do within someone else's business, I'm adept at asking the questions that lead a mentee to solving issues independently."

We asked Imogen why, having already successfully set up their tile design business, when it came to Arcane Interiors, she and Guy decided to enlist the help of a mentor. She said:

"We'd never done anything like Arcane Interiors before and we just wanted a bit of guidance. Specifically, we were looking for a better approach to time management because it's a lot to run two businesses simultaneously."

Charlotte Marshall, who is Creative Industries Advisor at Redcar and Cleveland Council, put Imogen in touch with IOEE Mentor Manager Paul Harper, who in turn matched her up with mentor Ann Ratcliffe. The mentor and mentee met for the first time just six weeks ago, halfway between their respective bases in a coffee shop in Dalton Park. In just two sessions, Ann has already made a difference to Arcane Interior's future outlook, as well as equipping Imogen with specific skills to strengthen her position when she's negotiating with agents for Guy Mitchell Design. Imogen says:

"Ann has given me some really good tips on how to improve the way I deal with challenging business situations. We work on practical strategies together and Ann's approach is very structured, which is something I appreciate. One example of a technique she's given me is when dealing with people and making arrangements over the

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phone. Now, I will always follow up calls with a detailed email to add extra clarity and summarise in writing what's been decided and what action will be taken."

Ann has also enabled Imogen to take the emotion out of potentially stressful business situations and present as professional a front as possible to customers, agents and suppliers alike. Imogen has been able to apply the insights she's gained through her mentoring sessions to successfully carry out a piece of work supplying bespoke handmade tiles for an exclusive Italian restaurant in Covent Garden – Margot. This high-profile interior design project has involved a number of parties, from architects and designers, through to agents and other creative businesses. Despite this, Imogen has found herself able to operate with confidence, applying her newly honed communication skills to properly represent Guy Mitchell Design's interests.

Arcane Interiors was, in part, set up to provide an appropriate outlet for Guy's high-end, stylish ceramic tiles when the couple realised that neither home-craft style sites like Etsy, or mass-market sites like Ebay and Amazon would allow them to reach the correct customer demographic. Marketing is absolutely key to any ecommerce business's success, so it is one of the areas Imogen and Ann intend to explore further during their mentoring sessions. Imogen says:

"We're just starting to talk about how to boost SEO [search engine optimisation], key words, back link strategy, and generating good PR stories, which is essential to online selling. Although Ann's not a marketer per se, because she's so well connected she's been able to contact people she knows to advise us, which is great."

Good mentoring is always rewarding for the mentor, as well as the mentee and Ann is no exception. For her, mentoring small businesses enables a deeper understanding of the enterprise landscape and the issues businesses are facing so that when she's coaching blue chip business leaders she's better equipped with a broader perspective. However, there's also a more personal satisfaction to be had from the process. She says:

"I find it fascinating and I love the buzz of being able to help somebody, particularly small businesses. It's great to work with people like Imogen and Guy because those are the enterprises where you can make the biggest difference."

Imogen and her husband feel extremely positive about the future of both of their interconnected businesses, which, thanks in large part to the mentoring Ann has provided are getting stronger every day. Imogen says:

"Aside from our own products, we have friends and professional contacts who make some incredibly beautiful homewares so we've incorporated those on Arcane Interiors too. Our network of suppliers also means we can offer bespoke versions of various products. The range is small but more and more people are approaching us and asking us to stock their goods. Our reputation is growing!"