

‘If they  
succeed,  
I succeed; if  
they fail, I fail’

Dr Anna Naumenko, Chartered  
Psychologist and Psychometrician,  
on working with start-ups.



**F**irst email of the day is from my client ‘Tom’, an accountant by day and entrepreneur by night. ‘We would like to market our services so that they become a must-have for companies rather than something they do for “fun”. We need to alter people’s habits... similar to how Steve Jobs got us to use tablets, or Edward Bernays (Freud’s nephew) got women in America to start smoking. Only, we will implant some healthy habits.’

I check my email archive – I last heard from Tom eight months ago. But his idea dates back seven years, when he decided to do a Master’s degree in a new field of Nutrition and Dietetics. He graduated and registered his company, and then two years later he contacted me to get advice on a psychometric tool to use as part of his innovative assessment of corporate wellbeing. Tom is determined to get his first paying client within the next four months.

Another client of mine is ‘Phoebe’ – a serial entrepreneur. She started an IT company nearly a decade ago and saw it grow rapidly from two to 50 employees in just under three years. She could have enjoyed her moments of success, but instead she sold the company and started a new venture. It didn’t go all that well, so after another three years she quit and went to teach at the University of Edinburgh. In parallel, she was doing some consulting work, all to earn enough money to start from scratch once again, this time on a brand-new idea – an app for mechanics, inspired by her husband’s racing hobby.

Most of my clients are like Tom and Phoebe – they are creative, strong-willed, unstoppable. They have vision and a genuine desire to make this world a better place, and they are bold enough to try. Some, like Tom, are trying to keep their office work along with a new business. Some, like Phoebe, invest all their time and much of their savings into their new endeavour. Interestingly, quite a few of my clients are immigrants trying to build international businesses while living in new countries – a Frenchman in China, an Egyptian in Finland, a Ghanaian in the UK. I suppose they all share some kind of global spirit and global ambitions.

So why do all these extraordinary people turn to me?

### **What I offer**

I am a quantitative psychologist specialising in the design of psychometric tests, surveys and assessment exercises. My clients mainly want me to develop bespoke tests for them in order to enhance or twist their service offering.

The range of topics I have worked with is quite diverse. For example, with Amir and Dylan we worked on some tools to bring together innovative and cohesive teams to improve performance and learning. Other clients were interested in custom-made tests for career guidance. I have also designed quite a few selection tests for different kinds of professionals: from global leaders to blue collar workers, nannies and governesses, not to mention product managers, salespeople, junior and middle managers and administrative assistants.

Most days I’ll be researching topics and trying to think how scientific knowledge can be applied in real-

world solutions. For example, today, I wake up to about 50 open tabs in my browser – I am reading about marital satisfaction, partners’ compatibility and how different personality traits and their constellations contribute to that. My client Oliver is developing a chat-bot for people wishing to improve the quality of their marital life and my task is to embed some kind of psychometric assessment

into the app. Oliver doesn’t have enough data to teach the chat-bot to talk naturally or allow users to enter free text all the time, so we decided that the chat-bot would suggest certain answers, like a multiple-choice questionnaire. So I’m looking for some super-brief, yet reliable measures of personality traits, and for research backing up the use of more natural responses rather than ‘Agree completely’ all the time. It turns out there are not many studies available, which means we would need to invent something ourselves and conduct some research of our own. So, I start thinking of the possible research design...

### **Like-minded people**

I do most of my work from home, and my friends often ask whether I feel lonely or bored. My clients live in 15 different countries and come from a whole range of backgrounds, so I see myself as part of a

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global community – it is fascinating and enriching to observe how differently people from diverse cultures communicate. With some of my clients, I have formed relationships that are probably more close, personal and meaningful than the ones someone would normally have with colleagues at work. I guess this happens because most start-up founders do not have many colleagues or partners either – to both sides our relationships seem quite unique, and we cherish them more.

As for boredom, the entrepreneurs' enthusiasm and spirit is infectious. Most clients have only a vague idea of what they want to get from me, so they give me a lot of freedom (which comes with a great deal of responsibility, of course). I decide on the structure and all other particularities of the instrument I am developing; I advise them on how to trial and implement it and how to market it along with their service offering. For them, I am not an employee or simply a service provider... I'm a partner, a confederate who shares their values and co-creates their product. I end up feeling that their venture is mine and if they succeed, I succeed. Of course if they fail, I also fail.

### Learning to fail

At the beginning of my career, my clients' failures posed a real problem for me. It felt devastating to see great ideas die; to watch their creators agonise over attempts to resuscitate something that is apparently dead. At the idea's deathbed, I often lost contact with my 'unsuccessful' clients. I know that some of them eventually went back to their not-any-longer-exciting jobs; some managed to secure another round of funding; some got back to me a few years later with completely new ideas and businesses.

However, my clients' experiences were only one part of my own 'grief'. Their failure often meant that my own work was not being used and I could not get feedback on how well I did or where I should improve. I started feeling rather unsuccessful. It was as if whatever I started never worked out, whatever I touched always turned to stone. It is widely known that 90 per cent of start-ups fail, and this was my rate exactly, but every failure felt like my personal and professional disaster. One after another. It took me some time to realise that those failures should not have become a measure of my success. To see where I stood I needed to look elsewhere.

### Getting professional feedback

Many people think that having worked in an organisation, the most difficult thing about going solo would be to maintain good discipline and control of yourself. But you get the hang of that, and even learn to manage the anxiety of not having enough clients next month. The most difficult aspect for me was lack of feedback. So I became a part of an action learning set (ALS). It's a structured method enabling

small groups of people to address complicated issues by meeting regularly and discussing their problems and challenges. Our ALS consisted of six independent occupational psychologists trying to build their own practice or business; all of us felt the need to discuss some professional issues we were facing, and had no colleagues or seniors to turn to. We met every six weeks for nearly two years. That gave me numerous insights and helped to build my confidence.

Another point of reference for me has been the British Psychological Society and the broad psychological community it represents. I felt much more confident when I was accepted as a Test Reviewer of the Psychological Testing Centre. If the BPS thought I was competent enough to evaluate the tests submitted for review by renowned publishers, it meant something. Along with other community activities, I gained a sense of belonging to a wider psychological community – and that much-needed feedback.

### Rethinking my services

As I saw more and more ventures, I started coming across some repeating patterns. When a new client Jason walked in and asked me to develop a game-based assessment, I knew from the start that it was not feasible for his small team... in one of my previous projects a huge international company failed to implement a rather basic game scenario I designed. Jason, however, was keen on his idea and reluctant to accept my advice. Writing a game scenario for him meant good money for me, but talking him out of it meant good conscience. So I insisted. Eventually, I persuaded Jason and introduced him to a larger company developing game-based assessments; he became their sole distributor in Malaysia and that suited him well.

I learned my lesson too – on occasions where I am more competent than my clients I should be providing *advice and guidance* instead of *research and development*. I am now thinking more and more of the ways to consolidate my vast experience in different areas: to bring everything together, re-use and scale it, maybe write a book or develop an online course.

I started freelancing 10 years ago, because I wanted to combine professional career and childcare. My children have grown and I have asked myself several times whether I wanted to go back to an office. I had a couple of opportunities, but I never pursued them. Sure, there would be structure, stability, security. But where's the thrill? It's like looking at the street out of a double-glazed window, all the street sounds muffled by the soundproof walls. I like my work with all its ups and downs. This is life and I interact with it directly, without any intermediaries. My clients make me feel alive and energised. Maybe, I am secretly waiting for a start-up that becomes a huge success... or maybe I will have to start my own venture.



## CENTRE FOR CHILD MENTAL HEALTH UPCOMING CONFERENCES 2020

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## Introducing the Psychological Government Programme

There is an appetite in government for a 'new way of doing things'. However, while the need to bring people (and their psychology) into the policy-making process is well understood, there is a lack of clarity regarding how this can be done beyond the surface level. People are the units of policy making. And policy makers are people too. Ultimately, understanding and supporting the people designing policy, affected by policy, and delivering policy is key.

Members are invited to apply for an exciting opportunity to play an active role in developing the Society's upcoming Psychological Government programme. The aim of this project will be to work with our members to develop scalable and psychologically-informed solutions to policy-making whilst promoting the BPS as the primary voice of psychology in Government and beyond.

To help the Policy Team implement this programme, we are seeking to appoint up to eight members to join a Steering Group for an initial period of 18 months starting in January 2020. We are looking for members who can demonstrate innovative approaches and real-life experiences of policy-making. We are particularly interested in hearing from academics, researchers and practitioners who can help us understand questions of group dynamics, leadership, norm setting, effective questioning, evidence evaluation, behaviour change, and public policy processes.

While every effort will be made to ensure the group has a range of experience across domains, contexts of research and practice, we are keen to hear from practitioners and academics who have direct experience of working in or with government departments. We also would particularly welcome BAME and LGBT+ applicants who are currently under-represented on Society working groups.

To apply, please send a statement of interest of up to 500 words outlining your relevant knowledge and experience along with any examples of any relevant research or professional practice to George Wilkinson at [george.wilkinson@bps.org.uk](mailto:george.wilkinson@bps.org.uk).

Statements of Interest must be received by 30 January 2020. There will be a maximum of six SG meetings throughout 2020. Steering group members may also be invited to participate in relevant external events throughout the year.

To schedule an informal conversation about the programme please contact [saskia.perriard-abdoh@bps.org.uk](mailto:saskia.perriard-abdoh@bps.org.uk).



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