

FESTIVAL of INNOVATION

A SUMMER CELEBRATION of IDEAS, VISION & CREATIVITY



INSPIRATIONAL INNOVATOR INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT – REBECCA PICK

This interview took place during summer 2020 as part of SIE's Festival of Innovation. The video of the interview can be watched in full on the Scottish Institute for Enterprise's Youtube Channel. (youtube.com/scottishinstituteforenterprise).

[Music]

QC (Quentin Cooper)- I'm Quentin Cooper and by chance or by choice you have stumbled on the 5th part of the six-part imagining the future interviews, which are part of the Scottish Institute for Enterprise's Festival of Innovation. Now for those of you who have stepped this way before, welcome back very glad to have you with us. I should have another real treat for you today and for those of you are new around these parts, the format is extremely simple, we have found somebody we think will be inspirational and we're going to have a candid conversation with them. It will last about 20-25 minutes, then we are going to have time for your questions and comments, of which I hope there will be many. Our theory is that we will benefit from their insight, hindsight and now it will be all right on nights this week. It is my great pleasure to be joined through the Internet by Rebecca Pick founder and CEO of Pick Protection. So, Rebecca welcome, where are you joining us from today?

RP (Rebecca Pick) - Thank you very much Quentin, delighted to be here! I'm joining you from North Yorkshire today.

QC- Marvellous and that's where you hail from isn't it?

RP- Indeed. Although I have been living in Glasgow for the last eight years.

QC- Right, so listeners will hear an interesting hybrid West Coast- North Yorkshire accent going on. What is it we are tearing you away from? What would you be normally doing in this lockdown world?

RP- Today I have got a board report that needs to go out tomorrow, so as soon as I finish this I am going to be writing up all of our sales, everything that's been happening in the month and making sure that it looks good enough to go to the board.

QC- Right, we might come back to you about your board later. But we should probably start by being clear what Pick Protection is and what is it you're protecting who from?

RP- Pick protection is now an employee protection company. We provide solutions for employees that work alone or work in dangerous situations; so it could be like a housing office officer that goes to somebody's premises; it could be a taxi driver that's working alone. There's a whole host of employees and every nine minutes in the UK an employee is attacked whilst working alone.

QC- So is it mostly is it mostly the physical because obviously there's lots of different kinds of dangers? You can be in a toxic work environment; you can be dealing with hazardous chemicals; you can have a boss who pushes you to work ridiculous hours and you can have you know physical assaults these are all dangers of different kinds.

RP- We help with the physical side if there is a threat of attack or even medical side of it. You could have a stroke, or you could have a heart attack; we will help protect and get you the right response that you need. Through different technology applications, hardware devices, wearable devices you can press a button and we can get the police there. We can record all the dialogue; we can do proactive safety things to make sure that you're okay at certain points in the day. It is all about making sure people are completely safe.

QC- It is worth saying you are doing pretty well at this, you made it onto the Sunday times 100 Maserati list of Top Innovators and Disruptors for last year?

RP- Yeah, that was incredible to be recognized it was one of the top 100 most innovative and disruptive companies in the UK and I think that is because our approach of keeping employees safe is different. When we started we looked at the market and we asked health and safety managers: what do you like? What do you not like? What are your challenges? We found everything that was wrong with this, and how can we fix it? We took their feedback and created what they wanted.

QC- Which is a very important and recurring point is taking account of what the customer actually wants rather than what you might think the customer might want. I want to ask you your exact basis because I work alone most of the time because I am a journalist. Am I the kind of person you are after as a potential client?

RP- If you think that you need some extra protection for peace of mind to keep yourself safe then absolutely. In terms of our standard customer, we do a lot with local authorities. As I said housing officers, social workers and its companies that have got a duty of care to their staff and which is anybody.

QC- This is a cunningly double-edged question, I'd imagine a lot of people like me are in that position and maybe we could do with that but it never crosses our mind. It's not like you're the dentist and people will come to you if they've got a toothache, people might have needs that you can help fulfil, might have problems that you can help deal with but it might not even cross their mind that you even exist as a service. How do you find those people?

RP- To be honest we've been laser focused in our approach of who is our customer and who do we want to target and those people generally are local authorities, housing officers and charities. They will know that they have a legal responsibility to do something about it. This makes it a lot easier and then it is building a case of why you should work with Pick Protection.

QC- Right, so it is not necessarily, although it's about helping the individuals, it's not the individuals who'll probably be your first point of contact it'll be the organization they work for. Okay let us wind it back and we kind of know where you're at now or nearly where you're at now. Let us talk a little bit about how you got here. When you first thought I want a protection company what came first running a company or protecting people?

RP- So never in a million years did I think I would start a business. I knew I loved business but didn't think I was the type of person that would start one or would run one. It all came from an idea I had when I was at Uni: an unfortunate incident. A girl was attacked. She was my neighbour, she was taking her bin out to the bin shed late at night and there was a guy hiding in there he dragged her in she was shouting and screaming and she heard people walking past and nobody stopped to help. It made me think we should all have something on us, always that we know if we activate, we will get a response. At first, I thought what I can get to protect me my flatmates and looked at what was on the market; there is those alarms where you pull a pin and they make a noise. But if nobody's there to hear it or like

those people, if people just walk past, they don't care they're useless. So I had an idea of an alarm that was linked to a centre where somebody would actually know that you need help and make sure that you get that help to your GPS location. That was the idea. I did not think "I'm going to start a company, I'm going to make a living off this it was"; I think there's a real gap in the market for a product like this.

QC- You're just reacting to a situation in your immediate environment and you started off thinking just go online and find the product. If you had found it you would have bought it for say £15.99 and that would have been it. But instead, you couldn't find anything that exists and you knew people needed this, I'm somebody who needs this, I'm going to do something.

RP- Yep absolutely. Taking it step by step: doing the market research and then figuring out from a technology perspective how would that work. It is these three of circles: technically feasible, is it commercially viable and is it desirable by more than just me that wants it. It started ticking those boxes and thinking actually to pro to bring this to market I'm going to have to set up a company as a by-product of the whole thing.

QC- But that's a major shift because you're going from kind of proof of concept of a possible design to try and come up with something and thinking in terms of I am going to try and develop a device that it will be part of what is offered by a company that will look take this bigger view. That's quite a major shift?

RP- Yeah it was. I think going through Strathclyde university was good, I'm sure all the other universities offer just as much support and reaching out to the Scottish Institute for Enterprise and other organizations. As you've got an idea of what you want to create but creating a company can be really foreign but reaching out to all the different organizations that can help you, they do help you with a template business plan and there are all these different sources of funding even if you've just got the idea.

QC- And it is worth stressing that you weren't doing engineering at Strathclyde, you were doing marketing and enterprise which I think you got a first for in the end. You went on to MIT to do Entrepreneurship and Enterprise. You were thinking along these lines but as you said you had difficulty envisaging yourself as being the person at the pinnacle of a company.

RP- Yeah absolutely, I thought I wanted to go into a cushy marketing job because I did not think I had the self-confidence. I knew I loved business but just did not think it would happen but as I say, between the university, all the support organizations there is so much help there. Anybody can do it if you have got an idea of what you want to achieve.

QC- It is possible and that's the hardest part isn't it? It is not limiting yourself by thinking oh if this is a good idea somebody would have had this already surely something else is out there. I wrote a book once simply because I wanted to buy that book, and nobody had written it so I had to write it myself. Still available from all good bookstores. Now you get to this stage and you begin the next stage presumably, you've got to get some funding how did you go about that?

RP- You know it was really not as difficult as it is as it sounds to get the first bit of funding and again a big thank you comes for me to the Scottish Institute for Enterprise because they gave me my first two and a half thousand pounds. That was through keeping an eye on their social media and I saw a competition for new ideas and enter this and I did I got the funding and I think they still have similar competitions and funding available. That two and a half thousand pounds meant that I could get prototypes developed, I could work with a designer, I could have something tangible. But the biggest thing it did was it gave me one, credibility in other people's eyes because I've been given £2500 somebody thinks it's good but also, for me personally getting that kind of confidence boost that I've been given £2500 there's something in that. When you get the credibility and that kind of confidence you can pitch for investment in front of investors and say I won this competition, and this is my prototype. It all helps to build that momentum and before I knew it I had the funding I needed to give it a real shot.

QC- It's the classic case isn't it, when nobody will touch you, nobody wants to be the first person to touch you but you've now got that first bit and it builds confidence in you. It builds their confidence in you and you've actually got something you can actually physically show them rather than saying this is an idea in my head and as soon as you've got something tangible people respond more to that. So you began to build up and I think you managed to raise what was it about a million pounds in terms of investment?

RP- Early on yeah. The first one was a £60000 investment and then from there we have had a bit more so we're just over two million now.

QC- Right two million. Let us go forward so now you have managed to make this progress; you begin to identify that the initial people you thought might be your customer base might not be the only ones. You realize there is a lot of people working for local authorities etc. This is a key point, when people get started on an idea, they are to use your terminology “laser focused” on a direction. That is where they are going com hell or high water but by doing this you are passing by a nice wide-open door of opportunity that might take you somewhere else, somewhere better. It can be easy to not go through that door and you have also got to persuade everybody else who is involved hang on we're not going there, we're going there.

RP- Absolutely for me this was the biggest lesson that I would wish I had learned sooner; is do not become so laser focused to your initial idea because chances are it is not right. It is so important that you test it with customers and just because you want it and you think it is great does not mean everybody else is going to. Your friends and family might be really encouraging and say that is fantastic but really until you've got somebody that you've never met that is willing to put money down for it the idea is just not proven and you just need to be really open to testing it and receiving feedback. That's not what you want to hear and for me, I initially had an idea of a wearable alarm that would clip on a bra strap under your clothes so girls could wear it on a night out. I absolutely loved this alarm, this is what I got printed and prototyped and I loved it loved the design I thought it was the best thing since sliced bread and I spent a fortune on mould tooling to get the product actually developed. But now we do not sell that. That's not a thing because even though it sounds great it just wasn't going to sell well commercially and if I'd have done more market research to start with and listened to the market sooner I would have saved so much money and we'd have been further ahead with the products that actually are doing well.

QC- As they say in the film business, sometimes you must kill your babies. I love this, I have invested so much time in it, it means so much to me, but it is the wrong thing I'm going to move on.

RP- Yep absolutely and I think it is not just me as well. I've seen for example; Oh I've been doing this for 60 years now and the businesses that started out at the same time or around when I started out are doing well. But those businesses have now got totally different ideas, they might have the same core mission and vision, but it is a different product, or it works in a different way. All the people that stayed so focused on you know their initial idea they are the ones that have flamed out they have not made it.

QC- But isn't there a balance to be struck here because inevitably when you are working on any particular area you get bogged down in details and then something else comes along and it's bright and it's shiny, it's attractive and you think oh let's go over there. You cannot be always bringing new ideas to the table otherwise your board's going to go hang on here Rebecca.

RP- Absolutely. So we have this discussion at every single board meeting because there is so much that we could do and with our technology. Every time I speak to a new customer, they're saying well I've got this problem can you help with that and I'm like yes we can. We could bring this back to the board, do this here and that there. But by doing this you make a product that does not meet any customers requirements fully. It's such a fine line between innovating, adapting and listening to customers but yet also making sure you've got the focus on where it needs to be to do well. For me I think the right process that we did get to eventually was to pick a target market really focus in on it. I had a great example given to me at MIT of your target market which was, somebody saying oh my target market is teachers, my product is a homework marking software and they said right well it's teachers; but is that university lecturers? Is it primary school? is it high school? They said right it's high school. Okay is it French teachers, German teachers, Maths teachers? Turns out that maths teachers and science teachers are more likely to take on new technology so it's maths and science teachers. The biggest requirement is within the S1 and S2 area so they'd focus their market from general teachers to this specific set of teachers and in doing that that's what we did. We said it's health and safety managers of local authorities, nailed that persona, nailed what they wanted and we've now got a product that really meets their needs and can now start to bring in the extra functionality based on that.

QC- That is very interesting. Now bring us up to speed to the start of the year where was Pick Protection at? At what point did you want your name in the title?

RP- Year one

QC- Right, you just think it's a good name isn't it

RP- Yeah, can't get married now right

QC- Always had your name in the title. So take us back start of the year, where were you at before we get to obviously the disruption caused by Covid?

RP-Touchwood. We were really lucky, we raised money at the start of the year before the pandemic really kicked off but we had big plans because we'd just taken on three new sales guys: one in Ireland, one in Wales and one down south in England. We thought right this is it, this is the big push get the marketing behind us this year we're really going to go for it. But Covid happened. So, in terms of the poor sales guys a lot of the people they've been trying to reach out to have been on furlough, so it's not been the start that we expected. A lot of the organizations that we were talking to have had to put their plans back a year but on the flip side we've actually had organizations that have said because of the pandemic we need something right now to protect our employees so we've had a lot of people come to us. I have to say we have been one of the lucky businesses. Some things have not gone to plan but we have made up for it because we are getting a new breed of loan worker. Everything is changing and they will need special requirements as the Health and Safety Executive released guidance stating that people working from home need safety and protection.

QC- Absolutely. So are you actually coming up with new stuff specifically for a post Covid world?

RP- We have got quite a lot in the development road map and some of it does fit quite nicely in with Covid, some of it doesn't and we're going to stick to what we said to customers we're going to provide. I mean there's definitely new opportunities and you can see it across the different sectors now that there is a lot that we could be doing that we need to think about as well but generally you think it's not it's going to be not too disruptive as far as you're concerned it might even possibly generate some new ideas for you. I mean I think in terms of budgets for employee protection we have seen an uplift at the moment but what's going to happen longer term we don't know. What we do know though is that the requirement certainly isn't going to go away.

QC- As you say it's going to grow so we definitely need to think about what else we can be doing, how else we can keep people safe, how broad can you get? I mean you're focused on the UK but can you go further afield?

RP- This is one of the things that I'm really excited about. I put a paper to board about this, it is slightly off target but it's a cracking idea. We can do travel risk management for anywhere in the world. This is from customer feedback but when employees can travel again if there is an incident such as a terrorist attack we can figure out in real time what's happened and where that employee is and alert the employee themselves.

QC- As well as doing all this, you sit on, I'll try and get the title right, the Prime Minister's Small Businesses Scale-ups and Entrepreneurs Business Council, we've got the title vaguely right?

RP- Yep bang on!

QC- Good, I'm amazed that's the hardest part of this job. Now there at this time surely you must your skills must be called upon more than ever what kind of advice what kind of help are you offering?

RP- The prime minister business council is an interesting one because it is about getting people who are experiencing the problems to feed into how the government helps. It is things like is there something the government could do to help small companies protect the patents that they have got, which we know is a massive problem. All the innovators will have great ideas and they'll patent it or they might get funding for patenting but if a big company comes along and just copies them they don't actually have the funds to be able to protect that idea. It is us, small businesses, seeing if we can leverage the government in some way to protect these patents. That is what the council is doing and if anybody listening to this has got any specific problems or ideas let me know and I can feed it into the next one because it's about taking the problems that we've got and seeing what the government can do.

QC- okay last question from me before I open it up to the questions and comments that are coming but I was also wondering specifically if I was a small business or a start-up right now who is struggling in the wake of Covid are you working on this in this group to actually try and help them?

RP- That's been something that's been left to Boris so we've not been invited to participate in that at the moment.

QC- I am so sorry to leave it on the phrase "left to Boris". Right okay Fiona Godson is with us, she is the Chief Executive of the Scottish Institute for Enterprise she has been collecting

and collating your questions and comments and I want to try and squeeze in as many as we can: Fiona?

FG (Fiona Godson)- Thank you very much Rebecca you've been answering some of the questions as they've been coming through which has been great it's almost like you've been reading their minds. I think that there's three I think that I'd like to ask so the first one I think was actually taking you right back to testing your idea and customers right at the beginning because it obviously makes complete sense but it always sounds easier in theory than it does in practice so when you were starting out how did you go about that?

RP- The first idea that I had was the personal alarm that would clip on a brass strap and the target market was female students initially so I did a survey to them. I literally created a survey monkey account sent it to all, which was a mistake my friends, and got the first bit of feedback and then sent it out wider and got them to share it and it's amazing the difference between what your friends say and then what people that you don't know say. From that I learned that people in general thought it was a great idea but in general would not pay for it. That was the first great piece, so then it was thinking who could pay for it: parents care about safety so another survey again going out to people that I didn't know to say this is the product what do you think would you pay for it how much and got a whole heap of different responses turns out parents do like the idea would pay for it. That was enough to get me started to be able to prove that I'd spoken to people and got a good idea of what the market wanted.

FG- Great thank you. Another question around advice, you said that the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Scotland is well developed but is there actually an issue with getting too much and too diverse advice?

RP- Yeah I mean you can never get too much advice, I think it's always really good to get as many opinions and feedback in and then you know you take it in and you think well what do. I think based on all these different opinions and I definitely went to as many places as possible I did converge SIE, Strathclyde, Scottish enterprise and found it actually all really complementary because it does people say the same thing and you think well if so many people are saying the same thing test your idea validate it you know it must be right. That I think was really good but where I think it can be a little bit too much is all the different application forms for competitions and things where they all ask you slightly different questions so it's all very time consuming and if you don't win you've got nothing to show for it but you spent a lot of time on it so I think if that could be more joined up if they asked the same question so at least you can copy and paste that would be great.

FG- Absolutely and final question from me, you talk about how credibility and confidence being so important so have you got any words of advice for people that are still at the very early stage of thinking about an idea about how they can build credibility and confidence?

RP- Good question, I think talking to as many people as you can is a really good step so the more people that you tell your idea to the more you will gain confidence in it and different networking events. I know they're probably more virtual right now than in person but the more people that you meet the more feedback that you're getting and different insights you sort of develop your idea and you're thinking a bit further. I would say just start talking to people, start telling people what you're doing and then taking it just day by day. What's your plan to move it forward just a little bit today and what you want to do by the end of the week rather than thinking you know in three years' time I want a business empire. You develop the confidence to do what you need to do this week.

FG- Thank you that's all from me Quentin back to you.

QC- Thank you very much. I think just briefly a follow up on that but there is an argument isn't there Rebecca, that you hear these people say don't have a super slick pitch for a not super slick idea, make sure it's your idea that you've worked on to get in shape and if your pitch is a bit stumbly that's going to be less of a problem than if you actually pitch something brilliantly and you get to the next stage but you haven't got something that's ready to go there ?

RP- Yeah absolutely. I think over the time I've seen some really slick pitches and people that come across as I've pursued this and they're I think the people that probably received the less help and the least funding because people look at them and think they're probably going to be difficult to work with they're probably not going to take criticism well. I think if you've got somebody that genuinely says right this is my idea, this is what I want to achieve pitches as best they can but is really open to saying well how can I make it better? how can I best achieve what I want to achieve? They are the people that absolutely everybody loves to work with get stuck in with and give them every chance of success.

QC- Brilliant! I've had a great time talking to you and I've enjoyed working with you. Can we please thank Rebecca for her Entrepreneurial 'pick me up' and thank you to Fiona for

fielding your questions and to yourselves for taking time out from whatever it is you're supposed to have been doing right now. Next week at 12 30 in what I think is the ultimate, last and final one of these innovation conversations for now, you never know Netflix might pick us up for a new series. I will be talking with Isatou Njai co-founder of the Baobob based beverage drink biotic. So have a last long cool sip of summer start-ups and effervescent entrepreneurship with Isatou Njai and me on Thursday the 27th at 12 30 and you can register absolutely free through the SIE website and I hope to see you then! Cheerio!