



Selling Happiness – Season 4 – Episode 3 - Alison Cooper – The WorkJoy Jam

Beth Stallwood: Hello and welcome to the WORKJoy Jam podcast, I'm your host Beth Stallwood, founder of Create WORKJoy. Today I am joined by the wonderful Alison Cooper and when I first spoke to Alison, I heard about her background and her history and all the incredible businesses that she has formed and developed and scaled. Her career is just such an interesting story in itself and one of real work joy actually, but the real version of work joy. Which is through those challenging moments, through the mountains that you have to get over, through the things that go wrong. Through the businesses that suddenly aren't there and don't work. How that visionary, being able to have the resilience and the tenacity to keep going, to start something new and to build it from scratch. I absolutely loved this conversation with Alison and I hope you do too.

Beth Stallwood: Welcome to the WORKJoy Jam, I am really excited today to be joined by the fabulous Alison Cooper, and rather than me tell you about Alison, I'm going to hand over to you Alison. Tell us a little bit about yourself, who you are and what you do.

Alison Cooper: Okay, well thank you Beth for having me on your wonderful podcast. My name is Alison Cooper and I am co-founder and CEO of a company called Alicia J Diamonds, which is a bespoke diamond and gem jewellery concierge service. Really, I suppose our ethos focuses on that we are all unique so our jewellery should be unique too. So, we help and guide people to have beautiful pieces of bespoke jewellery made for them, and I'd like to think at the end of a consultation with us, they very much understand the four C's of diamonds and gem stones and would be confident in the future to make an informed decision if they were buying jewellery somewhere else. I think we really like to educate people on what type of stones that we're putting into their jewellery for them. So, I now live in the UK but I, for many years, lived in Germany. I grew up in Birmingham and went to Huddersfield Polytechnic as it was then and did hotel management and catering. During my A levels I'd worked for a Holiday Inn in Birmingham and I didn't really know what I wanted to do, if I'm absolutely honest. I did actually want to study geology, but I think my dad thought I was a bit crazy wanting to do geology and put me off that. I think his exact words were, 'I don't know really love, if that's what you want to do.' So, I did definitely always had a penchant for gem stones, definitely when I think about it.

Beth Stallwood: It's like you've come full circle.

Alison Cooper: Yes, definitely because mum said to me the other day, she said, 'Darling, don't forget there's boxes of rocks and fossils in the loft that one day you'll have to come and get.' So, I used-

Beth Stallwood: I love that.

Alison Cooper: I spent many years as a teenager in quarries. I think one of my birthdays my dad bought me a helmet and a hammer because I used to like going around quarries knocking out fossils. Yes, I used to get very excited about that, you've just reminded me actually, I'd forgotten all about that. So, anyway, we digress.

So, I went to-, did hotel management and catering and during that time worked for Holiday Inns and when I was at polytechnic they sent you off on industrial placement. I was very adamant that I was not going to a hotel in the Lake District where most of my class was sent. And I went to see my lecturer and said, 'Well, I've done A level French, English and German, so can I go and work abroad.' And he was like, 'Well, we don't really have the budget Alison to go and visit people abroad.' But anyway, I persuaded them and off I went to Germany. We went to work for Holiday Inns in Germany, met my then future husband and after I finished my degree, went to live in Germany. I arrived in Germany, my husband was in fashion so he decided that it would be a good idea for me to work in fashion. That lasted about six weeks.

Beth Stallwood: Really?

Alison Cooper: Yes, we were not going to be in business together. I spent, I don't know I think I used to look at how he used to do things and try and say, 'Maybe we do it this way.' But he wasn't changing, so I decided that it was either the relationship stayed and I had to go and find something else to do. So, first of all I taught English for a few years and I did have a little residential English school where people would come and stay for a week or a weekend. Predominantly business people really who wanted to improve their English. Then that was very time consuming and used to take a lot of time and nights and then I had a child. After I had Robert, I decided that teaching English was probably not going to be-, lead itself to bringing up a child as well, because I just worked such long hours and weekends and that. For about two years I'd looked at the German snack market and absolutely thought, 'How dreadful is the food on the motorways in Germany.' You used to get these dried bread rolls with cold-, they were called Frikadellen Beilagen. But they were like cold hamburgers and bread rolls and I used to think, 'Oh, how do people eat this?' At the time, the is now the beginning of the 1990s, the sandwich market in Germany was-, in the UK was absolutely booming, I think it was a £1.4 billion market they were anticipating.

Pret a Manger were going from strength to strength and we had the-, I think they were called the yuppies, weren't they? They were all running off, getting coffees and buying sandwiches. I thought, 'What a great idea.' We're only in Germany, the UK is not that far away. I'm going to import sandwiches. So, yes, that was my-, probably my first entrepreneurial step into the entrepreneurial world. I went to the UK and found out-, researched all the big sandwich manufacturers. I did find a big one that produced one of the major retailers and we used to import in three times a week. The sandwiches had production plus three days, and we used to do three chilled deliveries into Germany a week. I used to have lots of sleepless nights, because we used to have to get the Euro Tunnel across.

Beth Stallwood: Yes.

Alison Cooper: If there was bad weather or something, but quite quickly I picked up some big contracts. We had sandwiches on some of the Lufthansa flights that were going out to the states. German Rail and big contract caterers where we would put them in the vending machines. Yes, and then, so that was successful, did freshly squeezed orange juice as well. Then one day utter-, I don't know, dismay, I woke up to, it was the time when we had BSE.

Beth Stallwood: Yes.

Alison Cooper: In the UK and I'd got-, you could see that it was a UK manufacturing plant that were manufacturing the sandwiches. There was a radio programme in the morning that put it on discussion, 'We've

taken the sandwich today from a major bank in Frankfurt out of the vending machine.' Yes, so they put it on radio and said, 'Could it be British beef?' So, sent them a lawyers letter really quickly and then they ignored that, and then it went onto TV in the evening, they zoomed in on the logo. Probably about 48 hours later, I literally lost all of my clients, because the sandwich manufacturer in the UK produced for a big major UK retailer. They weren't bothered it was under my brand, they were bothered about supporting my business. They were just worried about the retail business that they did for the major UK retailer. That was it, so yes, it was-, that was-, I built a business and lost a business very quickly. But I had-, I delivered sandwiches into one of the big contract caterers in Germany, who probably about twelve months before had been bought by Compass UK.

Beth Stallwood: Right, yes.

Alison Cooper: They had 600 restaurants in Germany and very much traditional cooking. So, meat and two veg, and the UK were very frustrated because the UK market was very much about we want to have the brands like Rattazzi Coffee, Applecrest and everything into the restaurants in Germany. But the Germans weren't really wanting it. So, I became a consultant for them and navigated English culture with German culture. Did all the Applecrest training and helped the German contract catering contacts to open restaurants. So, during that time I'd learned a lot about bakery and a lot about coffee, because obviously I was involved in some of the sourcing and different things that went on. Then unfortunately, my marriage ended and I made the decision to come back and live in the UK. As I was coming home on the plane I did think, 'This bread on a major airline wasn't very good.' (TC 00:10:00) Then I just had this brainwave movement and thought, 'Well, you know, contract catering have done that. They've gone to Europe and sourced really good baguettes. And they make all these amazing baguettes and everyone in the UK loves them, so why don't I go to the aviation industry and offer to pull together bakery products from different European countries.' And put it in as a concept, and that's really where the idea came from. So, that was my little foray into-,

Beth Stallwood: I love that, you just sat on a plane and-,

Alison Cooper: Yes.

Beth Stallwood: I feel like so far on the story, and we'll get to this in more detail, there have just been moments of putting things together and going for it.

Alison Cooper: Yes, that is very much-, yes, I am somebody that does-, I do have ideas but I am very, if I've got a lot of intuition and if I-, I base a lot of my business on intuition and everything in my life probably on intuition. I am the great believer that if you want it enough, the universe will deliver it. When I came home, I was literally coming home with nothing. I'd got a child in the UK who I knew I wanted to keep in his boarding school, didn't want to take him out. So, really thought well if I go and get a job, it's probably not going to make enough money to support my lifestyle. So, yes and I also Beth, I don't think ever in my life have I really ever wanted to work for anybody. I've always wanted to be in control of my own destiny. I mean, one story that I do have is when I went to live in Germany. My husband at the time said it would be good if I went and got a job at Lufthansa, because then he used to get lots of down time and we'd get cheap flights and we could travel the world. So, I actually did go and have an interview for Lufthansa but I failed all the psychometric testing. I was really upset, they came back with a letter basically saying I spoke German with an English accent and I was just not happy. But he knew somebody that worked in the personnel department and they pulled my thing and they basically told him on the quiet that I didn't do team work.

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f there was a fire onboard or something, I'd be one of those people that would assess the situation and decide we were aborting a different way. So, yes, so that summed it up really, that probably I was always meant to work for myself.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, they knew earlier than you did maybe.

Alison Cooper: Yes, I think so, yes. When I was smaller, when I used to play with people, I did. We used to live in a cul-de-sac and there were these two twins that I used to play with. If they didn't do what I wanted them-, or they didn't want to play the games that I wanted to play, I'd go in. So, I was a little bit-, I don't know, as a child, very driven on what I wanted to achieve. Yes, so then I came back and went to see this airline and said, 'Well, could we have a chat about your bakery products?' I did understand something about the aviation sector because I'd done some consultancy for a business that ran big logistics programmes in the aviation industry. So, I had understood how it all stacked up, the supply chain, and basically the airline said to me, 'Well, who are you?' I said, 'Well, here I am.' 'Are you looking for a job?' 'No, I don't think I'm looking for a job.' 'Would you like to be a consultant?' 'No, probably not.' 'Well, why don't you start a company?' So, I thought, 'Yes, actually that's what I'll do.' So, I did go into business originally with another girl. We started a company called On Route International and it went from there really. They did a tender for business class and first class and economy class and we ended up winning business class and economy class and that was the start of the business. I had that business for fifteen years.

Yes, I sold a major part of the business ten years after I started it in 2012. I sold that to Dnata, which is part of the Emirates Group. Then I did a five year earnout and I finished in 2017. Then, I thought, 'What do I do next?' I'd got to a point I think in my business, in the aviation industry, there was a lot of cost cutting going on in the premium cabins. We were constantly being pushed to cost engineer products, which went against my creativity as a person. If you're constantly working to stringent budgets, you can't really be that creative with the packaging and the type of food products you're putting in. So, that had started to, I suppose, demotivate me and annoy me. Then there was also an element of me-, I knew what I could do. I wasn't being challenged anymore and my learning and my thinking. I'd worked really hard, I mean, I'd gone from £14-, I think, no £12 million turnover in 2012 to £44 million turnover in 2017. So, in five years we'd gone, driven such huge growth. So, I was tired, I'd worked so hard and I'd travelled internationally extensively. I was constantly away from home and I think I just got to a point in my life where I thought, 'There must be more to life than working like a Trojan and sitting in meetings where people told me they needed to save money.'

So, yes, I think that's where I got to, and I knew I was young enough to-, I didn't want to leave the company. I got approached from so many airlines and aviation people after I left to work for them. But that never, ever ticked my boat, I have never been a believer of starting a company and then going again in the same industry. It never really appealed to me that. I wanted something new. So, when I gave up, I did some charity work first for about a year and during that time I really sat and thought, 'What do I like?' The one thing that I've always been passionate about is jewellery. I've treated myself over the years to some nice pieces of jewellery. I had had people say to me, because I used to travel extensively to the Middle East. I would quite often have people say to me, 'Oh, when you go to Dubai, would you get me some earrings? Would you pick me out a bracelet for my girlfriend.' When I left On Route International, a few people said to me, 'You won't be able to buy my Christmas presents for me anymore, or my birthday presents.' So, I thought, 'Hang on a minute, is there a little bit of a business?' Then really what clenched it, is a friend of my son was getting engaged and he came to me. Well, he came to Robert and said, 'Could you ask your mother about this diamond that somebody has offered

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me, diamond ring that somebody has offered me for my engagement?' I looked at the diamond he was being offered and I said, 'Well, if you can wait a few days, I will get you something that's far superior.'

That was the first ring that I made, sourced the diamond and made. Really, that was the beginning of Alicia J Diamonds. So, there we are.

Beth Stallwood: Such a story and there are so many things I want to pick out, because there are so many moments in that that are amazing and so related to a lot of the things we talk about in WORKjoy. So, are you alright if I pick up on some questions and we can-

Alison Cooper: Yes, absolutely.

Beth Stallwood: So, number one, this whole thing that you have totally come full circle back to the thing that you really love. I think it's really interesting and we'll talk about that in a bit. But that whole just sitting there and wondering and going, 'Actually, what is it?' Then just putting the pieces together and seeing that just a small idea or something you're interested in can create a business, I think it's an attitude, isn't it? It's a mindset that actually there are businesses out there to be created.

Alison Cooper: Yes, absolutely. But I think-, people ask me this. How do you manage that? But I think it is that you have to have a mindset that nothing is impossible. I'm the type of personality, that if somebody tells me I can't do something, I will do it.

Beth Stallwood: Yes.

Alison Cooper: So, if somebody-, when I started On Route International, I had so many people say to me, 'But Alison, you're not a baker, so how are you going to go into a tender for an airline for bakery products and you're not a baker?' I thought, 'Well, I don't need to be a baker to source products. I need to understand about bakery products. I need to have some knowledge, but I don't actually need to be a baker because we can run a supply chain where we outsource everything.' And the similar, I've had people say with diamonds, 'Well, how can you go from bakery to diamonds?' My first business was consultative selling, we used to go to airlines and we would analyse their service on board, in different cabins. We would work out products that would work on board for them. So, it wasn't a matter of-, it was us working out what cabin crew needed, what passenger's needed, how we would simplify the service. How we would save them money, how we would save them time. So, it was consultative, and Alicia J is really the same, it's consultative selling, but it's about diamonds. I really like to think that anybody who has bought a piece of jewellery from me, after their experience with us, absolutely understands diamonds. The four Cs of diamonds and gemstones and would be able in the future to walk into any store or on the internet and would be, kind of, be able to delegate how the world of diamonds.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and that's the interesting thing isn't it? It's not necessarily about being the expert, it's about knowing who the experts are and connecting clients and customers with the expertise (TC 00:20:00)

Alison Cooper: Yes, definitely. In this business we've found suppliers in the diamond business. I've had to talk to people that have come from mining. I've had to talk to diamond grading experts, I've had cups of coffee with other competitors. I've ran around Hatton Garden, I've gone to New York, I've gone to exhibitions. It's just a matter of just-, I think you've just got to have courage. You will always have people that will tell you

why you can't do things, but I'm a great believer, if you believe you can do it, and you've got the energy and the resilience and the determination, you can do it.

Beth Stallwood: I love that, courage, energy, resilience and determination, great words. Are things that you can choose, you can choose to step into your courage. It's not something that you either have or don't have, it's something you really want and you can build the energy for, you can step into that and take some of these challenges on. I think one of the things that really landed with me with your story and hearing it today is this idea that it's not all about-- if you looked at your CV as an example I'd be sitting there going, 'Wow, you've had an amazing career. It has been brilliant.' But you don't see the challenges behind that, like I don't see the day you lost everything at the BSE crisis. I don't see that because you see outwardly the success of what you've done, not the challenges and the hard times you've gone through. It has not been easy all the time, has it? There has been some big challenging situations where you've lost a business and you've had to start again from scratch. Start again in a different industry, in a different world.

Alison Cooper: Yes, no, definitely. I mean, I don't think I give myself-, I don't think I ever sit and really think about it. But I think the one thing that I've learned that you can't have a fear of failure. It's natural, but you can't let it deter you and you've got to remain ambitious. I've been fortunate enough to be strong enough to dig deep down inside me when it has been tough. There have been, even when I had On Route International, we got through SARS, I formed it on the back of 9/11. Then we had the Ebola crisis, then there was the economic crash, 2008 where lots of airlines took lots of products off. That business we had to navigate so many tough times.

Beth Stallwood: Yes.

Alison Cooper: I didn't have, Beth, I mean, I got to £12 million turnover, literally with confidential invoice discounting and financing out of profits. But I found it incredibly hard to raise money to fund the growth of the company. Because every time I'd go to the bank, we were in food products with short shelf lives, chilled or frozen, the bank weren't interested. We were in the travel industry, that didn't tick anything in their computer system where they rate you. So, we constantly would be knocked back on funding and I got-, 2011 I remember I went to see an American carrier and I came back and my FG at the time said, 'Well, it's really a great opportunity that we're going to be in tender, but it's £1 million worth of contract and we just don't have the cash Alison to fund the stock.' I was really happy that I'd got us into this tender, I remember sitting at my desk, thinking, 'You're the FD, that's what I employ you to do, you've got to go and find the money.' That was like the life changing thing, that I had no bricks in my little house, in my terraced house in Windsor where I live with my son, to give to the bank as security. Sometimes, I come across-, I quite often work on panels and mentoring at the moment. You do different investor forums, and you hear some of the people raising seed As and seed Bs and seed Cs.

I think, 'Goodness me, I didn't do it that way.' I literally had every brick of my house-, if it had gone wrong again, my house would've been gone, yes?

Beth Stallwood: Yes.

Alison Cooper: I think it was that, basically working with your back up against the wall like that, that was a lot of the motivation and determination that this could not fail.

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Beth Stallwood: Yes, you can sit here and we could choose to hear the story of that nothing to £12 million, to £44 million and go, 'Wow, you've obviously got some kind of magic behind you. You've got some backing.' But you haven't, what you've got is yourself and a real determination. This is where I want to get onto something is, obviously you didn't do zero to £44 million on your own. Like you say, you've got people around you. I think one of those things about WORKjoy as well, is about you have that real mindset, that real determination and you've got it. How did you build a team around you? This is such an important part, that also believed and had that determination, and helped make it happen?

Alison Cooper: I think as a person, I would meet people in social circumstances, or through business meetings that I would be attracted. I'm definitely an extrovert as a personality and I would be naturally drawn to people that were extroverts. Along the way, in the first bit of my career, I probably used to think, 'I get on great with them, they're an extrovert, they've got to be part of my team.' But I very quickly realised over the years that you cannot have lots of extroverts in a company, because they're all vying for the limelight. You do need to have-

Beth Stallwood: We need some diversity here, right?

Alison Cooper: Yes, you do need to have some people that do want to sit and analyse numbers and are introverted. They don't want to be in the limelight and I think that was a realisation. I definitely think early on in my career I made some dreadful mistakes on people that I've recruited and probably had a very-, definitely in the early years in the aviation industry. We were known as the blonde girls, because I used to employ a lot of people that were blonde, I don't know why, I just gravitated to blonde people I think. There was a bit of a joke in the industry that you'd phone On Route on a Friday afternoon and they'd be in the garden sipping cocktails. Which we did used to do, but that was part of my-, I think that's me as a person, is that I do celebrate life. I do think that there are things that you-, there's a journey that you go on in your life. You've got to stop and celebrate those successes. Sometimes there might be successes, and sometimes there maybe failures. But you have to celebrate both of them, because if it's a failure you learn from it, and if it's a success then it deserves to be celebrated. So, I think over my career, I would definitely say that building a team was-, people that I met that I got on with and I thought, 'Yes, I could sell them my vision.' I would be able to get them on the journey with me.

Later on, obviously as we became bigger we had then a HR team and then they took over how we would recruit people and we definitely employed things like psycho symmetric testing and different things like that. But for me, I would meet somebody and I could, kind of, like, see a diagram of what my team needed to be like. And I'm also very able-, I know what my limitations are as an MD or a CEO. I know what I'm good at. I know what I'm passionate about, but I also know what I can't do. And I had no problem during my career to actually the bits that I didn't enjoy doing or the bits that I couldn't do, is surrounding myself with a team of either external consultants that I did used to employ a lot of consultants because I used to find that would be a way I could get some expertise quite quickly. Maybe cost me a little bit more but then I could then say, 'Okay, you've done that piece of work for us now as a project, thank you very much,' And then we could move onto the next stage, rather than having them on the payroll. So, I used to use a lot of consultants. And also I found with consultants is that you could bring them back in, you know, in a year's time or eighteen months' time when you had another project. So, over my career there have been people that I've done lots of projects with external consultants and they've come back in again.

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I mean, even in this company I'm using some packaging consultants in my diamond company that I used in my old company. So, yes, I think I've, kind of, like, got a little address book of people that I know I can rely on and they're going to absolutely deliver what I need, yes.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, I love that. And actually thinking about what do you need in your organisation in it and what do you need for a limited period of time or for some expertise or that kind of thing, especially when you're growing and you don't necessarily have the room on the payroll for people like that that you can bring people in for short term things. And for me, I've just written it down and highlighted it, like, three times, is this thing that I think sometimes people aren't very good at which is knowing your limitations and knowing you can't do everything. And when you come from that entrepreneurial world where to start with you are doing everything because it is just you, or, just you and a business partner or whatever it is, trying to run everything, is being able to let some of that stuff go to other people is quite a hard thing to do. But actually when you do it, that's where the growth comes from, right, when you're able to stop doing trying to do everything yourself?

Alison Cooper: Yes, I mean, I quite often help people when they're-, I do some consultancy on scaling companies and I think one of the things that (TC 00:30:00) predominantly I get faced with as questions is, but how do you know when to let go? How do you know when you shouldn't be doing anything? And I think you have to be able to say to yourself, 'Well, I actually don't enjoy doing this.' I mean, we used to get huge tenders in that were, I don't know, 200 pages long from some of the international airlines. There was absolutely no way I was going to read that. It didn't interest me, I didn't have the time. But I had the most amazing non exec director who was called James who I'd known for many years and he'd come from the aviation industry and I would say to James, 'There's a new tender come in.' And he would read it and he would give me a one pager and say, 'This is what we've got to fulfil, these ten points.' And then I'd pull the team together and go, 'Right, costings you need to do this, procurement you need to do this, creative you do this.' And pull it all back together again. And I would, kind of, manage the project. I'd give them the creative input and the vision, then they'd all have to go away and come back again. But I hadn't sat and read that tender. There was absolutely no way I was going to do that. And I think those are the things that some people think because it's their company, or, they're the boss, or, they're the CO, they have to micro manage everything and that's where you can't scale. You have to learn to let go. You have to learn to empower people, and people will make mistakes, but as long as they learn from their mistakes then you just pick yourself up, get up the next day and off you go again.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and that being able to trust and be realistic with the fact that people will make mistakes because everybody's human. And it's not like-, on your own you don't make mistakes in life, we all make mistakes, but being able to, kind of, pick up and help and support and work through that I think is a really interesting thing. And as you say you can't scale things if you're going to try and do everything yourself, it just won't work. And I was laughing when you were saying about, like, a 200 page document. My brain would stop at about half way through the second page and that would be me really trying hard, really trying hard to read, yes, totally think we're quite aligned on this, also very extroverted in knowing that I can't do everything here. So, here we are now. So, you sold your organisation over a period of time and you're now in your new world of Alicia J Diamonds and you're growing this new organisation, how are you finding joy in, kind of, creating things again?

Alison Cooper: I mean, I had some time off between the two companies and during that time we did do some charity work, but I did realise then it was a little bit of a realisation for my personality that I wasn't going to be happy if I didn't go again. I don't know, I just didn't find it fulfilling enough. I'm not great, I don't have lots of hobbies, I'm not somebody that's, like, got lots of hobbies and gets up and thinks, 'Right, I'm going to do this today as a new hobby.' That's never really been me. I have actually been very work orientated the whole of my life, but I think I've been able to be work orientated because I have had an amazing amount of joy and happiness out of my work. So, it has dominated my life, my work, but I have gained joy and happiness. And, so, I didn't feel that I needed to have lots of hobbies on the side. That wasn't something. So, when I was transitioning between what I was going to do it was really, kind of, getting to go inside myself and really learn what was going to make me happy in the future, and I knew that I had to have another company, I was going to start another company, I was going to do some learning and I was going to go and disrupt another industry. I definitely think I've got a little bit of a personality that thinks I like to disrupt-

Beth Stallwood: You're a disruptor?

Alison Cooper: Yes, I am a disruptor, yes, definitely, you know, I disrupted the aviation when I went in, and I definitely think Alicia J's disrupting a little bit the diamond industry.

Beth Stallwood: Yes. And, so, tell us a little bit more about Alicia J Diamonds and how it works, and, yes, just tell us a little bit more about what is it bringing you joy in this new world of your new organisation?

Alison Cooper: I love the fact-, so, somebody said to me the other day, and I think now I would say that I am selling happiness because-

Beth Stallwood: Oh, that's lovely.

Alison Cooper: Yes, it is. So, we do a lot of engagement rings and we do a lot of one-off pieces of jewellery for special occasions, wedding anniversaries, or big birthdays, or, I have quite a lot of women on my LinkedIn profile who I'm linked in with that are extremely successful within their own right and they treat themselves to beautiful pieces of jewellery. They've, you know, achieved a milestone in their business and they come to me and say, 'Right, I'm going to treat myself to a big bold ring.' For example. So, we, kind of, go from young people that are getting engaged, older people that are getting re-married again. I also do change engagement rings, they've got a divorce and they want to keep the stones and they want them made into a necklace because they don't want to have it just sat in the safe. So, we do all different aspects of jewellery. But I think when I did my training in-between the two companies at the Gemological Institute of America, so, I'd learnt all about-, because I felt that I couldn't go and sell diamonds and gemstones if I didn't really understand about how diamonds and gemstones and mining and everything. So, I did do a year's long course on all of that which was hugely interesting and I definitely realised that I did have a passion for things that have matured over many years.

So, that fossil hunting thing from a child definitely is in me somewhere from a previous life maybe, I don't know. And then I then started to look online and obviously there's a lot of online jewellery now just due to COVID, a lot of the jewellers have gone online, but then when I spoke to people about their jewellery experiences I just felt it wasn't that special. It wasn't something that they'd at the end of it think it was an experience that they really enjoyed. So, for me it was like bringing, kind of, happiness and joy into the

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experience and then really sitting down and understanding them as a couple, or, understanding them as a person. So, one we did last month for somebody, it was a 50 year wedding anniversary and they had met backpacking in Australia and the guy wanted to buy her something special and we came up with this idea that, you know, they'd met in Australia, let's go and find some amazing opals from Australia. So, we found these lovely opals and we did this beautiful bracelet for her and then we engraved the place in Australia where they met in the back of the jewellery. And she was just so-, well, she was just so happy that he'd-, I don't know if happy is the right word, just overwhelmed that he'd gone to so much trouble to celebrate their 50 years of marriage that that's where they'd met in Australia and we'd managed to go to the mine where they were and find them.

So, for me, it's about designing something, it's a story, it's incorporating their life story into a unique piece of jewellery that they're going to have for a lifetime. And it's the same with engagement rings, you know, quite often we put birthstones inside the band of the ring. Some people have already got children before they get married so we put the birthstone of their children inside the band. We engrave something. Lots of different things that we can add in to, kind of, make it a unique piece of jewellery. (talking over each other 38.13) And it's an experience. Yes.

Beth Stallwood: What I'm hearing is that the jewellery is the thing but actually it's the experience of creating it together and making something really special and different and unique that brings that real joy to the whole experience.

Alison Cooper: Yes, absolutely that. But on the way, Beth, I'd like to say, is that we educate people. There's a lot of people that will buy jewellery and they will absolutely not know after the purchase what diamond they've got, how to read the diamond report if it's indeed come with a diamond report, understand about the gemstones that are in there, where they've come from in the world. And that's the bit that we add is that we really do educate them on it. And that's the ethos, that's the USP that I really want to, kind of, embed in everything that we do as a company.

Beth Stallwood: Love it. Oh, I could honestly talk to you for weeks I think about all the different experiences you have and how you've, you know, been bold and gone out there and taken all these ideas that you have, and I can imagine, and I might be wrong here Alison, tell me if I am, that you probably have ten ideas a day and it's, like, which one am I going to go for today?

Alison Cooper: Yes, absolutely.

Beth Stallwood: And it seems like the ideas that you've picked and you've run with and you've really worked hard for, and as you say, you know, you're work orientated, there's been some effort and time and energy and massive amounts of it gone into all of these things and it's just really great to hear a real life story of this and not the shiny everything was perfect and it all went well, but, the graft and the, 'We might not have made it happen. And the, 'I might have lost my home if (talking over each other 39.59).'

Alison Cooper: There have been nights in my (TC 00:40:00) career where I've literally lay in bed at night thinking, 'Goodness me, so and so, so and so supplier is going to take a direct debit tomorrow, I've got the salaries going out, I've got that going out, hopefully the client pays because it's all going to go horribly wrong.'

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and (talking over each other 40.14).

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Alison Cooper: Absolutely, there have just been those days.

Beth Stallwood: That's real life entrepreneurialism isn't it, is that there are massive highs and massive lows and everything in-between, and good days and bad days, you know, the fact that you've, kind of, sat here and go, 'Right, my next thing is going to be this.' And it's something that you really care about. And I think it's a great story, like, the full circle thing, a factor that I'm interested in geology and gemstones and all this and it's actually now really living your childhood dream almost.

Alison Cooper: Yes, no, definitely. Yes, I hadn't thought of it like that because it just, kind of, came to me when we started the podcast, but, yes, I can still remember a book that I was given on gemstones, a big book, that must be at home somewhere at mum and dad's house, but, yes, definitely I've always had a fascination with bright coloured stones and sparkly stones.

Beth Stallwood: Things that go sparkle. Love it. Right, although I could talk to you for hours, not everyone wants to listen to us for hours, so, I'm going to move us on if it's okay with you to some quick fire questions.

Alison Cooper: Yes.

Beth Stallwood: So, my first question is, for you personally, what is always guaranteed to bring you a bit of work joy?

Alison Cooper: For me it's when I build a team at work it's the relationship that I have with my team. So, I love bringing individuals together. I love the fact that they're diverse. I really enjoy building like a joyful working environment and very much all of my career I've always celebrated. I mean, I think a lot of my ex staff and current staff absolutely know that I drive performance and I do drive performance, but I think it's the fact that I understand how to impart my creativity, how to show them my vision and then it's, kind of, like, little cogs in a wheel, they all go off and work and then come back and we have this big creative project that we've done together. From having an idea over coffee to it then being delivered, that is just so joyful for me.

Beth Stallwood: To see the magic happen while (talking over each other 42.19) doing the thing that they're great at. I love that. And, you know, the celebrating, I was thinking back on when you were saying that the-, 'Yes, we probably were having a cocktail in the garden because that's how we did it. We worked hard and we, kind of, had that play hard mentality as well.'

Alison Cooper: Yes.

Beth Stallwood: Brilliant, so, working the team. Next question, what book are you currently reading?

Alison Cooper: Oh, this was the hard one because I absolutely am not-, I do read quite a lot of spiritual books. I don't know whether that's because since I've given up work I've-,

Beth Stallwood: Yes. Whatever, kind of, floats your boat.

Alison Cooper: Yes. And I do journal quite a bit but I'm not somebody that sits and reads. But there's one that I have read last year. I'll just try and get the name for you trying to remember the name. Sorry, you might need to edit this bit out. The Good Vibes, Good Life, by Vex King.

Beth Stallwood: Oh, that sounds good.

Alison Cooper: Yes, and that one-, I mean, I do like reading books about personal advancements and, like, looking at your life. And I think why I really like this one is that it, kind of, gets you to focus on lessons that you've had in your life and how you could pull those together and they could potentially then change your life. So, it's looking at going inside and saying, 'Okay, I was sent these lessons.' Because I'm a great believer that we do come to earth with a path and I do think that my path, I have had to climb some mountains, but then you have to, kind of, look at it and say, 'Okay, I climbed that mountain, came out the other side, but what's the lesson that I've got to learn and how do I not have that affect me again. And that book is very much about-, well, as the title says, good vibes and good life, it's very much about positive affirmations, forward thinking, dealing with stress and lots of inspirational words.

Beth Stallwood: Brilliant. I haven't heard of that one so I'm going to look (talking over each other 44.22).

Alison Cooper: Yes, they've got it on podcast as well.

Beth Stallwood: Ah, I love something to listen for.

Alison Cooper: Yes, an audible book.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, that's totally my world. So, question three, what is the best or most useful bit of advice that someone has given you in your life that you always find yourself coming back to?

Alison Cooper: Treat people with kindness and I think that, yes, somebody gave me that one, I think my uncle gave me that when I was younger, and just treat people with kindness and that, kind of, is repaid in buckets. But I think in my entrepreneurial career, when you're building a business, you obviously have to drive as a leader and you have to drive performance but I would like to say, and I think past employers would all say that but I absolutely knew people's boundaries and I was very able to go into work and scan all of my team and know when somebody was suffering personally or something at work wasn't going right for them, and taking the time from your busy agenda to say, 'Okay, how can we help you?' And that kindness has been repaid time and time again in my business, in my business life and scaling my company. And then I think on the flip side of that is then don't be afraid to show that you're vulnerable and that as a leader that you won't make the right mistakes. We are human, we do make mistakes, and if you've made an incorrect recruit don't be afraid to say to the team, 'Well, that recruitment didn't work out, we're going to start again.' And I think, so, being kind and being able to show vulnerability and then that, kind of, creates a really nice empathy within the work culture.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, because it sets that tone doesn't it for everybody?

Alison Cooper: Yes.

Beth Stallwood: That kind of kindness and vulnerability together equals the right culture that you're looking for.

Alison Cooper: Yes.

Beth Stallwood: Brilliant. So, as we finish off Alison, tell us, where can people find out more about you, about Alicia J Diamonds, and, you know, maybe go and have a little look and see if there's anything they want to treat themselves to?

Alison Cooper: Okay, so, our website is aliciajdiamonds.com and we have a contact form on there so that you contact us through that. Then we've got a big Instagram presence, so, that's [aliciajdiamonds](https://www.instagram.com/aliciajdiamonds), and I've got my LinkedIn profile which is Alison Cooper. And I'd also like to add that because we are very educational I have no problem if some founders are listening to this and they want a little motivational or something for employees to do, we don't mind doing like a diamond event in the evening or in the work day where we come in and talk to you about diamonds or gemstones, or, how to design an engagement ring. Or anything like that. So, those are the type of experiences that we do offer and we'll be offering more about in the future. And personally I do do some mentoring and I do run some vision days for founders that get to a point scaling their business that they need somebody to talk to, or, somebody to take them outside of their business to have a look to see how they get to the next stage, or, give them some motivation to get to the next stage in scaling their business. So, you can see all of that on my LinkedIn profile.

Beth Stallwood: Brilliant. Thank you so much for sharing it and what we will also do is make sure we put those links into the notes and the show notes and on our socials as well so that people can click straight through and find out more. I have had a little look and there are some very nice options there. And I love the idea of doing maybe, like, team activities and things, so, looking at getting educating around this whole world of excitement and exciting things.

Alison Cooper: Yes, I mean, the bold collection that's just-, because we didn't have a shop but we've just launched the shop on the internet site, so, we have got some ready to wear pieces which is the big bold collection that we've just launched, and that really, kind of, came from me thinking about people being bold, and there are a lot of times in businesses where entrepreneurs here you have to be bold and you do have your back up against the wall. And if you look at gemstones, every gemstone's got a meaning. So, all of those rings have been designed with the meaning, so, I don't know, you've got resilience, you've got amore for love, and each one of the gemstones has got those type of attributes attached to them. And we've teamed up with The Prince's Trust. I'm really passionate about helping women in business because I think there is so much gender discrimination that goes on when women are trying to raise money. And, you know, less than 2% of money goes to women from VCs. But one of the causes that I really really do believe in passionately is the Women Supporting Women from The Prince's Trust. So, we've teamed up with The Prince's Trust and we're donating a part of the profits from the bold collection to The Prince's Trust. And it was, kind of, just so lovely the other day, we did a big event for the brilliant breakfast for The Prince's Trust and we teamed that with Coutts Bank, because Coutts are a very big supporter of The Prince's Trust, and my celebrity hairdresser, Daniel J Galvin Junior, he helped as well.

And when we had a few girls from The Prince's Trust that have been on the programme and we launched this amazing breakfast in Coutts Bank (TC 00:50:00) and it was just so-, I don't know, we just brought lawyers and we brought entrepreneurs together, we had a panel discussion from some very-, yes, people that are scaling

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their businesses or have been very successful already within their own right. It was a day where we had lots of different types of people together but it was so nice to see that we could bring them all together for one cause to help Women Supporting Women. So, that's, kind of, where that collection comes from. And there's some more collections that we're currently designing at the moment, so, watch this space.

Beth Stallwood: Brilliant. I can't wait to go and have a (mw 50.38) more and see where all this gets to and, you know, well done on creating your next business.

Alison Cooper: Thank you, Beth.

Beth Stallwood: It's an exciting time and, yes, I really can't wait to see it go from strength to strength, and obviously the supporting of things like The Prince's Trust as part of that is such a wonderful thing to be able to do. So, Alison, a huge thank you for being my guest on the WORKJoy Jam.

Alison Cooper: Yes, thank you very much. And I've listened to lots of your podcasts, I think they're very good. It's amazing what you're achieving. And I really love the concept of joy and work, because I've never really actually thought about my career, but I do think I have been so embedded in my career because I've had a lot of joy on the way.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, definitely.

Alison Cooper: So, I don't think you ever stop and think about that, but definitely the questions that you gave me did give me a real insight to maybe that's why you don't have so many hobbies Alison, (talking over each other 51.36).

Beth Stallwood: Because you're work is what you love.

Alison Cooper: Yes, totally.

Beth Stallwood: There you go. Well, thank you so much, and we'll speak soon.

Alison Cooper: Okay, thank you Beth. Take care. Thank you everybody. Bye bye.

Beth Stallwood: Thank you all for listening to my episode with Alison Cooper, and a huge thank you to Alison for joining me and for sharing so openly her wonderful and interesting and really inspiring story of being an entrepreneur, working through some amazing times, some difficult times, finding that inspiration in almost the everyday things and really disrupting the marketplace, creating new ways of thinking about things, of connecting the experts with the customers and creating such a wonderful customer journey, a really great experience of education. And I love the way that Alison talks about her business all being about selling happiness. Isn't that a wonderful way of thinking about things. And lots of real lessons that I've taken away. Some of the notes that I wrote down as a theme of being in control of your own destiny and making some of those decisions with a mindset that nothing is impossible. That doesn't mean it's not hard, but you've got to have that courage. She talked about courage, energy, resilience and determination and building a great team, knowing what your limitations are as a leader, the things that you love doing, the things that you don't love doing, and working through the tough stuff. And really working through the fact that actually as a work orientated person how much joy she

found in her work, and I really love that. And that she's trying to build happiness and joy into the experience for her customers now.

So, I had a great time talking to Alison. I hope you really enjoyed and were inspired by this conversation. I know I was. Do go and listen to some of our other episodes on the WORKjoy Jam. We've got four seasons already out there. Go and have a listen to some of them that you haven't caught up on yet. We also have our Club WORKjoy which is a fantastic community of people who are all working on getting more and more joy into their working lives and to maintaining and sustaining that through some difficult real times that go on for us as humans. We have monthly events with amazing speakers. We have networking. Every week you can ask me any questions you want to and I will come back with my thinking on them. And if you're interested head over to createworkjoy.com and have a little look at Club WORKjoy and see if it's something that you might be interested in. I also have my freebie, a downloadable, where do you get yours, to help you work out where your WORKjoy's coming from and how to get a little bit more of it a bit more often, and you can download that from the website too. Thank you all for listening, I will speak to you soon.