

Future of Business Podcast

Episode: Navigating the stresses of the media and entertainment world

Bartek Ogonowski:

Welcome to future of business, where we take you on a journey to explore a diverse range of sectors and stories embedded in the Oxford MBA cohorts and beyond, and how they will shape the future of business. My name is Bartek Ogonowski, and I will be hosting our conversation today with Huw Allen, a current Oxford MBA student, previous film producer, and future media tycoon. Welcome hug.

Huw Allen:

Hey, thanks. It's nice to be here. Future media tycoon sounds very optimistic, but I'm going for it.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah, so I mean, I think when we initially started talking about this podcast, we wanted to do a video version of it, and I think one day we will do this.

Huw Allen:

Yeah. That'd be more of a sort of corny sketch show more than anything.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah. And if those of you that don't know Huw, he's very charismatic. He's very... Stop it.

Huw Allen:

Carry on, please.

Bartek Ogonowski:

He's one of those people in the class that bring the positivity, bring the fun, always full of chirps, always full of laughter. And that's what you need, and I think a lot of that is probably because of his background in the media and entertainment space, but particularly we aren't going to be talking only about the glamour and all the shine that comes with it today, but actually the real life problems that actually are encountered in everyday business, not only in that world, particularly around mental health in the workspace. And Huw's going to be taking us through a bit of a journey of his life and his career, where he is now, and just some future advice. So yeah, over to you, Huw. Can you maybe just give us a bit of intro as to your background, what you're busy with, et cetera, and how you found yourself in the seat today?

Huw Allen:

Well, I actually don't know how I found myself in this seat. I don't even know how I found myself doing an MBA, to be honest. It's all sort of like bonus round stuff. But my undergrad, I studied drama, and after that, I moved to London and wanted to kind of work within the industry. And I started working producing theater, which then, by complete luck and serendipity, moved into sort of more film work, which was working primarily in sort of commercials. Then I ended up working in advertising agencies, most recently working for apple for about two years. So, it's been a really sort of varied thing. The

industry's not that... It's not well structured, but it's very, very kind of... It's a bit like the wild west. I would say that. It's kind what you make it.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Are you John Wayne?

Huw Allen:

Yeah, no more like a Gary Cooper, stoic. It's been a weird journey. I mean, the way I sort of describe, and there will be people who listen to this who've heard me say it a thousand times, but the way I would describe my career journey to this point is there's Looney Tunes cartoon where Bugs Bunny is sleep walking, and he sleeps walk into this construction site, and he finds himself at the very, very top of this unbuilt skyscraper full of metal girders. And he's walking along this metal girder, and just as he's about to walk off the end of it, a crane comes in and another girder comes in, and he manages to walk across it. So it's like complete luck. Obviously, the harder you work, the luckier you get, but there is a genuine element of nothing is foretold. It just happens, which is great, but it's also very stressful, as you can imagine.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah. And I think that's what we're going to be talking about. I mean luck plays a big part in any industry I'm sure. But your last comment about being stressful, I mean, I know particularly in this industry, I know from mates of mine that have tried and tested for decades, and some of them eventually don't make it. But are you talking about those pressures? Or are you talking about the pressures of... Can you take us through a bit of that?

Huw Allen:

Yeah. I mean for the majority of my career, up until... I mean, actually the job I had before I came to my MBA was the very first full-time like salaried job I ever had. I was freelance up until then, so for eight of my working years. So obviously there's the pressure of... Well, not pressure, but the stress of being freelance and also being very junior when realistically you haven't done anything is really, really difficult. But it's kind of how the industry operates because a lot of the full-time roles are just paid peanuts. So there is obviously the practical elements of the stress of not knowing what your next job is, or if you mess something up, you might get kicked out or whatever. But for me, something I always found really stressful was, well, one not being able to deal with stress very well myself, but also how the sort of... It's very club. The industry's very sort of not cliquy, but if you're part of the club, if you've sort of, as I said drunk the Kool-Aid, it can be a lot easier for you, but if you don't kind of operate within that way, it can be quite difficult, especially when you are younger, especially when you're sort of more junior where people kind of expect you just sort of toe the line. And I've never been very good at doing that. I'm a sort of habitual line stepper, so yeah.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah. Just to, just to take on two of those points, we'll explore them a bit further. So drink the Kool-Aid. And then, also you mentioned something about pay and I'm assuming that adds to a lot of the stress and pressure as a youngster.

Huw Allen:

Yeah.

Bartek Ogonowski:

What was your dream kind of going into this industry? Did you want to get into the Hollywood, become an actor? I mean, I'm sure there's a lot of people that are going to be listening to this that are thinking, I want some sort of role in media and entertainment, but I actually don't understand the realities behind it. So one, what did you actually want to achieve? What was your dream?

Huw Allen:

Well, actually, it's funny. It changed. I mean, when I graduated from my undergrad, I thought, "Oh yeah being an actor would be great. Well, it wouldn't be great, but that's what I want to do. That's my calling." And I very quickly realized that a couple things. One, 80% of the job is not acting. It's doing the other stuff. Two, I'm not good looking enough. Three, I'm not really good enough to do it. And then, I realized, and maybe this was a rationalization. But I didn't really want to do that anyway. I knew I understood that... Well understood the industry. I knew that's what I wanted to work in, but I'm a bit too sort of, not too pragmatic, but I think that the element of the business side of the show business always interested me more. And that's kind of why I sort of pursued it, and I've got a real recalcitrance to relying on other people. I really don't like being, not subservient to other people, but being the last to be hired, first to be dropped. I didn't want to find myself in that situation.

Huw Allen:

And I always think this is... I'm getting a bit profound here, but it was really funny. I don't know when it was. It might have been maybe 15 years ago, someone did a talk at the Oxford Union, keeping it relevant, and they said-

Bartek Ogonowski:

You were there or you...

Huw Allen:

No, I wasn't there. No. Because I was only 15 then, my darling. And they said don't do what you want to in life, in the sense of like what's your calling, what's your passion. Don't make that your reason for, let's say work, but do what you're good at. If you do what you're good, and the likelihood is you're not going to you're not going to hate it, but you're going to excel. And you're going to sort of, I guess, fulfill your potential in that sense. That to me found sounded much... You know, play to your strengths is essentially what it is.

Bartek Ogonowski:

So what does that mean for someone trying to get into that industry? What do they need to be good at? What are some of the key skills and competencies that are required?

Huw Allen:

I think you've got to be able to... Obviously, it depends on your sort of role and stuff what you want to do. If you want to produce, you've got to be able to have a pretty solid plan, but also be able to very much throw that all out the window and think on your feet. The problem with that often is that if said plan doesn't go the way that you need it to.... Because it doesn't. You're relying on thousands of different variables that can always change at a moment. And most of them are human beings, which are incredibly chaotic. So you have to be able to change it. But what I always used to struggle with is I've got

this plan, okay. It's falling apart. Okay. What have I got to do? Oh, I'm going to get chewed out for this because this hasn't worked. This has worked. And it's like, "Well, no, you can't."

And what it does is it can really knock yourself confidence if you kind of give yourself a really hard time for it not going perfectly. And then, what happens is when people can see that you are being a bit sort of self-detrimental, then people go, "Oh, well, then I can just feed into that," and sort of not push you down, but be like, "Yeah, you should have done better." And I got to the point where I was like, "Nah, I'm not doing that anymore."

Bartek Ogonowski:

So what does it take, for someone to withstand that pressure of the industry? Is it detaching emotion from the professional working world? Or is it, I mean...

Huw Allen:

I mean, yeah.

Bartek Ogonowski:

How do you go about it?

Huw Allen:

I mean, it's really hard. When I was 23, I did first major job I ever did. It was a big thing. It was a Marks & Spencer's Christmas ad, which we were shooting in July, because that's how early they do them.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Were you dressed up as Santa Claus?

Huw Allen:

I unfortunately wasn't in it, but... I asked. They said no. I was kind of super, super junior, but this was an enormous budget. It's a commercial, so it was like 2 million pounds, which is huge.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah, 2013 now.

Huw Allen:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. 2013 and you know, we had-

Bartek Ogonowski:

Good maths...

Huw Allen:

Bingo. And it had Helena Bonham Carter in it, and Rosie Huntington-Whiteley. It had some serious, serious players. And that's obviously a really, really high pressure environment. It was a very odd thing where basically because of the budget, I had a week off. And then I was coming back on to kind of carry on working on the film. And I remember I had... I'm going to get onto the story here, so buckle up. But

the day that the job ended, I went out for dinner and I was sitting there and I felt like I had ginger ale on my brain. And it was just swirling around, and I didn't really know what was going on.

Bartek Ogonowski:

What do you mean by that? Sorry.

Huw Allen:

So it's essentially, I sort of felt... The only way I can describe it's almost like there was a back of my head opened up like a window. And it felt really sort of sloshy and a bit weird. And I didn't quite work out what was going on. I knew something wasn't bad, but I wasn't like wasn't dread or anything. And then I went home and my heart was racing, and I was really, really hot. And I was happy to sort of lying in bed like, "Everything's okay, you're doing all right." And I realized. I was like, "Oh my God, I think I've got bloody diabetes or I have heart murmur or I've got whatever. I'm having a stroke." We have walk-in centers in the UK through the NHS. I went to the walk-in center the next morning. And I said to this nurse, I was like, "I want you to do everything. I want you to check if I've got diabetes. I want to see if I've got bloody irregular heartbeat. I want to see if I've got high cholesterol, whatever."

Huw Allen:

And the nurse looked to me and she was like, "I'm going to do all these tests. And I guarantee you, everything will be fine." And it was. Everything was fine. I had the bloody ECG. I had this. And she was like, "You had a panic attack." And I was like, "What?" And I took me about four days to come down. I had to go to the Edinburgh Fringe the day after that. And I was walking around like my soul had left my body. And then I was walking on the Royal Mile, and I had to go down an alleyway to be sick. I was so bad. It was all-

Bartek Ogonowski:

Was it just like your whole body just felt tight?

Huw Allen:

I don't know how to describe it. The only way I can sort of really think about is it's like the physical embodiment of being heartbroken.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah.

Huw Allen:

That was a way that I could do it where you're like a husk.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah.

Huw Allen:

Yeah. And you don't really have any control, and especially when you've never had it before, it's terrifying.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah.

Huw Allen:

It's so scary. And I remember it took me a long time to get over it after that. And I had never really considered anything to do with mental health or... Well I used to stress a lot as a kid and I mean, I still stress a lot now, much less. so actually since I've been on the MBA, which is usually highly pressured, which makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. But thank God for that. But I always used to know that I used to put pressure myself, and I used to feel lots of stress and it used to kind of paralyze me. And I ended up doing nothing, which would add to the stress, which would make me... But that then opened up the world of like, "Okay, well, how do I deal with the fact that I know that have a propensity to panic, and therefore can occasionally have panic attacks? I mean, I've only had-

Bartek Ogonowski:

I was about to say, after that, how many more episodes have you had?

Huw Allen:

I believe I've had maybe three or four. I actually had one. I went through a pretty hectic time at the beginning of this year, and I had one in end of January. And I remember sitting in class, and our friend Izzy was sitting next to me and I said, "Listen, I think I'm having a panic attack." And she just took me outside. And I just sat outside the lecture theaters with a thousand yard stare hyperventilating with her just looking at me being like, "You're okay. You're okay."

Bartek Ogonowski:

Back to the Edinburgh Mile.

Huw Allen:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah. PTSD for the Mile. Yeah.

Bartek Ogonowski:

No, I mean, I'm obviously not trying to take the joke out of.

Huw Allen:

No, no, but it's important. I think actually, not being funny, to talk about it as if it's some sort of serious thing. You're human beings and actually being able to talk about it.

Bartek Ogonowski:

As if it were normal..

Huw Allen:

Yeah. Talk about it in a lighthearted way is actually really important, because you want to normalize it. You don't want it to be this sort of like, "Oh God, this sort of almost taboo thing that you can't talk about because it's so serious." No, it happens all the time. I mean we go up and down. Right? No one's constant.

Bartek Ogonowski:

And that's so important to hear. Because I think, I mean, depending on where you come from, I come from South Africa, and I think a lot of the times-

Huw Allen:

Oh really??

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah. Huw always mocks my accent. Actually, try the accent..

Huw Allen:

No, I'm not doing that. Not recorded, no way.

Bartek Ogonowski:

I don't know, maybe it's a consequence of where you're from or, or how you're brought up or whatever the case may be. But we generally didn't speak about mental health issues too much or too openly. And I think particularly in the UK, or maybe particularly post-COVID in general, mental health has just become a lot more... What's the correct saying it? In your face.

Huw Allen:

Sharply in focus.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah. Sharply focus. And it's important to hear more. It's crazy because the more guest speakers we've had at Oxford, the more they start talking about their mental health journey and their mental health issues and how it's completely okay to go through it and cover it and actually talk openly about it and seek the help that you need. I mean, if you've got a broken bone, you're not going to be able to run a race. The same way as if you've got something broken within your mind, you've got to fix it and mend it. And that's exactly what we're talking about with the conversation. So again, thanks for opening up.

Huw Allen:

No problem.

Bartek Ogonowski:

You mentioned the MBA, and funnily enough, that your stresses have been diminished this year, somewhat. My question was more on how the MBAs added to that stress, but maybe just talk a bit about that. Yeah.

Huw Allen:

Well, it's a funny one because I'm now I'm realizing... A pattern is the wrong word, but so we have assessment weeks every block of modules we have, and I'm at my least stressed during assessment week, which seems ridiculous when you think about it. But I think it's less chaotic. It's more like I have one thing to do, and I this time to do it. And I'm going to go and do it. And that to me feels... Actually, it's almost maybe-

Bartek Ogonowski:

Manageable.

Huw Allen:

Yeah, manageable, regimented, I don't know.

Bartek Ogonowski:

It's nice. You don't have classes in that week, so...

Huw Allen:

Yes. Yeah, exactly. So, all you have to do is your assessment. Doesn't mean it's doesn't mean it's easy, but it's less hectic. I think since coming to do the MBA, the one thing I would say, especially at Saïd is that so condensed that, for me, it takes a long time because I have a very small brain, to assimilate all the information. So, I will realize two weeks after my first class that I now know what I learned in my first class. You almost kind of like got a two-week delay on one's learning for me. But I think the brilliant thing about it really for me is that you get out of it what you put in. Realistically, you could sit here, and you could do absolutely nothing apart from turn up to class. And to be honest, you could probably not turn up for class, and that is something that is...

Huw Allen:

It's not self-made, but it is very much like you put yourself under pressure to achieve what you want to achieve. It's all self-led. There we are. And that makes it. But I think for me, that intention level makes it so much more manageable because essentially, I put myself in this position, and I want to do this and that's it. Okay, fine. There come responsibilities, pressures, things within that. But you're not feeling like you are sort of acquiescing to force. You are doing it voluntarily. Like you've turned up here this morning, and we're recording a podcast. No one's told you to do this. You want to do it, right?

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yep.

Huw Allen:

And the MBA for me, I think for everybody, but specifically for me is a hugely, hugely transformative time. I'm 32 this week. Realistically, when I came to the MBA... Maybe I'm being a bit self-deprecating here and everyone tells me not to be, but this was a bit of a last chance for me. I really wanted to get out of working film production. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but I knew that being here was something that would enable me to just entirely like metamorphosize, I think that's the right word, my life. And it's turned everything inside out, like every aspect of my life: personal professional, mental, physical, romantic, whatever. All of that stuff has been turned entirely inside out. I mean, thank God because I felt like I was in a bit of a rut, but that doesn't come for free.

Huw Allen:

And so, it's not necessarily the pressures of the MBA, because it's such a broad, almost holistically nebulous sort of thing where everything... People change very, very quickly. And I haven't probably noticed the change in myself, and I probably won't notice until after I've left. But you notice it in other people enormously and-

Bartek Ogonowski:

Other people within the MBA or...

Huw Allen:

Yeah. Other people within the MBA, and then also when you can contextualize your life outside of the MBA. You go, "Oh, right. Okay. Well, there's a big void actually between where I was and where I am now." And you volunteer for that, but it's a very odd thing that an academic course can change every single aspect of your life when realistically on paper, you just think, "Well, I'm just going to lectures," but no, it's a complete, not reset, but...

Bartek Ogonowski:

I get you. I mean, you just get pushed out of your normal ways of thinking, I guess.

Huw Allen:

Absolutely.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Obviously with the global cohort and with everyone coming with different views and opinions, it's been fascinating.

Huw Allen:

It has been fascinating.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Are you going to stay in the industry? Are you going to stay in media and...

Huw Allen:

I don't know. I mean, I'd like to... I know I don't really want to produce anymore, but I think it makes sense really to stay in that industry because I can speak the language and I understand it.

Bartek Ogonowski:

And you're good, as it goes back to the Oxford Union debate.

Huw Allen:

Actually, I mean, I am fantastic at it. No, but the thing is the industry moves so quickly. When I first joined, I thought, "Oh," I was like 22, and I was like, "Do you know what I should do? Set up a DVD company," because they were making a ton of money. And then literally within two years they were like, "Ha, ha. No, we don't do DVDs anymore." I mean, realistically it's very, very fluid and fast moving. You're getting a big intersect between tech and media.

Bartek Ogonowski:

The fascinating thing about Huw is that I can say one word related to tech and Huw's reaction...

Huw Allen:

No, don't do it. Please, don't do it.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Metaverse.

Huw Allen:

Oh God. Oh my... I'm going to turn up to work... I'm going to put on the goggles, and now I'm in work. What? Geeze. It's sort of everyone goes, "Oh my God, this is so cool." Has anyone turned around and gone like, "Is this ridiculous?" No, of course they haven't. And that's where I come in.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Anyways, we're not going to talk about the Metaverse today, but...

Huw Allen:

Another podcast.

Bartek Ogonowski:

I do think that's quite important because the future of the media world is not only in high tech I guess, but you've also got to have real personalities and you've got to be able to sustain that pressure.

Huw Allen:

It isn't written. Let's put it that way.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah. Yeah. Another good analogy, which I mentioned to Huw earlier is having so many things on in your brain and this concept of multitasking, which I think is... Most of our time in the MBA, we feel that pressure of a million things on, and Huw mentioned in the assessment week, maybe you don't because there's only one or two things to focus on. Same as like a computer, if you've got too many tabs open or too many applications open, it's not going to work. It's going to be that dull slowness. And I think that's what happens with our brains, as well, in terms of trying to deal with stresses and pressures. And if there's too much going on, you just won't be able to actually refresh until you've closed those applications.

Huw Allen:

That's actually right. Every single day, something's going on here and especially because we're in Trinity where everyone goes like, "Okay, fine. I want to just say yes to everything." And to be honest, I mean that is the right way to do it, a bit of sleep deprivation because you've spent more time with people doing different things is probably right. But there are certain times. So last Sunday I realized I was like, "I'm not doing anything." And I watched all of Stranger Things and didn't even leave my house. And I realized that was the first time I'd done that in maybe nine months. And I was like, "Well, I'm watching television. Like what was this luxury?" But, but it was-

Bartek Ogonowski:

I don't think I've watched TV in the MBA.

Huw Allen:

Yeah. Exactly, right? But I realized how really beneficial that was to me. Or not being on your own. I'm a bit of social animal as you can probably tell by everything about me.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Even by his voice, the podcast..

Huw Allen:

Well, I have a face for radio. Giving yourself time, even though every time I've tried to do it, I've been like, "I don't want to be here. What am I sitting here on my own for? I want to go out doing X, Y, and Z." but you sometimes have to just slightly give yourself... What did we say? I was talking about this with our friend. I think it was Ava the other day. And we said, it's better to go and have five nights, days, whatever activities where you are fully present, and you can make the most of it than seven and you half ass all of them, and you feel like drained and crap. It's not helpful. And that balance and learning how that works, it's really important. And you kind of learn to self-regulate it. That's what I've noticed a lot.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Well, yeah. And I know this whole series of the podcasts have been the future of business. And I know today we've taken a bit of a different spin in it's because you, and I mean, you, not Huw.

Huw Allen:

One, the Royal we.

Bartek Ogonowski:

But people need to be clear-minded focused to actually be present in their jobs to be present in whatever their future of business is, from producing films to whatever the future holds for you, not Huw.

Huw Allen:

Well, I'm hoping that I'm going to be king one day. So hopefully...

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah. So next podcast we'll do from the royal palace or something.

Huw Allen:

Buckingham Palace, yeah.

Bartek Ogonowski:

But I think that's just so key that the focus is always on you as opposed to the actual business that you're doing. We don't have much time left.

Huw Allen:

No, let's go on.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Yeah. It's been an interesting conversation. I know we can continue this after this podcast in the cafeteria.

Huw Allen:

Yeah, thank God.

Bartek Ogonowski:

But I do think that maybe on a good closing note, there's going to be a lot of people listening to this that are either current MBA students or prospective MBA students or past MBA students. And I think everyone will be going through similar challenges in their specific industry. And no one's perfect. But with someone that's gone through high pressure environments, that's gone through and openly spoken about these panic attacks. What is your advice? Particularly, I mean, we've got two strong male characters sitting on this chair.

Huw Allen:

Silverbacks, yeah.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Your future Kings. I mean, but for anyone and particularly in males, we're discussing that. What is your advice to them to handle themselves in the future?

Huw Allen:

I genuinely think, and I've kind of come to this conclusion since being here. We've got this mental health and wellbeing Telegram group, is talking about it. And I know that that actually sounds so simple, but actually it's so hard, especially for men. And I'm not here being like, "I am a pioneer of vulnerability," but equally I am very okay with talking about how I feel well... Because all I do is talk, but I'm very okay with talking about how I feel and saying, "Today was crap," or, "I didn't like this," and "This was really bad," because I've been sitting around feeling like, "I'm just miserable. I'm just going to sit here and not do anything." My best self is to just talk about it. And it doesn't need to be... Obviously having therapy is super important, but talking about it with your friends, with people around you. I mean, in theory, depending on your industry and you know, I only know my own really.

Huw Allen:

You talk about it with people that you work with. You can talk about it with your... Realistically to be open and transparent about it, makes it so much easier. It takes the pressure out because what it does is it goes, "Okay, I feel this way." You don't add anything on top of it, of like, "I feel this way, but I can't show it. I shouldn't talk about it because it's going to make me look weak. It's going to make me look this, da, da, da, da." And that internal, what they used to call psychomachia, you can look that one up later, that thing is really, really, really, really important to just a spell. Talking about it is absolutely fine. And what happens is it becomes a symbiotic thing, where you go and help other people.

Huw Allen:

Having that dialogue around it, where it's open and available also takes the power away from it. One of my favorite things I've ever read is that anxiety is just conspiracy theories about yourself. When you

contextualize it like that, it makes you go, "Yeah, actually this is total rubbish." And obviously it doesn't mean it's not real. It doesn't mean you don't feel it, but what it does is it just means, "Okay, what's going to happen? You going to get sacked? Probably going to get another job." It's not so much. Not everything is life and death, although 9% inflation rate in this country, traveling into a recession, not looking good. Conversely-

Bartek Ogonowski:

The next podcast session in the UK.

Huw Allen:

No, what I mean is that what I've learned really is that life goes on, stuff happens. And you will retrospect your life and all the stuff you're worrying about today, you'll be like, "Ugh, yeah. Probably actually just completely inconsequential." And then if you can kind of take a step out and don't be so in it and try and see the wood for the trees and just look big picture, I mean that's honestly the thing that has helped me the most this year.

Bartek Ogonowski:

Anyways, folks, that's all we have for today. And we just want to thank Huw very much for being here and giving up his time. I know he's got a lecture now.

Huw Allen:

Yeah, I do.

Thank God.

Bartek Ogonowski:

That's all from the future business. And for more stay tuned and follow our pages. And we'll hear from you soon.