



PRO THOUGHTS

# Animated woman: my journey to leading an animation studio

AWUK's board member Georgina Hurcombe discusses women's position in the animation industry and reflects on running a studio as a young woman

**I** founded LoveLove Films when I was 25 years old after being made redundant. I had been working in the industry for a few years, but the redundancy really knocked my confidence. Looking back now, it was one of the best things that could have happened to me, as it allowed me to consider my next steps. Full of passion (and naivety!), I decided to start my own business.

Through a combination of way too much coffee and a rented desk, I started to build my studio. In the early days of the company, I gained clients by approaching people, networking anywhere and everywhere, working around the clock and, most importantly, I'd like to think I was friendly.

Running a business wasn't always easy. I've found that it can be a lot like riding a rollercoaster; one minute you're on top of the world, and the next, it feels like the cart is about to fly off the tracks, but you take a corner and are riding high once more.

Things that I thought would never go wrong did go wrong. In my first office, the roof collapsed and we basically had an indoor waterfall! After that, I moved our team into an old Gospel hall that I had found for rent on Gumtree. It was beautiful, with

parquet floors and a stunning high ceiling, but it was also a bit of a mess. The old man who had owned it for over 30 years clearly hadn't maintained it, but it was the kind of space that I had dreamed about for the team. I put a deposit down, and within the first week the boiler broke down, and our roof started to leak (again!). The leaking roof then became the inspiration behind our music video for Joss Stone's *The Love We Had*, which went on to get over 11 million views online.

The next hurdle was when we were told that the building was being repossessed, as our landlord hadn't been keeping up with his mortgage payments. Again, full of naivety, I put in an offer to buy the building from him – which he accepted. I then had the daunting task of figuring out how to buy a building.

I spent days and days writing a 60-page business plan, detailing the reasons my local bank should help me buy this beautiful old building. I went into the bank and pitched my heart out for about 40 minutes, only to be told that he was only the man who helped me fill out the forms.

I pitched again to the regional bank manager a couple of weeks later. I was thrilled when they agreed to help me buy

the building. I spent months renovating it – including one unfortunate incident where I had to fix the sewage drain and got covered head to toe in... yep! Those were difficult times, but nearly ten years later I look around at our stunning, bespoke studio and laugh at the memories of me literally covered in poo.

Starting a business is challenging for anyone, but starting a business as a young woman came with its own unique barriers that I feel are important to raise awareness of.

I have certainly experienced many examples of sexism throughout my career, from being asked when my boss is joining me at a meeting, to being told that I could not attend a networking event because it was for "serious businessmen". I've often been to networking events where I was the only woman in the room. I remember one audio-visual event early on in my career – before I had started the company – where a client got very handsy. Luckily, I was with another colleague who had to physically pull the client off me and allow me to escape. When I, shaken, told my boss, he shrugged his shoulders and told me to try and avoid that client. I would love to be able to say that these things have completely changed since



Aardman have been appointed as the distribution partner for LoveLove Films' preschool series *Pop Paper City*, which encourages children to be creative

I started the company almost ten years ago, but unfortunately, many women experience similar obstacles themselves.

I feel very fortunate to now be in the position where I can pass on some of the advice that helped me get through the tougher points in my career to where I am now. Firstly, you have to be confident, no matter how hard this can be sometimes. In the early days of LoveLove Films, there were times when I felt my confidence slip because of the barriers I too frequently experienced because of my gender. Being confident in your own abilities, as well as seeking out and taking advice is a winning formula.

Of course, this can be difficult – I recently read that over 6 in 10 women in the UK suffer from imposter syndrome. I have seen this so many times in my own friends, who ask me whether they are experienced enough to go for jobs that I know they are more than qualified for. I always tell them to just go for it – what do you have to lose? This has become a personal motto for me. I tend to go for things, and just ask people, because the worst thing they can do is say no, and if they do, it's not the end of the world.

One of the most wonderful things about this industry is the support networks available and the incredibly friendly atmosphere of the children's TV and animation industry. I have met some truly wonderful women who have provided me with incredible guidance as my business has transitioned from producing graphics and TV adverts into children's television.

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Organisations like Animated Women UK have provided me with amazing opportunities to meet more like-minded women in diverse stages of their careers. The Helen North programme introduced me to lots of women, from juniors entering the industry to senior women doing really amazing work in VFX and animation. My network has grown tenfold, not only with

new associates but with new friends too, and I have learned so much from these incredible women.

LoveLove Films recently signed a distribution deal with Aardman for our children's TV show in development, *Pop Paper City*, which has been a great step in the direction we want our company to go in. Again, I have had so much support from people in all areas of the animation industry, and it is lovely to feel like you have a network of people wanting you to do well.

To conclude, if you're a woman who works in animation or visual effects: seek out opportunities, surround yourself with people who are passionate, listen to advice, and don't stress out too much – I always tell my team "we're producing animations not saving lives". Most importantly, believe in yourself, surround yourself with a great team of people, and go for it.

Georgina Hurcombe is the founder and managing director of Bournemouth-based animation studio LoveLove Films. She became a board member of Animated Women UK in May 2019