

Flexible working

Beyond the side hustle: the new online learning entrepreneurs

The 'great resignation' — plus soaring numbers of students seeking career skills — are creating a global boom in digital learning

Jill Martin Wrenn APRIL 14 2022

Entrepreneur Gayneté Jones is the founder of an online course called Cubicle Ditch Academy. Her seven-week programme, costing approximately \$1,000, teaches students to turn their side hustles into full-time jobs and work for themselves.

Based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Jones crafted her course using videos recorded on her phone and creating slide decks in the graphic design platform Canva. It generated \$70,000 in its first week, attracting students from Pakistan to the US, Kuwait and Bermuda, where she was born and raised.

Jones is part of a wave of entrepreneurs who are capitalising on the soaring global interest in online courses. The pandemic sparked [growth in online MBAs](#), and normalised digital corporate training and remote school learning. Now, solo entrepreneurs are seeking niches where they can earn money from students who want to gain à la carte career skills that aren't covered in traditional classrooms.

Estimates vary about the value of the global online education market, but all agree it is growing dramatically. The scale will reach \$350bn by 2025, according to industry data source [Research and Markets](#) in a 2019 report. That would mark a nearly 30 per cent rise from the previous year. [Global Market Insights](#) predicts that the value of the e-learning market will hit \$1tn in 2027.

Jones says her own journey from corporate employee to business owner inspired her course, which teaches students to make the same leap. "It's all the things they need to build up that side hustle to a place that they can eventually leave their cubicle, if that's something that they want to do," she says.

"So it teaches them the branding, but more important than that, it teaches them how to find an audience, and really create the thing that's going to be substantial and help the person at the end of the day."

The course plays a key part in her portfolio career. Jones is also founder and CEO

of the menstrual care brand, **Best, Periodt**. She hosts a podcast called **Freedom Slay**, which focuses on entrepreneurs looking for financial freedom. “It’s the genesis of a megabrand!” she says.

The pandemic accelerated a global trend of employees quitting corporate jobs and launching their own enterprises, particularly in industries such as media and marketing. The so-called “[great resignation](#)” opens the door to students looking for options beyond corporate jobs, and creators chasing potential pathways to passive income.

Online course creation is playing a key role in this shift. “It’s a brilliant tactic, because we’re online more now,” says Lisa Gooder, co-founder of One Eleven Partners, a New York City-based brand strategy and content marketing agency. Clients who used to seek mentions in mainstream media are now spearheading their own content. “Brands are becoming content creators,” Gooder says. Creating and owning content empowers more people to launch their own brands, as start-up numbers skyrocket.

More than 5.3mn people filed applications to start new businesses last year in the US, according to [data from the US Census Bureau](#), more than a 50 per cent rise from 2019. The number of newly incorporated companies in the UK rose nearly 15 per cent between the fourth quarter of 2019 and the same period in 2021, according to [Companies House data](#).

Online classes allow entrepreneurs to scale coaching sessions beyond their immediate circle of clients, because students can watch courses virtually long after the teacher has uploaded the content.

While [online MBAs](#) and massive open online courses, or Moocs, offer free online classes backed by [established universities](#), there is a rising wave of competing courses launched and marketed by solo entrepreneurs alone, without the might of a company or a university behind them. Thanks to a proliferation of online course creation platforms, such as Kajabi, Teachable, Thinkific, and many others, the market is soaring.

“Right now, it feels like this is the boom,” says Marianne Cantwell, who has been coaching clients on how to launch businesses for the past decade. “When I started out, no one was doing this,” she says.

Newly based in Los Angeles, Cantwell started leading online career coaching

NOW BASED IN LOS ANGELES, Cantwell started leading online career coaching sessions ten years ago while living in London. She wanted to visit her family in Australia, without taking a break from her fledgling business. “What I loved about it,” she says, “was I suddenly had people who found my work online, but didn’t live in London, all joining this group.”

Most of her courses cost about \$2,500, and last about four to six months, such as her new offering, Free Range Academy. Her courses provide Cantwell with a robust revenue stream. Still, Cantwell says, “I don’t think that online courses are a magic bullet.” Without a solid marketing plan, profit can be precarious. “Do not just put up an online course and hope people find it,” she says.

Fiona Ellis-Chadwick, senior lecturer in marketing and retailing at Loughborough University, points out that the ease of launching online courses opens the door to a multitude of online course teachers.

“Anybody can do it,” she says. “Can anyone make money out of it is another question.” While an enterprising business owner can create a course with a smartphone and an online platform, the monetisation piece can be trickier.

“If you’re going to make money, you’ve got to be an accomplished e-marketer or you’ve got to be very lucky,” Ellis-Chadwick says. “In the long-term, to build a successful and sustainable business, you’ve got to have a quality package.”

Gayneté Jones agrees. “Courses are great, but the reason people go to the courses is because they know me — either through the podcast, or from social, from someone else’s podcast or an interview they’ve seen,” she says. Online courses don’t sell themselves.

How to launch your own online course





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If you would like to create a video course that allows you to reach students all over the world, experts advise making a plan before you start paying for a course creation platform. “My biggest piece of advice is — if you want to do a course, do not make your first step to invest in course technology,” says Marianne Cantwell, author of the book, *Be A Free Range Human*, “That’s the last step.” She has been teaching online courses for ten years. “You should have your course sketched out first,” she says.

Once you’re happy with your content, choose a platform to host your course. See if you can test drive a free option before you commit. You can choose whether you would like a high-touch, support-heavy option, or a light-touch option with less IT support if you’re tech savvy.

“If you don’t enjoy the marketing, then make sure you’re pricing your product so that you don’t need a thousand people (to sign up for your course),” says Cantwell.

And don’t expect a passive revenue stream right away. “I would never start from zero, and say, ‘I’m going to create a passive revenue stream’,” says Cantwell. “Focus on who you’re helping, then step back and say, ‘This worked, let’s make it bigger’.”

The writer is the host of the podcast ‘How to Build a Village’

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