

Turning the world Crimson

Janine Manning CA describes her experience of investing in and working for New Zealand's hottest young talent in the education world, Jamie Beaton.

BY ALEX WRIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRAN HALES

MOST PEOPLE approached by a fresh-faced 18-year-old student looking for their first investment in their new business venture would run a mile. Not Janine Manning.

But then again, it's hardly surprising. The 53-year-old director of Crimson Education has form with start-ups.

Her list of investments is impressive: Acuite (real-time construction project reporting), Career Engagement (professional careers management for large companies), MoovMe (home moving service), Rush Digital Interaction (high-end software engineering) and her sole UK investment, Stitched (augmented reality blinds and curtains). Three years ago she decided to throw her lot in with New Zealand whiz-kid Jamie Beaton's new company, Crimson. She has never looked back.

Crimson's business model is to help students win entry to elite global universities such as Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Oxford and Cambridge, against competition from thousands of others. It charges fees for tutoring and other services to help clients achieve that goal.

Crimson has worked with more than 20,000 students, with a 93% success rate in placing applicants in the world's top universities, as well as securing more than US\$35 million in financial aid and

scholarships since it launched in 2013. It has more than 2000 tutors and mentors on its books and offices in 15 countries, including New Zealand, Australia, China, Thailand and the UK.

The company is valued at US\$160 million after raising US\$30 million in its most recent investment round in October 2016. Manning has put in NZ\$100,000 of her own money as well as representing Ice Angels, New Zealand's largest angel investor group. As a group, Ice Angels has so far put in NZ\$770,000.

"I love being involved with grassroots businesses where you have to roll your sleeves up and get things done," Manning explains. "And as an angel investor, I relish the set of challenges that brings as well, dealing with everyone from employees to large hedge fund investors."

Born in Wellington, Manning was educated at Feilding High School and graduated with a Bachelor of Business Studies from Massey University under Coopers & Lybrand's trainee accountant scheme. After moving to London, she took her first job in industry with US computer sales and leasing firm Businessland.

From there she went to work for one of its clients, Bell & Watson, where

she became a 40% shareholder before selling the business to MicroAge, then a US Fortune 500 company, in 1998. Returning to New Zealand the same year, Manning went back to her alma mater to lecture undergraduates in accounting, e-business and professional development, and teach innovation and entrepreneurship to MBA students.

A stint as professional development manager at Counties Manukau Rugby Football Union followed, before Manning became executive manager at the Association of Cambridge Schools in New Zealand. That was where she first met Jamie Beaton.

Beaton passed out of King's College, Auckland, with flying colours and was interning at Ice Angels before going to Harvard. He had started Crimson and was working in conjunction with the Association of Cambridge Schools running weekend classes for students.

Manning recalls that he approached her to see if she would be interested in becoming an angel investor, which she did. Then, a year later, when Beaton came back from Harvard, he asked her to become the lead investor with Ice Angels on the company's first funding round in 2014, and again in 2015.

She went to London and set up Crimson's European headquarters. ▶



‘We want to become the No.1 education brand in the same way that Apple and Coca-Cola are in their fields.’

“The rest is history,” she jokes.

Admitting that she would probably take more risks than most people her age, Manning said she knew what she was getting into with Beaton’s new venture. Her position at the Association of Cambridge Schools and knowledge of the education sector also helped.

“I didn’t think I was taking a huge risk because I knew the education sector,” says Manning. “And the fact that it was such a talented young individual as Jamie at the helm made it a no-brainer.”

It’s clear the feeling is mutual.

Beaton describes Manning as “incredibly charismatic and engaging”, while bringing a real energy to the room. It’s those attributes that have driven much of Crimson’s success and helped put it on the map.

What’s also apparent is that Manning gets a buzz out of working in such a young and dynamic environment as evidenced by the team she has assembled in London. That youthfulness is reflected at board level, where both Beaton and his co-founder girlfriend, Sharndre Kushor, both 22, are directors.

But there are also a couple of wise heads to keep them in line.

The first is Jason Lenga, of investment firm Tiger Global Management in New York, the city where Beaton used to work while studying at Harvard. Lenga has also headed international operations for Australian recruitment giant SEEK.

And the second wise head, of course, is Manning herself.

“When we started, we used to have this joke that I was the only adult on the board because Jamie and Sharndre were both under 20,” says Manning. “But, despite their age and lack of experience, they are both passionate about what they do and they have really stepped up to their roles of CEO and COO in a fast growing global business. It’s a huge responsibility at such an early age.

“Jamie really sets the tone and ethos of the company. He works very hard and believes passionately in the importance of education and helping people achieve their goals. And because everyone is so young and for many of them it’s their first business, they can

do things the way they want to, because they are not bound by convention.”

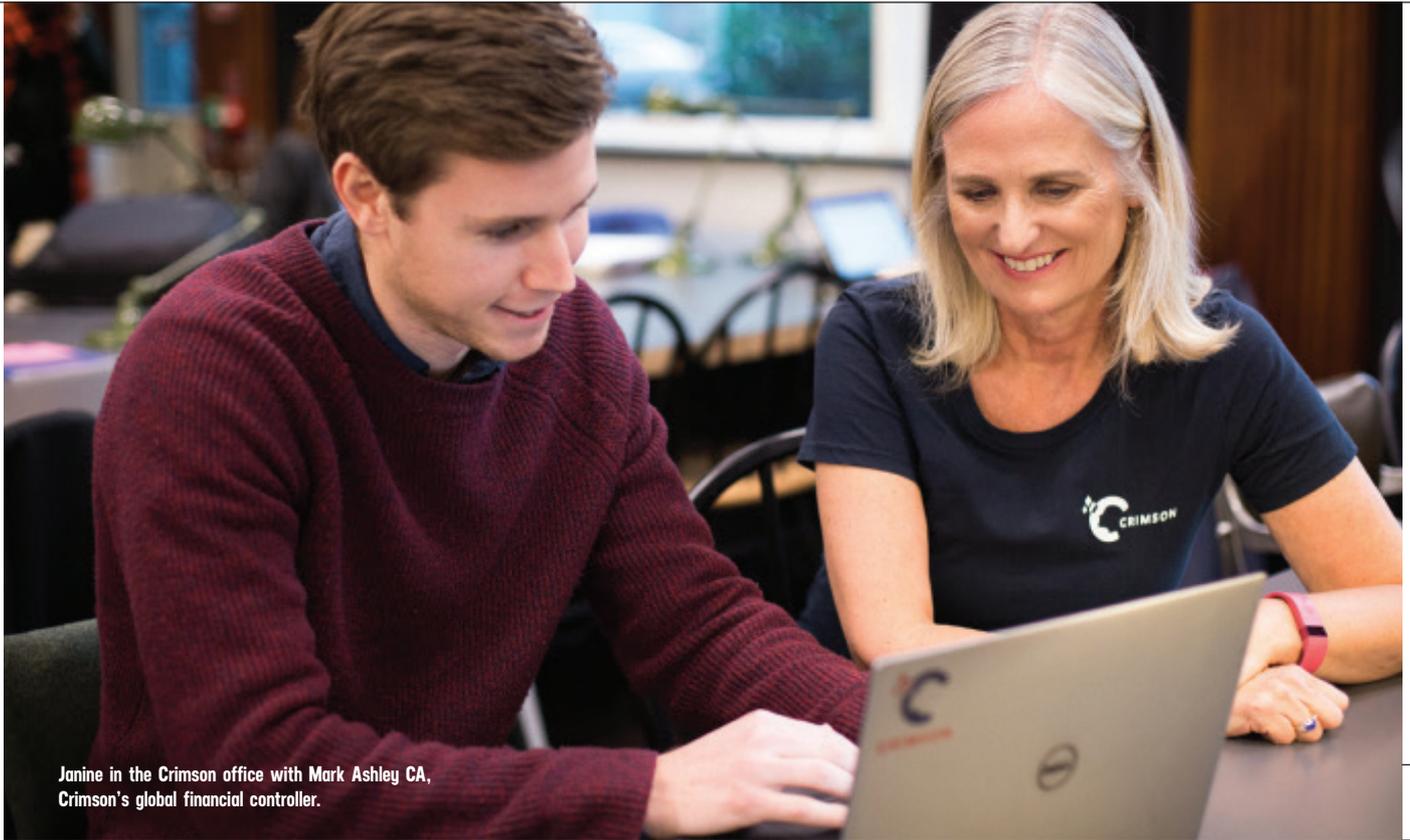
As in any business though, there are conflicts. But Manning, with her years of experience, gives as good as she gets.

“We’ve had our battles,” says Manning of Beaton. “And because of the way Jamie’s mind works, he’s constantly got all these great ideas going on in his head that need to be filtered.

“Jamie knows himself that you can have 100 new ideas but not all of them are going to work. He’ll often use me as a sounding board to get my view on a particular idea and to weed out the non-starters.

“Then we’ll sit down and go through the various stages required to implement an idea, such as personnel, investment and logistics. He’s very keen on debating new ideas but you need to go into any discussion with him fully prepared because he will quickly pick holes in your response if it’s not.”

Then there is co-ordinating Crimson’s global network of offices across separate time zones, with Beaton running operations from the US where he is studying for a Master of Education and



Janine in the Crimson office with Mark Ashley CA, Crimson's global financial controller.

Education Technology and an MBA at Stanford University, and Kushor based in New Zealand.

"Sometimes that can be a challenge," says Manning. "But we have a weekly conference call and technology makes keeping in touch easier. And, of course, Jamie often works through the night."

As a mother of four, Manning admits that the biggest challenge she has faced is juggling her family and career. But she has found that using her chartered accountant status as a transferable skill has helped her to overcome this.

"Being a qualified accountant has given me the flexibility to adapt my career so that I was able to fit in having kids with my working life," says Manning. "It's the most globally portable qualification that you can have, because wherever you go in the world it's recognised."

Another hurdle she has had to clear has been the rapid evolution of technology. But with a young tech savvy team around her, she has found it relatively easy to adapt.

"For someone of my generation, particularly working in start-ups, it

can be a challenge to keep up with the technology, so I naturally need to work a bit harder at it," says Manning. "But I'm lucky to have a good team."

A keen learner, Manning is herself studying for a Master of Social Innovation at the University of Cambridge, as well as being an active member of New Zealand Women's Business Network in London, mentoring a group of five women who are starting their own businesses.

And the most important lesson she has learnt during her career? "To understand that it's the people that drive any business," says Manning. "First there's the employees and then the customers and other stakeholders from the vendors and suppliers to the professional services firms and the banks."

"So it's critical to focus on building up strong and long-lasting relationships."

Manning is now well settled in the UK, but still returns to New Zealand three times a year to visit her children. Following her into accounting, her youngest daughter has just started at KPMG, while her eldest daughter and son are a lawyer and an investment

banker respectively, and her youngest son is studying law at university.

On a global scale, Crimson continues to grow organically through acquisitions when entering new countries and markets. And Manning, like Beaton, has aspirations to one day turn Crimson into the Coca-Cola or Apple of the education world, with Russia and the Far East in its sights.

"We have this saying in the company that we want to paint the world 'Crimson'," says Manning. "We want to become the No.1 education brand in the same way that Apple and Coca-Cola are in their fields."

For now though, Manning has stepped away from the day-to-day accounting and transitioned into more of a company secretarial and investor relations role. But she will always be grateful for her CA qualification.

"I still love doing the nuts and bolts accounting," says Manning. "It's been great to be able to apply my skills to an area that's one of my biggest passions in life." ●

ALEX WRIGHT is a UK-based writer and journalist specialising in business and finance.