

My First Year as a Director: PAYE, Porta 6 and Finding My Feet

Considering this journal was supposed to be published a month ago, I'll let you decide how my first year as a director went.

In my defence, the year involved starting a company, completing a degree, moving home, entering a new relationship and attempting to buy a property—all while learning that the letters marked “PAYE” did, in fact, apply to me.

Let me add some context.

Where it all began

When I started Vantage Bureau, I was living in Manchester—the city of creativity and, for me, reinvention.

I was flat-sharing for the first time with a man called Tim, who was probably the best stranger I could have ended up living with. Shout out to Tim!

I had left my job at Yankee Candle and started helping my dad, who owns an accountancy firm. Growing up around an accountancy business meant I was no stranger to the administrative jobs that other people might find boring.

One of my dad's friends had experienced rapid business growth. Like many directors, he didn't want to spend his time submitting bookkeeping every month when he could be focusing on moving his company forward.

That was where I came in.

I realised I could take time-consuming jobs off directors' hands, giving them more time to work on their businesses rather than constantly working in them. As I developed my skills, I could take on more responsibilities and give them even more of that time back.

That idea became Vantage Bureau.

I started helping other people, particularly with personal assistant work. Surprisingly, I was good at it. Even more surprisingly, I enjoyed it.

I have always loved helping people and feeling useful. It simply took me a while to realise I could build a business around it.

Graduation, adulthood and a new company

While the idea was taking shape, I was completing the final year of my bachelor's degree. In June 2025, I flew to Barcelona to graduate from GBSB Global Business School.

The degree itself might have been the easiest part of my university experience.

I had moved out at 18, lived in Manchester through COVID-19 and experienced the ups and downs of a young relationship during a pandemic. I worked in different environments, dealt with an aneurysm, formed important friendships and attempted the slightly terrifying task of becoming an adult.

Because I apparently enjoy doing everything at once, I graduated on 23 June 2025, turned 22 on 25 June and officially started Vantage Bureau on 9 July.

The director I imagined

Before starting the company, I thought becoming a director would transform me overnight.

I imagined waking up early each morning, putting on a suit and following a perfect routine. I would feel permanently inspired, motivated and creative. My life would somehow become simpler and more organised.

Apparently, becoming a director does not include that particular upgrade.

Instead, I had to learn about PAYE, tax, legislation, insurance, marketing and finding clients in a rapidly changing, AI-driven world.

I also learned that being an accountant's daughter does not make you immune to late fines.

Despite receiving some very clear PAYE letters, I decided they surely didn't apply to me.

They did.

The fines did too.

This was also around the time I discovered Porta 6 wine. The two events may or may not be connected.

When working for yourself means never stopping

The hardest part was not the paperwork. It was deciding what I should do every day when nobody else was setting my hours or creating my schedule.

When I first started, I worked 17-hour days. I skipped meals and, at one point, started talking about work in my sleep.

I still find routine difficult, although I am beginning to build one. I recently started following The Miracle Morning, waking—or trying to wake—at 6:22 a.m. and spending an hour on its SAVERS routine.

It has only been a week, so I am not ready to declare myself miraculously transformed just yet.

I have had to remind myself that not having traditional nine-to-five hours does not mean I need to work every available hour. Switching off remains difficult. Sometimes I am still "Director Alex" long after the working day should have ended.

There is a certain irony in building a company that gives other directors more time while failing to protect any time for myself.

Carrying the responsibility

For a long time, Vantage Bureau depended heavily on one client. Their business was experiencing a difficult period of change, and that brought another side of being a director into focus.

Worrying about the survival of your own company is hard enough. When you care deeply about your clients and what they are going through, the responsibility can feel even heavier.

Clients often become more than names on an invoice. You see the pressure that running a company puts on them, and naturally, some of that pressure affects you too.

There are still moments when I feel completely out of my depth. Everything rests on my shoulders, and there is no manager waiting to make the difficult decisions for me.

However, I have never seriously considered giving up.

I know what I don't want: I don't want somebody else deciding when I work, how I work or when I am allowed to eat my sandwich.

That leaves one option—work for myself and make it work.

We may not always know the exact path, but we have to keep moving and learn to enjoy the journey. Sometimes the best outcomes come from the periods when we struggle the most.

Learning to regain control

My biggest lesson has been the importance of work-life balance. It is a boundary I wish I had established much sooner.

For a while, working for myself genuinely changed my life. I started going to the gym regularly, eating better and feeling happier. Having greater control gave me more discipline, and my brain became quieter. Moving again and beginning the process of buying a home disrupted that routine. Writing this journal has forced me to reflect and reassess, so I have now joined a gym again.

It is not about trying to fix everything at once. It is about looking at what is within my control and beginning there.

Success does not mean getting every part of life right simultaneously. It means recognising what you can control, taking responsibility for it and learning to block out some of the surrounding noise.

The victories nobody sees

Some of my proudest moments might not look particularly dramatic from the outside.

I am proud whenever a client sees me as their point of contact—the person they trust, rely upon and turn to when something needs to be handled.

Being useful is where this journey began. Becoming someone people can depend upon has meant more to me than they probably realise.

I am also proud that I wake up every morning and get to do what I want to do. That freedom is something I never want to take for granted.

Was the first year successful?

Yes—because Vantage Bureau is entering year two, the first of many.

In year two, I want to block out more of the noise. I want to remember that work is not everything and that I am allowed to have a life outside being a director.

Vantage Bureau is a major part of my identity, but it is not the whole of it.

I also want to pause occasionally and acknowledge what I have already achieved. I am the founder of a successful company that allows me to help people I understand and relate to. That deserves recognition, even if I am still learning to give it to myself.

My first year as a director was not perfectly organised. I did not wake up motivated every morning, my routine remains a work in progress and the suit made fewer appearances than expected.

But I built something of my own. I helped people. I made mistakes, paid the occasional fine and learned that I can keep moving even when I cannot see the entire path ahead.

As a friend of mine says: make the plan, then trade the plan.

For now, I will remain focused on what I want, work on what I can control and continue learning when to switch off.

And, in my case, always listen to Dad.