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The joint chief executive of the fast-fashion etailer talks to **Becky Waller-Davies** about her rise to business success and the background to her drive and determination

Boohoo boss Carol Kane

Inspiring creative stars of the future

"I WANTED TO BE ABLE TO walk down the high street and see something I'd touched," says Carol Kane of her ambitions as a graduate, fresh out of design school. She could not have known that, years later, while no longer able to spot garments on a shopfloor that she had had a hand in designing, she would build a fashion giant that threatens the stores in which they are sold.

Kane is one half of the management of fast-fashion etailer Boohoo. Together with joint chief executive Mahmud Kamani, Kane has built the business from scratch over the past decade – this November marks its 10th anniversary.

"I remember signing off the first home page and taking the first day's trade," Kane says.

"Three people in a tiny room. We were in this office but it was full of other companies. We were the babies."

The office she's referring to is a vast warren of studios and workspaces on Manchester's Dale Street. The industrial-age warehouse was built to serve the cotton industry, and now the rag trade is firmly ensconced there once again but in a form that would be unrecognisable to its first inhabitants.

Design for life

Kane came from the creative and sourcing side of the industry, graduating from design school.

A natural creative, she says she is at her happiest at the beginning of the season when the business is all about the new collections and campaigns. "Sit me down on the floor with a bag of new samples," she says. "I am in my element there. I'm not a chief exec then, I'm just having a bit of playtime."

That creativity is complemented, however, by a fiercely commercial mind. When asked,



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as she shows off the offices, through corridors full of rails bursting with new summer product, which season she prefers, Kane doesn't hesitate: "Spring/summer. It's a much longer season, there's more to sell."

Such canny commercialism has been with Kane since the beginning.

"In my early 20s I thought I could conquer the world," she says of her first business. It failed in a month – the drive to succeed was there but the all-important capital was not.

She spent her first decade of working life in a tiny enterprise that comprised of Kane and the owner.

"I didn't have the salary of a senior role but I had to do the role that a more senior person would do if it had been a larger company," she says. "I don't know if that was fortunate or unfortunate, but it gave me a wide skillset, which has benefited me. I was not only designing. I was sourcing, costing, doing paperwork, taking documents to the bank to import goods, negotiating with the customer."

And, arguably more importantly, it taught her to trust her instincts and not doubt that she would achieve her aims.

"I have always had lots of autonomy because I didn't have anyone else to tell me how to do something," she says. "I have

a lot of self-belief. And a clear vision.

"I may be perceived as being driven, but it never felt deliberate. I am quite laid-back and open but everyone tells me I am driven, so I suppose I must be. I think it is instinctive. I don't force it on myself, I just want to do it. I like to be in the driving seat."

Fast fashion

Kane met Kamani in her mid-twenties when she joined Pinstripe, at where she was director of buying and design at 27 years old.

The pair have now worked together for 23 years, including time before Boohoo, turning Pinstripe from a small business to one supplying much of the high street.

"We were at the value end of the market and were a bit of a go-to team for fast fashion," she says of that time. "We had a DNA of sourcing quickly, designing quickly and knowing how to import quickly. Retailers were then working six months in advance, internationally, and we were working two."

Not much has changed. Boohoo's strengths lie in its fast-fashion model. It produces 500 lines a week, and has 20,000 lines live.

On one of the exposed walls of Kane's glass-and-brick office hangs a screen that

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shows the best-selling lines being snapped up by customers across the globe. It updates every 15 minutes, allowing a near-instant glimpse into the mindset of the Boohoo customer.

Such screens are replicated across the office, allowing many departments a close to real-time look at the fruits of their labour.

But the fast-paced working environment brings with it certain demands. Kane has said on many occasions that she can't do down time.

When asked about that, she says: "In retail, especially in ecommerce, it doesn't stop. The doors don't close. We are dispatching through the night. It is very tough to have a balance."

"But I don't mind that. I did a lot of work on myself, trying to achieve a work/life balance, and it was too much pressure, trying to balance it."

"I decided not to bother and that's the balance I've found – not trying too hard. Be there when you need to be there, take time out for a couple of hours when you don't."

DIY attitude

At present, Boohoo is beating the high street at its own game, turning over trends faster than

you can say "nineties' grunge". For Kane, being at the forefront of that is a big part of the excitement.

"When I was growing up, if you wanted something a bit different you had to make it," she says. "You got your sewing machine out and made it yourself. The high street did not have great young fashion."

"Instead you had to buy a bit from the high street, go to a thrift store, customise and put your own thing together. I always thought there was a gap in the market."

That creative streak is also evident in her choice of role models.

When asked whether she looked up to any women when starting out in her career, Kane says: "I would have loved to, but in retail I haven't had the opportunity of working with a woman I could look to. It is a bit sad really. Until I was a business partner I had always reported to a man."

Casting her net wider, she says that most of her inspiration comes from creative women. She lists Debbie Harry, Kate Bush – and the Queen. "That poise," she smiles. "And her fashion choices are great."

Pastel suit dresses aside, Kane says she almost wishes she didn't have to talk about the issue of women making it to the top of

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businesses but reflects that "the more I listen to the topic about women in retail, especially at board level, the more I realise that it is really important."

"There are not enough of us. I do need to lead and set an example. It is just part of what you have to do as a woman."

But while Kane wants to encourage women generally, it's the creatives whom she especially wants to nurture into leadership roles. "It would be lovely to see a few more creative women coming through," she says. "If I could do anything with the next 10 years, it would be to inspire that."

"I would say to them 'don't believe you have reached your ceiling'. It is about belief. You have to want it. It is not for everyone, but it is doable – because I did it. And if I can, more people can."