

Wimbledon Women in Business – how entrepreneurship could be the solution working mothers are looking for

By Lucy Martin

Women set up businesses in a variety of circumstances, and for many reasons, but a universal driver is the prospect of more freedom and control over their lives, and the prospect of finding the unimaginable – *work that is rewarding and actually compatible with motherhood at the same time.*

Why do women set up businesses?

For some people the *idea* is the most important thing. **Bella Mehta**, coach, psychologist and trainer specialising in women and self-employment, was inspired to coach by people who had coached her. *“I’d previously worked within organisations on large change projects, where I was coaching team members and being coached. At work, I saw how personal relationships were crucial to success, and how changes in behaviour of any team member (myself included) could make life better for all of us. I set up my business to focus on the “inner life” of employees, and to support organisations and people in making work a fulfilling part of life.”*

For others, like me, the important thing was *ownership and control*. At 35 years old I suddenly felt I was simply too old to be bossed around by managers who I felt did not appreciate the skills I had to offer. Business ownership was the glittering prize which I believed would give me the chance to do something brilliantly, to control its shape and direction, and to reap the rewards directly. I had decided to set up on my own a long time before I thought of setting up a **Gina’s Nannies**. I knew I could outperform the competition, and I was good at putting people in touch – it was logical.

For others, business ownership is the logical change of direction when *circumstances* change: **Alice Wood, Virgin Vie consultant**, has a background was in women’s magazine publishing. She became a Virgin Vie consultant when her children left home for university, *“I enjoyed publishing, but realised a few years ago that I needed a change of direction. I’d always been interested in cosmetics and skincare and loved learning about make-up. I was invited to a Virgin party and was so impressed that I decided to become a consultant. I had never been involved in direct sales before so it was a massive learning curve, but I wasn’t alone. One of the great things about it is that there is a very professional and supportive culture, and an excellent mentoring network – in this business, women help to empower other women by sharing their knowledge and being supportive to each other.”*

The stress of combining motherhood with a big corporate career took its toll on **Elaine Barbrook**. She set up **Promise Design** to work around her children's school hours after 15 years in a high profile graphic design career. *"I realised that my family life couldn't take the pressure of my husband and I both working such long hours. Setting up my own design business was a logical step to take, as I always loved what I did, just not what it did to me..."*

For **Louise Cooper** things just snowballed - her hobby became her business and her life. She set up **Gingham Hearts** when she received glowing feedback from parents attending her children's parties. She started helping friends out with their parties for free, and gradually realised that she had a talent people were keen to pay for. She now regularly organises large events, and has built up a reputation for outstanding customer service, as she treats each party as if it were her own.

The motherhood guilt thing

Most of us wonder (and often worry about) how our circumstances, actions and choices affect our children's futures. We are constantly bombarded with reports telling us what is best for our children, in particular whether or not the children of working mothers suffer in later life. We may choose not to set up a business for many reasons, including how it may affect our children, but our children should never be an excuse for not achieving our goal. A lot of working mothers will admit (obviously out of the earshot of the non-working mothers) that working revives them, gives them a sense of themselves, a reminder of who they are outside their role as mother and wife, and actually helps them be a better mother when they come home. I know that when I've had a good day at work, my children definitely share the benefit of that with me. I am physically and mentally recharged, much more attentive and enthusiastic and enjoy my time with them much more. and life goals!

As women, we have natural advantages to succeeding in business. Networking, communication, sensitivity, co-operation, community concerns and authenticity all come easily to us. As mothers we are natural multi-tasking experts, peacemakers, providers and managers. Motherhood should not be seen as a barrier to self-employment, but rather a qualification that opens the door to it.

*If you want to find out more about setting up your own business, please email Wimbledon Women in Business info@wwib.org.uk. For coaching sessions to explore whether this is a realistic option for you, email bella@enspiral.co.uk Lucy Martin and Bella Mehta are co-writing *Make it Your Business* scheduled for publication by How To Books in September 06.*