



LEAVING THE CORPORATE NEST: ADAPTING TO A SMALL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

“After 34 years in corporate life with BT, ntl and Tiscali, I thought I had all the tools I needed to run my own business. I was so wrong.”

BY SHARON PINK

Richard Campos discovered the hard way that the transition from the large-corporate world to small business ownership can be, as he puts it, mind-blowingly challenging.

“It was far more of a culture shock than I anticipated,” Campos says, “and that surprised me, because I had considered and planned carefully how I would adapt away from the cushion of a major corporation. But I hadn’t bargained for the additional skills you have to develop instantly when you’re working on your own, not least electrical and computer maintenance, and the additional costs of office furniture and supplies, not forgetting that you’ve got to go out and get the clients to get your business started.”

Independent business adviser Mel Lockett certainly agrees about the need for multi-tasking, describing his current role as a combination of executive mentor, manufacturing expert, tea-boy, telemarketer, credit controller and secretary. After 20 years as a senior director with companies including Vickers and Dresser, Lockett says small business is all about fending for yourself. “I hadn’t realised just how much my PA organised my daily life,” he says. “From arranging all your own appointments to emptying the bins, now it’s all down to you.”

Adrian Diamond, who set up on his own after 25 years in the security industry, says that people coming out of a large company must understand that “the game’s changed”. Customers and suppliers you had a good relationship with before won’t necessarily deal with you as a one-man band, he explains, adding “You’ve lost the mantle of authority that a senior role in a major corporation confers on you. If your assumptions for the future are based on the credibility that you had before, you’ll just get blown away.”

For Diamond, there was a further adjustment to make: working from home. “By using our house as my workplace,” he says, “I was basically invading my wife’s space. We sorted it out – at least I think she’s still downstairs somewhere – but it was very tricky at the start.”

Psychologist Dr Lesley Morris says many people underestimate the impact of

turning ‘home space’ into ‘office’ and spending much more time with their partner or children during the day. “Separation of home and work has many valuable contexts,” she explains. “Firstly, not everyone has the space to put a quiet room aside as an office. So the new homeworker might be dealing with television noise, children’s activities, all kinds of normal living. Add to that one partner trying to adjust to life outside the corporate womb, with the associated insecurity and potential financial worries, and you can have a powder-keg situation.”

For business adviser Chris Miller, it was important to establish the boundaries between work and home life once he set up his office ‘in-house’, explaining that his partner tended to assume that, as he was ‘home today’, all outstanding jobs in the house would get done.

On the positive side, the independent businesspeople we talked to were enjoying the flexibility that life outside the corporate structure gives them, citing more rapid decision-making, fewer long-winded meetings and simply being in control of

their own futures. Many mentioned the importance of a strong support network. “In a large corporate environment there is always someone else around to bounce ideas off,” says business development specialist Stuart McMillan. “Just getting a coffee brings you into contact with other people. Many of us have never had to deal with time on our own at work.” Motivation is more difficult to create artificially, McMillan explains, and everyone goes through times when they question what they are doing and what the outcome will be.

SME marketing consultant Phil Taylor emphasises that while a good support network can help combat any sense of isolation or uncertainty, it can also be invaluable in providing expert advice and assistance and sharing business opportunities. Taylor set up on his own 18 months ago after 20 years in marketing with engineering companies. The most difficult aspect of his change of career was adjusting to the “up and down” nature of the work – and associated income stream – but he now feels the transition period gave him valuable experience that he is using to support his clients.

According to Taylor, many small businesses make the mistake of relying too heavily on a limited range of customers. “I worked with a company that was initially doing very well with just two clients,” he says. “They didn’t look for any more customers because they were busy enough with the ones they had, but one customer got bought by a competitor and 40 per cent of my client’s revenue disappeared within three months – it took them two years to recover.”

All the people we talked to believed although the challenges of the transition from a large-company mentality can be daunting at first, you soon realise that being master of your own destiny is extremely empowering. As Richard Campos says: “Do I regret the move from the cosseted life of the high-flying executive? Not at all. I wish I had done this years ago.”

Phil Taylor agrees: “When I decided on this business, I committed wholeheartedly to making it a success,” he says, adding “In the corporate world, you see lots of senior managers with signs on their desks saying ‘The buck stops here.’ They’ve got no idea what that really means...”



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