

Finding jobs for others adds up for recruiter

Janine Perrett finds an innovative employment agency specialising in part-time bookkeepers.

OVERCOMING adversity can be the catalyst for entrepreneurial endeavour but, in the case of Kathryn MacMillan, plenty of others have benefited from her success.

As well as the mature-age employees and working mothers she has placed in jobs, many small businesses have found help with their paperwork burden, thanks to her innovative recruitment firm.

The biggest beneficiary is MacMillan herself, a former ballerina who overcame serious health problems to found Nine2Three Employment Solutions, which specialises in placing older workers in part-time bookkeeping and office support jobs.

Her biggest challenge today is managing the company's success.

In the past six months revenue has jumped 100 per cent and profits are up 250 per cent, so she is keen to maintain the momentum.

"I started from scratch and, because it is a young company, it is still coming off a small base" she says modestly. "I want to keep these figures going."

With turnover already running at about \$500,000 a year, she is hoping to achieve \$1 million this time next year. Not bad for someone who wanted to be a ballerina.

"I got very close but I was not quite perfect enough so I started teaching," she explains.

From the age of 19 MacMillan ran her own ballet school at the pavilion on Bondi Beach which at its height boasted 200 students and three staff.

But after 10 years she was diagnosed with the chronic autoimmune disease lupus. She was forced to take "bit of a rest" and, after the birth of her son, she found she missed working but faced problems re-entering the workforce.

"I knew a lot about management through running the ballet school but I had never worked for anyone else so I had no referees and my computer skills were not as good as they could be," MacMillan says.

"I responded to ads and went for clerical jobs but didn't get any interest. It really hit my self-confidence but I knew I could do it and I knew I had a lot to offer."

Two things changed her fate in 2000. Firstly she enrolled in a WOW course (Work Opportunities for Women) and then the introduction of the GST led her father-in-law to offer her work as a bookkeeper, as

she had done her own books for the ballet school.

"WOW gave me the confidence to get started and then someone gave me a chance," she says.

The firm's accountant offered her a traineeship but she explained that she had to drop her son off and pick him up each day so she could only work certain hours.

"I told her I would certainly work hard in that time and I would sit at my computer and bring a sandwich to work, and she agreed."

MacMillan completed business administration courses and soon found herself in demand among clients who were happy to accommodate her part-time hours of nine to three - it was the genesis of the small business idea.

"I came to the realisation that I am a good bookkeeper but not fantastic, so what do I have that the clients want? It was reliability, maturity, life skills, responsibility. I thought there were a whole lot of women in the same position who wanted flexible working hours."

Together with her chartered accountant husband, Ross, she launched Nine2Three in October 2003. She already had clients' support so they advertised for the staff.

Today the firm has 500 candidates on its books, primarily mature women returning to the workforce. While the focus is on bookkeepers, which account for 65 per cent of placements, their success has led clients to ask the firm to supply other clerical staff as well.

Competition is fierce in the recruiting world but Nine2Three offers more experienced workers for flexible hours. While it might be a point of difference it also means MacMillan has to work at explaining and selling the concept.

She describes the challenge as "educating the workplace and being a catalyst for change".

"They often have a set in their mind of 9 to 5 and we have to change their attitude and tell them we offer flexibility," she says.

"Companies ring us and say 'I need a bookkeeper three days a week full-time' and we say 'have you considered four days a week part-time? We try to make them change their thinking.'"

Small companies in particular are attracted to the concept as "they often only want someone once a month - and they don't want a school leaver".



The right moves ... former ballet school owner Kathryn MacMillan now helps mature women return to the workforce. Photo: Lisa Willtse

CHALLENGES FOR NINE2THREE EMPLOYMENT SOLUTIONS

- Educating the workplace and being a catalyst for change
- Managing resources to match growth
- Maintaining growth
- Progression from technician to strategic management

Nine2Three also services larger companies and can offer them traditional full-time bookkeepers if they prefer. MacMillan is keen to expand this corporate market.

Although the firm has a website it has not been used as an effective marketing tool until now, because it was set up as a frame-based site, which hampered search engine optimisation.

While she is keen to move into more traditional forms of advertising, she knows that she must be prepared - and there is no use increasing demand if she doesn't have the supply to meet it.

She has used the media to lift her own profile, writing articles on the highly newsworthy issue of mature-age workers, and she is keen to free herself from office duties to concentrate on things such as networking.

But she finds that another challenge for herself and four internal part-time employees

move my mind space. I have to stop saying 'I will do that' and have to say 'it's not my job'."

However, there is one thing she does continue to do personally and that is the bookkeeping for her two original clients.

"I preach to my staff about their bookkeeping skills so it's good to keep mine current."

Kathryn and Ross's accounting skills not only give them a competitive advantage but also help in running their own business with things like strong debtor procedures with seven-day payment terms.

"We carry the staff for two weeks before the company gets invoiced, so we can't afford for the staff not to be paid wages," she explains.

Meanwhile, her other big immediate challenge is expanding into new office space, after outgrowing her current base at the highly regarded SHED incubator in south Sydney.

The move will mean she has to address practical issues such as setting up a computer system whereby her part-time staff can access different computers each day. Then there is the vexed question of telephones.

"We have only one line and when I put in another line I want to know how to transfer between departments. I want to know if the Commander system is still the way to go. And do the phones come with training, does someone come out to help?"

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