

Starting a business in your spare time

Increasing numbers of women are starting their own businesses, often around a full-time job and family life. **Isabel Robson** finds out how they do it. Illustrations by **Michelle Shepley**.

Working in the current economic climate can seem a hard and thankless slog for ever-decreasing returns, with newspapers being full of stories about cuts, bailouts and rising prices. While it can appear to be pretty grim out there and it may seem harder than ever to keep your job, the silver lining to all of this is that it's never been easier to start your own business.

I currently run four businesses from home and will probably start a few more before the year is out. I work 36–40 hours a week at a city council, but I also make time around that to bake and sell 'feminist cupcakes', write bespoke erotic fiction, freelance as a proof reader and offer life coaching. On top of that, my husband and I are looking to set up a full-time business when our sons go to school. It sounds like a lot, but I'm no superwoman. Nor am I particularly unique: there's a growing number of innovative and successful businesswomen, many of whom started their businesses at home in their spare time.

Bedroom entrepreneurs

Tory Johnson, workplace pundit for *Good morning America*, argues that the workplace has changed since the days of doing one job for thirty years. According to Johnson, some young professionals can expect to undergo over thirty job iterations over their working lives. Working more than one job, or managing several 'mini gigs' is becoming



increasingly common, giving rise to the term 'gigonomics.'

Support site for home businesses *Enterprise nation* says that the number of women starting their own 'gig' by running a business around their day job has risen steadily since early 2009. The flexible hours of many home business ideas are a

natural fit for those who care for children or relatives, but single and childfree women may be at an advantage in this marketplace, usually with more disposable income and no dependents to worry about.

Emma Jones, founder of *Enterprise nation*, suggests that 'five to niners' get the best of both worlds: growing their businesses

The home business guru



As well as being the brain behind enterprisenation.com, **Emma Jones** has written several books about running a home business, including *Working 5-9: how to start a successful business in your spare*

time, Spare room start-up and *Go global: how to take your business to the world*.

How did you notice the '5 to 9' phenomenon?

In 2009 I noticed a good number of people we were profiling at enterprisenation.com were holding down a day job and building a business at nights and weekends. I thought it was the best way to start a business as you keep risk low and give yourself time to build confidence and cashflow. I wanted to tell these stories and offer a guide for others wanting to follow that path.



What are the top five things that anyone starting a business needs?

1. A business idea: the best ideas are niche ideas, serving a specific audience
2. A business plan, which doesn't have to be long
3. Dedicated workspace: as you are likely to start the business from home, find space that you can work in – and walk away from at the end of the day
4. A support network of understanding friends and family – even better if they have skills to help you out!
5. Sales!

Do you think that women face different challenges when it comes to starting and building a business?

I was at a business awards ceremony recently and notice just how many women were on the short lists. Whether you are male or female, there has never been a better time to start a business. Choose something that is your passion, hobby or skill and turning it into a way of making a living and, if it's right for you, start in your spare time outside the day job, whether that's being an employee or a mum.

gradually while keeping a steady income. The key to success lies in having a business idea that really meets a need and also being committed to and passionate about what you want to do. I love making new cake recipes up and trying them out, but hours of baking, mixing and icing, all on top of a full day at work, time with the kids and maybe another fiction re-write can sometimes cause one to question one's sanity. Organisation is definitely a home business requirement, as is the ability to put the computer down and do something to relax.

Setting up shop and finding support

If these words sound inspirational and make you consider starting a home business of your very own, there are loads of resources out there to help you. Recognising that new businesses are vital in helping any economy thrive and respond to flexible conditions, most countries have set up government-funded organisations (in the UK, it's Business Link) especially to support budding entrepreneurs. 'I knew nothing about starting a business, but that didn't matter,' says Gen, 33, who now runs her own successful PR firm, 'There are so many organisations set up to help new businesses – and especially women in business – that I simply phoned them up whenever I needed to know about anything. That's what they're there for.' Additionally, most large banks now offer specialist support to small businesses and your bank manager will be able to advise everything from tax requirements to how business ownership could affect any benefits you might receive.

If you do decide to go full time with your idea, it makes good business sense to speak to a range of financial advisers to

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sound out investment routes, and look at getting your taxes done professionally. Most accountancy companies will offer free consultations to help you decide whether you'd benefit from taking them on.

Of course, this is a decision to think carefully about. Running a business requires time and financial commitment that you would need to be sure you can afford. But if you have an idea that excites you, taking that step and working for yourself could be one of the best decisions you'll ever make. 

Further information

1. enterprisenation.com: A UK-based site for supporting micro-businesses, with start-up business kits, forums and meet-ups.
2. swapaskill.com: A place where members can offer up and swap skills. Post up something you want (eg, a bookkeeper or a web designer), members who have that skill respond, and in return you offer something you can do.
3. 37signals.com/rework : Rework is a book from the IT development company 37signals, which does a great job of debunking business myths.

Writer **Isabel Robson** juggles family life, breadwinning, business ownership and cakes in London's hinterland. She sells her feminist baked goods at subversivecupcakes.co.uk.
Illustrator **Michelle Shepley** lives in Las Vegas, Nevada. See more of her work at violetjimjams.deviantart.com.

Four women who have set up successful home or part-time businesses speak about their experiences.



Successful women in business

Copywriter

Sara Howard, Australia



I never thought I'd start my own business - I saw my parents work every waking hour in theirs, only to go bankrupt. However, in my first year of motherhood I had an idea for a kids clothing business and decided to run with it, in a very low risk sort of way. It was a way for me to use the experience I'd built up over ten years in retail, but do it flexibly. After three years I was exhausted and I sold the clothing business. Still, I knew by this time

that I wanted to write, I just needed to find a way I could do that and pay a mortgage. I took a year 'off' to study, learning everything I could about writing and copywriting, and discovered I loved it! And I had learned enough about running a small business to feel confident in taking on a new opportunity. I was lucky to form a partnership with a great team in the UK, and one of the directors has acted as my mentor throughout. They are all incredibly flexible and giving, and their credibility helped me open many doors in Australia. They're my backup when I have too many projects on, my sounding board when I'm not sure, and we have regular email banter that provides the 'water cooler moments' for my solo office.

writers.uk.net

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Graphic designer

Mary Macgregor-Reid, New Zealand



I've been running *Black robin design* for six years. I'd worked for design companies for years before I made the decision to go it on my own. I'd been interested

in starting my own business but really didn't know if I was the right sort of person or what it would involve, but it seemed like the right time to give it a go.

I registered my company and started out freelancing for some of the larger agencies around town. I immediately got an accountant and registered for a business mentor – it's so important to get advice and support from people who know what they are doing. I spent about a year as a freelance contractor doing jobs from my home office. My big break came when I won a largish client. This enabled me to move out of my spare bedroom into offices and get another staff member.

It wasn't easy, but everyone would do it if it was, so you wouldn't get the same satisfaction. To start with, learning about tax or using accounting software was difficult because it was outside my area of expertise. Dealing with clients can still be very difficult because design is such an ephemeral thing and people often don't really understand what we do or how long it takes.

I enjoy the freedom to choose where I work, what the environment is like and who I work with. I love managing another designer and helping them get the best out of themselves. blackrobindesign.com

Accountant

Psyche, United Kingdom



Photography Catherine Currie

I was studying my final year of my Association of Accounting Technicians qualification and working as a finance officer. The advised next step was to continue to a

higher qualification and progress up the corporate ladder into management accounting. I thought my dress sense – purple hair and big boots – wouldn't fit in a corporate environment, and I was more interested helping small businesses and self-employed people to do basic accounts, than performing financial fancy footwork to lower the tax bills of large corporations.

When I began to float this idea among friends, the number of 'Oh, I need an accountant' responses convinced me that it was feasible to start out in business among people I knew, who wouldn't care about my black clothes and piercings. When I finished my qualification, I applied for a practice licence, and *Death and taxes* was born.

My unique selling point is that I'm not a conformist corporate accountant. London is full of creative types – for example graphic and web designers, musicians, promoters, IT consultants, hairdressers and tattoo artists – who may not feel that a suited accountant can understand their business. While I'm not making as much money as I would in the corporate world, I can maintain my own style and help small business people save money. I currently have another part-time job, but I can see the time coming when *Death and taxes* will be my full-time gig.

deathandtaxes.biz 

Web developer

Tammy Lee, Canada



Photography W.Griffiths

My province is very friendly towards business owners. It's not uncommon to find people with full-time jobs who freelance or run their own

companies in their spare time. It only took me a week to set up in business.

I added thirty or so clients in two years through word of mouth. The growth made it obvious my side business would need more time and attention if I were to continue providing good service.

It was a difficult decision, but I decided to sell my side business and take advantage of new opportunities presented at my day job. I sold my business the same way I had acquired and grew it: putting the word out among my peers that I was interested in selling my client list, and found a buyer right away. In two years plus the sale, I netted after taxes and expenses just over what I gross in a year at my day job.