

What I learnt leaving the safety of a 9 to 5 job for the rush of a start up



I never planned to work in small business.

In fact, my parents explicitly asked me not to. After all, they ran a small business themselves. Growing up, I had seen the relentless effort that it required. With the full burden of the business resting on their shoulders, my parents often worked seven days a week and rarely took holidays.

Refugees fleeing the Vietnam war and communist rule in the 1970s, mum and dad were eventually granted asylum in Australia and they began their new lives with next to nothing. To make ends meet, they worked various jobs – mum as a teacher’s aide by day and a waitress by night while dad worked in a car parts factory, at a glass cutting manufacturer as well as trying his hand as a locksmith and painter.

But they aspired to a better life in Australia and they believed that by working for themselves, they might be able to achieve it. They wanted to get ahead and when I asked them why they wanted to run their own business, they said that if they didn’t want to work hard, laborious jobs that paid little money, they had to strike out on their own.

One day, they met a man who owned a children’s clothing shop in Sydney’s southwest. The man seemed to be doing well. He lived in a large house with a pool and so mum and dad figured that this must be a good business to be in. With the little savings they had from working odd jobs, they rented a small shop opposite the train station in Bankstown and, despite having no experience in fashion or children’s clothing, in 1984, Little Swan Children’s Wear opened.



My parents had to learn everything on the go, including sourcing suppliers, merchandising and even learning to make clothes from scratch when they could not find the stock they wanted.

They did well and eventually opened a new shop where I remember spending much of my time growing up, doing homework out the back and even spending Christmases there some years when we stayed open until midnight to meet demand. When I was old enough, I helped on the shop floor doing stock take, sales and security.

Mum would tell me to keep an eye out for the customers she suspected were fond of five fingered discounts. I do think back and wonder what people thought of this tiny Asian girl following them around the store. While my parents mostly hid their stress from me and my sister, they encouraged us not to follow in their footsteps. Instead they wanted us to seek the financial security and prestige of climbing the corporate ladder.

So I did what was expected.

I worked hard at school and university and was thrilled when I landed a graduate job at multinational corporation KPMG, eventually becoming an Associate Director. It was during my 15 years at the company, that I met and worked as a project manager with Andrew May, who had sold his business to KPMG and was working as a Partner heading up KPMG Performance Clinic.

When Andrew left to launch his own company, we kept in touch. I was excited by the work Andrew was doing with companies to change people, to change the approach to optimising physical and psychological performance and to change culture, but I felt uneasy about leaving the “safety net” of a large organisation. And there was the niggly of my parents’ hopes.

After umming and aching over it, I decided it was too good an opportunity to pass up, but when I finally did make the leap in 2019, it was a shock to the system. It took me about six months to adjust to a very different way of operating. I went from having a quite defined role to wearing many different hats. I also had to learn an entrepreneurial mindset.

I quickly realised controlling my time as much as I could (and not always reacting to others), managing my energy and deciding where to focus my attention was the key to success in small business. It’s also the ability to think on your feet and make decisions and I think the biggest one for me was to be OK with failing but to fail fast, learn quickly and adapt.

I didn’t appreciate how hard it is to run a small business. Having to just figure everything out from scratch, the tenacity, the persistence and not being willing to take no for an answer – it’s a whole new level of respect that I have for my parents and for all small business owners.

As a result of my own experiences and seeing my parents’ experiences, I believe small businesses need more support. They need tools and strategies to support their physical health, promote resilience, mental health and wellbeing as well as offering resources to take care of business.

When you’re in a small business, people feel guilty for looking after themselves because they feel like if they’re not contributing to their business and growing their business then they’re losing money or not being there to take on the next opportunity.

This was why Andrew and I were so keen to develop a program that provides important resources to SMEs and as a reminder to take care of yourself first so that you can take care of your business and the people who are important to you.

I’m hoping this will give business owners permission to look after their physical and mental wellbeing, and in turn, improve their relationships, their wellbeing and ultimately their business because they have more energy and capacity to grow.

StriveStronger has partnered with NAB to provide a complimentary digital program and Business Fit Podcast to support SMEs and their staff be more resilient, transition to new ways of working and sustain physical and psychological wellbeing. Sign up at [NAB Business Fit](#)



by **Angela Poon**

February 2, 2021

Women's AGENDA

WITH A CHANCE TO WIN ONE OF 3 WOMEN'S AGENDA BOOK BUNDLES!

supported by AGSM, part of
UNSW Business School in Sydney

Women's AGENDA

Stay Smart, Get Savvy!

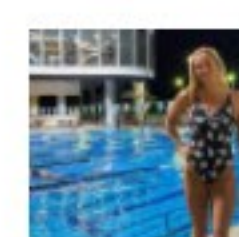
Get Women’s Agenda in your inbox

SUBSCRIBE

Latest news



How I made \$400k on Instagram



Maddie Groves opens dialogue with Swimming Australia as the sport grapples with its treatment of women



Mackenzie Scott donates a further US \$2.7 billion to high impact, under-funded charities



Men retaining Australian Club memberships can't claim 'gender equality' credentials



Verve Super to invest in companies that prioritise gender equality

Christine Holgate’s brilliant takedown. And pink gloves for tampon removal? No