

Bibi Berki talks to three women who have stepped off the career treadmill to become their own bosses, running their own businesses from home



BITE THE BULLET

SO, HERE'S THE DREAM: you pack in your job, say goodbye to taking orders from somebody younger than your children, and set out on a re-balanced life, where *you* decide what you do each day and make money at the end of it.

But one person's fantasy is another's sensible career plan and, as the inspirational women here reveal, stepping off the treadmill to become your own boss is not as reckless as it may seem. All three had their eureka moments, where a blindingly obvious business idea became obtainable.

Lissa Cook, 36, lives in Chinley, Derbyshire, from where she runs her children's wear business, Peak Princess.

Lissa was watching her friend's daughter running around a London park in her pretty new dress. When she inquired how much the dress cost, she was knocked sideways. 'I could have sewn it for a fraction of the price. And that's when I had my eureka moment. I thought, "I could do that!"'

Lissa and her husband Nik had already moved from London to the idyllic Derbyshire village of Chinley, but Lissa was still devoting all her time to her job at a radio production company. A former BBC producer, she had spent the past few years working herself into a state of exhaustion.

She ran up three prototype dresses based on her own designs and showed them to friends and relatives with children. The response was overwhelmingly positive and one of them suggested that she approach the London department store Liberty's. 'I was really nervous about

that bit,' she recalls. 'Here I was, a small business, going to see one of London's oldest institutions. But they were lovely and helpful and agreed to a deal.' That deal was the supply of a range of exquisite Liberty fabrics at a negotiated rate, making Lissa one of the only dressmakers in the country to produce a range of clothes entirely out of Liberty fabrics. Prices start at £24, which, as any fan of Liberty clothing will tell you, is a remarkable feat.

But there was a lot of preparation before she started. She carried out market research on what mothers wanted and what they couldn't currently get. Working with her own mother, a former professional dressmaker, she perfected the patterns and sewed an initial supply of dresses to sell at fairs and markets. She also set up a website, largely by herself, using her considerable media skills. She borrowed friends' daughters as models and took their pictures herself for the site.

Her lucky break came with a wholly coincidental mention on the Liberty Loves blog. From there, she says, it snowballed. Her aim was never to hit the big time but to combine her busy rural life with a paying pastime. 'I did it to make a living and to enjoy it. I could never go in the Dragons' Den. I could employ people to make my dresses but I left work and London because I didn't want to do things that way. I just enjoy it.'

Lissa's tip for going solo: *'Just get started! You only really find out what the market's like by starting.'*

www.peakprincess.co.uk

Anne Richardson, 50, lives in East Dulwich in London, where she runs her own blind-making company from home.

Anne vowed that once she'd left her stressful job and become her own boss she would never set the alarm clock again. She's achieved that aim and, with it, a contented lifestyle as well as a flourishing business.

She can put her success down to two eureka moments. Arriving in the UK from her native South Africa, she intended to remain in her field of fashion and textile design. Instead, her first job was in the soft-furnishings department of Heals in London. Helping customers choose fabrics for blinds she was struck by the uncomplicated procedure and knew she could do the same as a one-woman business.

But first she needed financial stability so, gritting her teeth, she went back to work in the garment industry and logged until she had enough for a mortgage and savings as a back-up. It took years.

The day came when she could start her dream. She took her first order to a small-scale blind-maker to have it made up. Then came the second eureka moment. The blind-maker was busy and suggested Anne make them herself. She bought a book on the subject and set about making herself a business.

She says the beauty is that you don't have to load yourself with huge amounts of stock. You just make one item at a time. 'You go and measure somebody's windows. They pay you a deposit then you fit them and that's the profit.'

'I have always enjoyed textiles and



One of the gorgeous dresses designed for Peak Princess by Lissa Cook (left)



Left: Angela Armsby with her husband Tim and one of their sons in Cairo, where she runs her Egyptian cotton nightwear business
Below: Anne Richardson runs a blind-making company

'Far from being stressed... the pleasure she gets from running her own business makes her a better mum'

putting things together and financially it's quite uncomplicated. I don't have a rich husband to pay bills, so I had to choose something that would make me financially stable.' Anne says she could never go back to working for someone else and 'having to jump when someone says jump'.

Anne's tip for going it alone: *'Have the confidence. A steady job is a security blanket. It's hard to give it up but now I'm self-employed I could never go back.'*
www.eastdukwichblinds.co.uk

Angela Armsby, 39, lives in Cairo with husband Tim and two sons. Her company Angellily supplies high quality Egyptian cotton nightwear and loungewear.

When Angela's husband was offered a job in Cairo, she left behind a long and successful career as a retail buyer and relished the Egyptian adventure. She could never have predicted that moving abroad would lead her to her own business.

One day seeing a pile of her husband's shirts made her think: the fine quality Egyptian cotton would make ideal pyjamas. Would there be a market in the UK?

'At first I focused on sourcing supply,' she says. 'Once I knew I could make it in Egypt I set up a UK company and launched the business in 2009. It wasn't complicated as I've got good support. My husband is a lawyer so he did all the legal work.' She



says she is indebted to a friend who is helping with administration in the UK.

Angela recently gave birth to her second child but says that far from being stressed with having so much to do, the pleasure she gets from running her own business makes her a better mum.

'It's great to be able to channel your

energy into something that is yours. Never look back!

Angela's tip for success: *'Make sure you have really done the market research to ensure you have a unique selling point. It's inspiring to have a great idea, but better if nobody else has had it yet.'*

www.angellily.com

INSPIRED? TIPS FOR GOING IT ALONE

Going into business on your own is one of the most rewarding things you can do with your working life, says John Lawrenson, advisor with the Government-backed Business Link service. But he stresses you should prepare yourself for what lies ahead. 'You've got to do the planning. Write a business plan and once you think you've got it right, write it again.' Here are his suggestions for a happy transfer to solo-working:

- Be realistic. Is this really for you? The impact on your home life and relationship could be immense. Can your financial situation take it?
- Remember the regulations. Some businesses, like cake decorating or natural toiletries, come with stringent industry regulations.
- Give your plans a structure. Draw up a business plan and discuss it with an expert body like Business Link or the Women in Business Network. Include an outline of where you see yourself in, say, five years' time.