



Juggling work and children prompted Sally McIlroy to start her own business

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Sally helps women become their own interior designers

THE HOME design businesses launched by Sally McIlroy respond to the demands of modern life, particularly for women. The rise of flexible working and the growing availability, affordability and acceptability of retraining has enabled many women to re-enter the workforce after raising a family.

But as members of either sex will tell you, an extended period out of work does nothing for your confidence, and it requires time to readjust, often with the help of a supportive employer.

These are all trends that feed into the success of Mrs McIlroy's two businesses. The first, Sallyforth, a home design consultancy, came about from the personal experience of wanting to remain in work while juggling the demands of a young family. The crucial moment came in 1999 when she took on the redesign of the interior of her new home in Surrey. "I knew I wanted to do the design myself but I did not know where to start. I called some professional interior designers to give me some guidance. There was lots of 'I can do it for you', or 'Here's a little bit of advice', but no one to hold my hand and guide me to do it."

So the former geography teacher signed up for a course at the KLC School of Design in London and emerged a year later with plans to build a business that helped Surrey's home-owners become their own interior designers.

She set up workshops and they proved a hit, but she soon realised her customers wanted home visits as well. "People need to see how the theory relates," she says. So she created a "Be your own designer case" that includes a colour wheel and samples and a design board. "I would then talk through the principles of design and apply it to their own houses," she says.

"Lots of the ladies have said 'You have given me the confidence to go ahead'. This often is the thing with women, particularly if you have been out of the workplace for a while, they have lost confidence."

From here, she saw that while her customers felt confident enough to take on the design of smaller rooms, like the bathroom or bedroom, some baulked at the idea of designing their living rooms and asked whether Sallyforth would take on the projects.

As a sole proprietor, Mrs McIlroy said she was not set up to do this and so recommended other firms that would do it. But the demand sparked the idea for House Tutor, her second business - www.housetutor.co.uk - which was launched six weeks ago and trains other professionally qualified women to become interior design tutors.

It is essentially a licence that enables other women looking for flexible part-time employment to use their design skills to take on a ready made business with little initial outlay.

You pay for a four year licence and training in West Surrey, a start-up pack including design materials and the right to use the House Tutor and "Be your own designer with Sallyforth" brands, which she trademarked with the help of the Reigate solicitors Shadbolt & Co. Mrs McIlroy says the package is a "foot in the door" for budding designers. "When you start your own business you are on a massive learning curve. What I am doing is notching them five or six steps up that learning curve."