

Who wouldn't like to have more time, space and flexibility to do what you want, and less of what you have to? An increasing number of professional women are choosing to do just that: move out of large organisations and find ways to work that suit them and their lives. At a time when there seem to be endless opportunities for those willing to put in the hours, do the travel and play the political games, some women are saying 'no' to corporate drudgery. They are instead prioritising lifestyle and creativity, and doing work that gives them meaning and purpose.

Sue Homewood, 38, is joint owner and manager of Body Freedom Urban Retreat in South Melbourne. Until two years ago, she had a pedigree corporate career, steaming through leading international technology consultancies and investment management houses and becoming a general manager in her early 30s.

But Homewood decided to opt out of that world of suits and computers to build a more balanced life doing something that would give her a greater connection with people.

"In a corporate role you can actually lose the sense of what you like doing, what you want and what's important to you in life," she says. "Your goals can become those of the project you are on at that time or the team you are in, and you can lose sight of your own goals and dreams."

The idea for the Urban Retreat grew from the small massage therapy business Homewood's partner was running from their house. "We always thought it would be great to have something like the Golden Door, but accessible [to people] in the city so that clients could incorporate well-being and grooming into their daily lives, and not only go to a retreat for a special occasion."

She jokes that her business title is now "receptionist", a role she sees as critical to the business, as she is the face of the retreat, but adds that she also uses most of the skills she learned in the corporate world. "Marketing, business strategy and seeing things from the client's perspective—these tools have been invaluable."

After leaving her job, she took a year off to decide what she really wanted to do. "It is so important to take that time out to think after you leave the corporate world," she says. "Often, within a corporate, what you think you want is restricted by what is possible within that organisation and structure. I had to ask myself if I was really in touch with what I wanted or if I was only thinking within the boundaries of what the company could accommodate."

Bianca Doyle agrees. At just 28, Doyle happily left a lucrative career in investment banking to launch her own fashion label and boutique, Melvin & Doyle, a mix of vintage fashion and her own designs. Her boutique opened in November 2004 in Sydney's Paddington.

"I had been with the bank for eight and a half years and always found the constant change stimulating," she says. "Even though the subject matter wasn't always the most interesting for me, I really got an adrenaline rush from the variety and the travel."

During her banking career, English-born Doyle lived and worked in London, New York, Tokyo and Sydney. However, "towards the end I noticed that things had changed for me and the feeling that I wasn't



Facing page: Bianca Doyle in her Paddington boutique.
Above: Personal and business coach Belinda Merry.

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Belinda Merry

content or happy in my job wouldn't go away," she says. "I found that the more senior I got, the less clarity I had about where my career was going."

Doyle talked to her mentors about promotions and next steps, but none of the roles on offer appealed to her. She decided to take a six-month sabbatical with a view to exploring the two areas she was passionate about: film and fashion.

One of the common concerns people have about leaving corporate careers is the loss of income. Doyle believes that in order to allay this concern, women really need to find out where their passions lie. "If you are potentially going to take a drop in income, even just initially, you really want to make sure that what you're doing is right."

To that end, she undertook a three-month internship, one day a week, with a film production company, only to discover that the industry was not what she had expected. But like a failed affair, it did confirm her love for fashion.

"I have always had a passion for vintage clothing and for wearing things that are unique and reflect my individuality. I had started collecting vintage clothes seriously during my time in New York. If I saw something amazing and could afford it, even if it didn't fit, I would buy it."

Doyle stresses the importance of researching your marketplace thoroughly before embarking on any new venture. She considered her brand, her target market and how best to price her products. She also looked into the Australian market to assess whether there was enough of a gap for her business.

Belinda Merry, a personal and business coach, works with many men and women wanting to leave careers in large organisations to do something new. She is also a "corporate refugee", leaving a senior administrative position with an automotive manufacturer five years ago to start her own business, which she runs from home.

"When I resigned I had no idea that coaching was what I was going to do," she recalls. "I was planning on being a lady who lunched for a time—and that time lasted about three weeks before I was bored!"

With the encouragement of her husband, Merry began investigating the field of coaching, which at that stage was a growing industry in the US but relatively new to the Australian market. She undertook some introductory training and realised it was for her.

In the past five years, she has become one of Australia's most prominent life coaches, sitting on the Australasian Board of the International Coach Federation and speaking regularly at international conferences.

When advising clients who are thinking of leaving the corporate world, Merry stresses the importance of a cash reserve. "I recommend having at least six months [worth of] cash in reserve," she says. "Know

your fixed monthly expenses, do a budget, track your expenses and know what you need to live on. I see this as vital because there is nothing more unattractive to potential clients than someone who comes across as desperate and needy for income."

Along with a strong financial reserve, Merry says the secret to solo success is understanding your values and having a compelling vision. "When the self-doubt hits—and it will hit, often very hard—you need to have a very big vision to keep you moving forward."

Merry's own vision was to be able to work beside a palm tree and a pool. After her years spent in Melbourne and London, she and her husband made the break last year and moved to Maleny, Queensland. Her office now overlooks the lap pool she uses daily.

Sometimes the change can just be a move to a different organisation. Three years ago, Jodi Braszell, 33, made the move from the corporate to the public sector. Braszell was working for a large international management consultancy but felt her personal values were not aligned with those of her employer. She took a significant pay cut to become a project manager with the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

"The consulting projects I worked on were so far removed from anything I'd ever thought about doing and did not match my values," she says. "I felt quite out of my comfort zone and also had to be this 'other person', and that required a lot of energy. At least now I don't have to put on a performance each day or wear uncomfortable suits—if I am going on a field visit I can even wear hiking boots!"

Braszell has always been passionate about preserving the environment and says the career move has taken her back to her "true core". She is currently working with the Victorian government to improve the health of the major rivers that supply Melbourne's drinking water and says she now feels proud to tell people what she does.

Her career change has also sparked her creativity. In September 2004 Braszell held her first exhibition of paintings, inspired by the bushfires in alpine Victoria in 2003, where she spent six months as part of a community response unit. She has also taken up rowing and competed in several competitions. "Ironically, I have a far more senior and responsible role now than I did in consulting, but because I work in an area that I love, I find that I have the right headspace to not only be more creative, but also more fit and active."

Helen Robinett, 38, left her career of 20 years in sales and marketing to improve her lifestyle and to work in a way that better suited her values. She had always enjoyed the industry, but "I was always so busy that I didn't have time for anything else," she explains. "Now I'm just as busy, but I feel that I can think more clearly. The games and the politicking that goes on in corporate life can really drain you of energy."

Robinett is now an image consultant and is president of the



Above, from left: Image consultant Helen Robinett, environmental manager Jodi Braszell and urban retreat owner Sue Homewood.

Association of Image Consultants International. She sits on the board of a local charity and has recently been accredited by the National Speakers Association of Australia.

"I empower people through their personal presentation," says Robinett. "I started out working with a guy at the office who was constantly being overlooked for promotion. He was really good at what he did but his presentation didn't show that. I suggested to him that I help him change his dress and clean up a little, and he was up for the challenge. This same man is now working overseas, earning four times more money and has recently become engaged."

Robinett says that although she had a vision and an established business, leaving the security of corporate life was hard. "I was elated the day I left. I thought, 'This is fantastic, I am living a dream'. I had been working with a life coach and had a financial plan in place and was so pleased the time to leave had finally come. But a week later I put on my

corporate suit, my hosiery and heels, because I thought that was what 'going to work' was."

Robinett learned early on the value of a good support network. She asked her family and friends for support and works with both a life coach and a marketing coach. "I am really clear with people about what I need from them in terms of their support."

Two and a half years down the track and Robinett feels she's grown into herself and her job. "I am now really [focussed on] what is appropriate for who I am," she says. "For my clients, that means working with them on who they are, what they do and the type of client they want to attract." She no longer wears suits or heels. "Changing my own dress has been a big part of letting go of corporate life and being better able to advise my own clients."

Like the four other women interviewed, she has chosen to take the journey to discover what makes her happy in life and work. ■