

A little light mousework



Downloading programmes and uploading the dishwasher... Burning CDs, but hopefully not the dinner. Emma Caulton found out how to juggle home, work and social life when the office is a click away

With faster broadband and a business culture change underway, the working-from-home dream has never seemed more attainable or more appealing. Networking groups like Cappuccino Connections and Ladies who Latte are burgeoning, giving the impression of women choosing working from home as a lifestyle option. But just how easy it is for these 'mouseworkers' to mix business, pleasure and housework?

"It's not a family related issue, I don't have children, but it's still a work-life balance thing," says accountant Amanda Bell who set up as a sole practitioner from her Maidenhead home last summer primarily to meet the needs of self-employed and owner-managed businesses.

"If you commute anywhere in the South East you're spending a lot of time each day travelling very slowly. I was out of the house 11 hours a day, and I wanted a social life in the evenings.

"You can rearrange your lifestyle so that nothing seems so much of a rush. Beforehand household chores were getting stuck at the end of the day, but now chores don't build up. I'll get up and have a cup of tea and put the washing on or unload the dishwasher. If you're staring at a computer screen eight to nine hours a day, then getting up and doing something else is actually good for you".

It may seem as though Amanda has stepped off the corporate ladder, but she feels she's offering a more personal service.



Far left: Amanda Bell. Left: Award winners from a recent BT competition, including Paula Wynne on the far left.

"I'd been working in chartered accountancy for 16 years, 13 as a manager; I'd gone from managing a department of six to a department of 20 and it was more about man management than being involved in the day to day accounting I enjoyed.

"I don't perceive it as a step down. As a sole practitioner I'm equal to a partner. The organisation may grow beyond me eventually and I may bring in other people, but I'm quite enjoying there not being the distractions on my time that personnel issues bring."

Making the connection

If homeworking is the future, then Paula Wynne is in the vanguard with her internet business Remote Employment which matches employers with employees looking for flexible, home-based opportunities. The website was launched a year ago in April, but Paula has already won two awards and has herself just launched her own remote worker national awards with a prize value

approaching £60,000, including a £15,000 franchise.

Paula enthuses: "We will be changing someone's life by giving them a career."

Remote Employment is a

business born out of personal experience. As a mother Paula chose to be freelance as she wanted the freedom to be able to drop her son off at school, but it meant she sometimes found herself 'taking on anything'. Meanwhile her business partner, Ken Sheridan, was 'on the other side of the fence' working for big corporations such as Tetley and Pepsi yet having difficulty finding people prepared to undertake project work for a few hours a week. There simply wasn't a vehicle for contacting people.

"We practise what we preach," says Paula. "We run a home office and the people who work for us work from home. Once a month we find a central location and meet at a coffee shop or hotel.

"Business demands can take over and at 7pm at night I can be thinking why am I doing this? But at lunchtime you can take the dog for a walk, and you don't have to do the shop on a Saturday morning, you can do it out of other people's time, and we always



From left: Paula Wynne: Anna Colclough and children enjoy the snow; Joanna Ward and Sue Harrison

Time to gaze

There's a spirit of freedom and adventure about Anna Colclough's home-based Internet business which is in keeping with its origins - a nugget of an idea that Anna and her husband, Ben, had while backpacking in

Mongolia where they stayed with a nomadic family.

"We thought it would be really amazing if there were a website which could arrange these really authentic experiences," remembers Anna.

Five years and two very young children later, Anna and Ben, have moved out of London and set up tourdust.com from a quiet Buckinghamshire village. The website went live last June and they left their high-flying corporate careers last October.

"When it snowed it wasn't an issue for us."

"We're all much happier than we were. The children are much more settled and love the fact that they see more of their father. I like working, although it never goes away. To a certain extent you're always switched on, but we do have breakfast together and lunch together and we're always there to put the children to bed. The only thing that suffers is that you don't get much time together to stare into each other's eyes.

"When it snowed it wasn't an issue for us - there wasn't that awful what is my boss going to say feeling.

"I may be on the phone to someone in South Africa and then we will wander down with our wellies on to feed the local farmer's ducks. I love the life we're giving our children.

"My husband is all for rigging up a camper van with a satellite dish and touring round Europe. And why not?"

"To a certain extent you're always switched on."

make time for family.

"The whole working culture has been changing over the past year; businesses are looking at new ways to employ people and everyone is looking at alternative ways of working.

"It's a very exciting working culture and we're going to see it more and more; kids are growing up with broadband on their mobile phones and see this as standard. They are the employees of the future and they aren't going to stand for having to go into an office nine to five."

It's also a way of working that includes those who have felt excluded from the workplace - such as carers, the disabled and the retired.

"Homeworking benefits people, the environment and business productivity. The bad weather we had in February was a prime example - a national magazine I was trying to contact had the security guard answering the phone! The people who were working were those working from home. It was businesses with remote workers who were keeping the country going."

Gem of an idea

"Standards have slipped within our houses," laughs Joanna Ward who, along with Sue Harrison, has founded an Internet Business www.studentgems.com which they run primarily from Sue's Gerrard's

Cross home. They've eschewed housework for developing their business.

"It took us a year to research and develop the site which went live in September 2007," continues Joanna, "and we've been working for it ever since. It's been very full-on, but we do a lot of business online after office hours, once we've done some dinner and ironing. It doesn't feel like work."

Joanna and Sue met at the school gates and were determined to work together. It was while working on a business plan that they tried to find a student to take some photographs, but it proved difficult to find one.

"We thought we would save money and they would earn more money than pulling a pint, and gain experience."

The business grew from the belief that everyone could have easy access to the student talent in this country. "My son said, 'so you're going after uncut diamonds?' And so Student Gems was born.

"The site is changing and developing all the time - learning to twitter is the latest skill available.

"The great thing about running a company is it provides a huge amount of flexibility. We have huge freedom. If you're in an office nine to five you can't take time off to take your son or daughter to university or to the dentist. I couldn't imagine going back into an office and having to ask permission."