

Theresa Nash Out & About – widening my network

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I became self-employed a year ago. Vainly, I thought I could make more money and get more interesting and fulfilling work on my own. There had to be more to life than staring at a pile of spreadsheets in a dimly lit office on an industrial estate, which is the lot of many an accountant like me. So, after reading a couple of 'fulfil your own destiny' self improvement books, I kissed goodbye to the endless round of office politics, embarrassing Christmas parties, the idiot boss, the lazy colleague, the leery strange guy from IT and the ditzy admin person from HR. Not that I am stereotyping, of course but it really is like that in most offices. And I should know – I've worked in a few and they all have their little irritations that go to completely ruin what is an already dull and meaningless day. Not that I am looking on the black side of life – that's just how it felt at the time.

Of course, I also said goodbye to all my friends at work. And looking back, I had made a few. The fun Irish girl who always cheered you up, the helpful chap in finance who would always lend a hand when you got stuck, the friendly team from HR who always said hello. At the time, and for a long time afterwards, I didn't really appreciate them. Just as I didn't appreciate free access to the stationery cupboard, the coffee machine, the on-site gym, ready-made social events, the sick pay, the holiday pay, the pension. I considered all these to be carefully placed traps to get to stay in your pointless day job whilst working underpaid to enhance your boss's career.

Obviously I thought I knew better. I was clever, experienced, fun. I could make it on my own. I could earn more, do more, meet more interesting people. I didn't need the crutch that was the office. At first it all went so well. I landed two contracts at a previous employer paying double my salaried day rate for only three days a week work. And it was good work – cutting edge and interesting. I was effectively earning what I had been but only working half the time. I set up a company to manage the contracts so I could now say I was a company director. I thought this was an exciting, cool step up from telling people I was a boring old accountant, even though it actually pushed up all my insurance premiums when I came to renew the policies a couple of months later. But I was finally my own boss and the world was my oyster.

I used my new free time to grow things in the garden. It's only a tiny garden but I planted loads of herbs, bulbs, roses, my favourite clematis, an apple tree; even a vine to kick start our dream of one day owning a vineyard. I hired a personal trainer to get me fit and upped my kickboxing to four times a week to get my through my blackbelt training. I hired a life coach to invest in my personal development. I joined a writing group and finally started my best selling novel. I took my husband for the official launch of our company as a thank you for all his support. We had our own, fun Christmas do and toasted its success. I was the envy and pride of my family who had always dreamed of kicking in the 9-5 routine themselves.

It didn't take long to unravel. The people I worked with on my high-paying new contract - my former colleagues who I had considered friends - barely spoke to me, resentful of my daily rate, which had been injudiciously communicated to them by my manager. No mention of the fact that I get no pension, no holiday pay nor sick pay, which, later in the year when I broke my foot and was unable to work for two months, would have come in handy. My immediate former colleagues at the company I had just left barely spoke to me either, the feeling of abandonment too fresh in their minds.

Six months in and my rosy world had started to cloud. My contracts were due to come to an end. There was no need for further work and, anyway, the company could no longer afford to pay for contractors in the recession. My former colleagues take longer and longer to return my jokey, familiar update emails and phone calls until now they don't return them at all. I stop getting the invites to go for a quick lunchtime drink.

I broke my foot in the summer and had to give up kickboxing while it healed. I haven't yet gone back. Likewise the personal trainer, who was little help anyway. Unfortunately he was still training and so very cheap, which is why I secured his services in the first place. I should have known this was a false economy; his approach to training was to let me do what I felt comfortable with while he learnt the next bit of the syllabus. This meant I progressed particularly slowly, my idea of feeling comfortable being always to do as little as possible. The life coach was equally ineffective, although unfortunately much more expensive, talking to me every month in her LA drawl – yes, she was American – and thanking me for letting her 'stretch' me if we ever went over time. And to cap it all, the writing group I belonged to disbanded due to lack of interest.

By the end of the summer, I am left with just my plants for company, which are, to be fair, doing quite well, and my husband. There is really only so long this limited circle of friends can keep you going. The plants in particular don't have much to say for themselves.

So I decided I needed to get out more and see what I could do to widen my network. I hoped that this would (a) introduce me to fun, interesting new people and (b) lead to more work, if I was lucky.

This all requires, however, a level of social interaction that is completely alien to me. I'm not what you would call anti-social as such, but it wouldn't surprise me if I featured somewhere on the autistic spectrum. I just don't get it. I don't get how or why you would just talk to complete strangers as if you knew them or were interested in them. Mostly I make friends over a long period of time through working with people. But with all this networking you are expected to create these wow first impressions and make it look like you *really* want to get to know people. Basically, I can't be bothered.

My first foray into this world was a business breakfast meeting where unexpectedly (to me) I was supposed to introduce myself to the room through a 60 second pitch and then go and see individuals to explain my business to them. I waffled through something totally incomprehensible about business improvement and shook hands politely with a few people but no-one asked for my business card or contact details either at the time or since. No-one asked me any questions. No-one wanted to speak to me. It was at that point that I first started to wonder whether I had a business at all or the skills to run one.

Or maybe I just needed help marketing it. Cue joining a self-help-for-businesses network. They said they knew just what I was talking about and could help me out. For £1,000. I must have looked shocked. Well, what price success, they asked? If I made £1million after taking their advice, it would be the biggest return on investment ever. And wasn't I worth that? It sounded curiously like the sales pitch of the life coach I had fallen for a few months before. And look where that had got me. But they could introduce me to people, get me a plan, help make it happen. Could they guarantee me £1million, though? Er, no, of course not. They weren't selling magic wands.

I haven't been back to either since.

I contacted my one remaining colleague from work days, who was also self-employed now, and asked him what he thought. Hmm, he said, over a fish finger sandwich at a local hostelry, maybe I should do some accounts just to keep things ticking over. But that's what I've just left, so that I could do exciting contract work like him. He was the one who'd encouraged me to do this in the first place. Follow your dream he said; there's loads of work out here, he said; we could make millions doing contracts together, he said. To be fair, he got me the first contract, but since then – a whole year ago – I'd barely heard from him. And now all he had to say was that my best bet was to go back to accounts. That's great.

Ok, thinking caps on. Getting my own contract work is going to be tricky. I don't know anyone. My former work colleagues are not speaking to me. My business proposition appears to be crap. Maybe what would help is to get work through some agencies. They must know a lot more people

than me and have access to more information. I get some interviews. They go quite well. Of course they can help me, they say. I hear nothing from them from week to week and when I ring they say everything is *really* quiet. And what I want to do is really not that common either.

Right, well, the business side of things is going really badly now. I decide I need cheering up. Maybe, what I need is to forget about the dirty business of making money and do something truly worthwhile, like volunteering. After all, work being what it is (ie non-existent), I have a bit more time on my hands than usual. What can I offer? Well, I know a bit about business, I will try a business support group. I ring up a very well-known national charity and enquire. Well, that's very sweet, they say, but really, where I live, there is no need for that kind of thing. They have plenty of people already involved for the number of 'clients'. Oh, ok, I say, if anything changes, give me a call. They assure me they will do, but in the tone of the 'don't call us, we'll call you' way that means you will never hear from them again.

Well, maybe business support is a bit niche. What about more social support? I ring another well-known national charity and enquire. I get exactly the same spiel from them too. It seems I cannot even give my services away.

Of course, by now, I am bordering on the depressed. My husband is less than amused, especially as we need to get a mortgage next year. I have no job, no prospects, no contacts and I have put on half a stone as well. The Christmas party has been cancelled. Things are going particularly badly. I haven't even made any progress on my best-selling novel. This is all very sapping to one's creativity, I can tell you. And to make matters worse, I have come down with the flu.

I hope this will be a lesson to you all. Under no circumstances take any advice to 'follow your dream', 'fulfil your destiny' or 'sky-rocket your life'. At least not without a water tight plan and access to independent means. This is all nonsense peddled by self-help gurus wanting to sell you their latest book, CD or whatever. Be thankful for what you've got and work hard. As for me, I am hoping that the 'necessity is the mother of invention' phrase will eventually mean I come up with a whizz idea for getting myself out of this hole.

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