

"I MADE THE JUMP AND I NOW RUN MY OWN COMPANY"

REBECCA LEIVARS, 34, WORKED IN HUMAN RESOURCES FOR A BLUE-CHIP FIRM FOR 11 YEARS BEFORE SHE DECIDED THAT ENOUGH WAS ENOUGH. SHE IS SINGLE AND LIVES IN LONDON

"Over a six-month period in my job as HR manager, I had to personally make 1,000 people redundant. Just a week before the lay-offs began, I had congratulated some of those people on the birth of new babies and admired photos of their new homes – while knowing what the future held – and had been unable to utter a single word. It was completely soul-destroying; I felt as if I was ruining their lives.

One day in December 2005, shortly after the redundancies had begun, I spent the morning handling a particularly nasty sexual harassment case before being told I had to go to a field office to make yet more redundancies. By that point I felt so disillusioned that – with no thought for the consequences – I went straight to my manager and handed in my notice. I'll always remember driving home that day, thinking, "My God, what have I done?" I was walking away from an annual salary of £45,000 (plus bonuses) and a career with a blue-chip company in which I'd worked so hard to succeed. But I realised that it was a thankless task, in a thankless industry.

My boyfriend at the time, Arnold, ran his own sports nutrition business. I'd often moan at him about the fact that he was always working – but actually I envied his passion. He loved what he did and he was determined to succeed.

So what should I do next? I'd recently sold a cottage that I had renovated from scratch, so when Arnold said: "Why don't you go into interior design? You're fantastic at it and you obviously enjoy it," I knew he was right.

The next step was to enrol on

a 10-month diploma course at London's KLC School of Design, but I had to wait another nine months before starting the course. In the meantime, I looked after Arnold's children (from a previous relationship) and at weekends, when he was home, I took a part-time job conducting viewings for an estate agent to make some money. I was extremely lucky that Arnold's business was doing very well and he was happy to fund the KLC course for me.

Stepping into college that first morning gave me such a buzz – I felt as if my life was starting again. But to say the course was intense is an understatement – it was the hardest work I've ever done. The diploma course usually takes two to three years, but was condensed into just 10 months. It involved everything from completing architectural drawings for builders with exacting lighting, electrical and joinery plans, to putting together colour schemes and soft furnishings. Before I knew it, I was up until 3am designing schemes, my head buzzing with ideas.

Part of the course was a work experience placement at an interior design company in London and when they offered me a job after I graduated, I was delighted. But, on the downside, the pressure of the course, and the changes it brought about in me, resulted in the end of my relationship with Arnold, although it was a mutual and very amicable split – I had become so much more driven, independent and determined.

Even so, it was a scary time, as financially I had to start all over again. The day after I finished the course, I found a flat in London and a very kind flat mate who was willing to wait until I was paid to

get the first month's rent. Right from the outset I loved my new job. There was a lot to learn but I was given complete autonomy in my work. I went straight into managing three schemes, doing everything from designing the new space and completing the architectural plans, through to selecting the builders and managing the project.

Each morning, I'd leap out of bed bursting with enthusiasm – and work from 7am to 7pm. Slowly yet steadily, I started to get freelance commissions too, and for a while I was juggling those and my job at the same time. When I got to the point where I was handling five projects at once, I knew it was too much. My quality of life started to suffer as I was working too hard, so in June this year I left the company and set up my own business.

I left with four live projects and now have seven projects on the go – including a fabulous 5,000 sq ft project in Notting Hill, turning two properties into one – for a very well-known client. I still sometimes have to pinch myself when I think about how well the business is doing and how quickly it has all happened. My income far exceeds my old salary and my predicted turnover this year is in the region of £100,000 – not bad for the first year of a business. I have also rented myself a studio in Chelsea – it's a beautiful room in an old gas works and the light is just amazing – it's my haven.

I firmly believe that if you are unhappy, make that change. Have the courage of your convictions that you'll make it work. Life is too short not to. If you don't try it, it might just haunt you forever. My new career makes me smile every day." >

• Visit rebeccaleivarsdesigns.com.

REBECCA LEIVARS DESIGN

- Startup costs: KLC 10-month course fee, £18,000.
- Turnover: £100,000 estimated for 2009.
- What I wish I'd known before: How happy it would make me!
- My advice: Just close your eyes and make that leap.

START OVER TO BE A SUCCESS!

Would you ditch your job to follow your dream?
Rachel Eaton meets three readers who did just that