



My friends always call me Mrs Fixit

Joan Williamson, 43, runs her own lifestyle management service. She lives in Fleet, Hampshire, with her husband, Stephen, 44, a management consultant.

'As well as running my own home, I organise about 70 other busy people's lives. Some of my clients use me on a day-to-day basis to sort out those mundane but time-consuming tasks, such as cleaning and ironing, or to remind them of birthdays, shop for gifts and book their haircuts. Others will phone up if there's an emergency plumber needed to fix a leak or if they want me to book them a romantic weekend away.

It's a wonderful, varied job that I really love – and one I would never have got into had I not suddenly been made redundant three years ago.

Having worked in customer service for the same company for 16 years, it was a huge shock to be handed my cards. But soon the feeling subsided and instead it was as if a huge weight had

been lifted from my shoulders. I decided I should take the opportunity to think about working for myself and enrolled on a business course. By the end of it, I was convinced I could never work for anyone else again.

My idea was simple. With so many busy friends always complaining they never had time to themselves – and with my reputation for being something of a Mrs Fixit (if ever there was a problem, friends would say, 'Phone Joan, she'll sort it out') – I felt there was a market for lifestyle management.

Over the next six months, I wrote a business plan, bought a new computer with my redundancy money, forged links with local gardeners, decorators and household maintenance companies, and set up office in my loft.

Within a few days, my phone was ringing. My first client was a lady who wanted her garden redesigned

and, as she worked full-time, simply didn't have the time to phone around for quotes or to see portfolios.

Soon, my business was up and running and I found myself booking restaurants, arranging surprise birthday parties, watering plants for people who were on holiday and arranging for guttering to be mended.

Then there were the more unusual requests: Could I get rid of an old trolley that had been stuck in a client's pond for six years? Would I photocopy a room-sized, 250-year-old map? And did I know who would be the most reputable company to restore a valuable antique Persian carpet?

What has really surprised me is the sheer diversity of my clientele. Some are young, busy professionals, others are working mothers or retired people. But they all want the same thing – to buy my time and knowledge to sort out tasks they're too busy to do, or don't know how to do. Then they can get on with more important

things, such as pampering themselves or spending more time with their family.

As busy as I am in my new career, I do, amazingly, still manage to keep control of my own life. I keep fit at the gym and indulge in a reflexology session every few weeks. I also volunteer as a Samaritan.

But I must admit it can be hard to switch off sometimes. I take a Dictaphone to bed and often sit bolt upright when an idea comes to me. And the hardest thing is going on holiday – because I have to inform 70 people I'll be away!

I'm not making as much money as I used to, but the job satisfaction is amazing. I started out in business wanting to help people improve their quality of life – and that's something I'm told I do by many a satisfied customer.'

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