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April 26, 2013

First Published: 12:56 IST(26/4/2013)

Last Updated: 17:22 IST(27/4/2013)

 Print

Switching career from banking to image management

In this five-part series, five Mumbaikars tell us how they abandoned their comfort zones to plunge into new professions.

Parul Shukla

Owner, Image 4 U, an image management firm Bio: In her previous life, Shukla managed other people's money. She now manages other people's wardrobes, teaches them airplane etiquette, how to shake hands and how not to mess up an interview

I was 28 when I realised I wanted to quit my job. For six years, I'd worked in the HR and wealth-management divisions of Merrill Lynch and UBS in London. It had been a full life, punctuated by travels to India, mainland Europe and the United States for campus recruitment. But it was gruelling, so I moved to India to be closer to family and friends. But after 18 months at Merrill Lynch, Mumbai, I realised I couldn't adjust. There'd been too many changes – we got taken over by Bank of America, the financial crisis had begun – so I started looking around for something else to do. I considered a baby clothes store, even a tea shop, but finally settled on a course at the Image Consulting Institute in Andheri, and launched Image 4 U, which offers image management for individuals and corporates, in 2010.

First impression

This was a real shock to my parents – they're doctors and my brother's in banking. They could not understand why I was giving up such a good career. My father still can't believe that people pay me to shop with them at stores like Bebe, Aldo, Jack & Jones, Curio Cottage and the like!

But I was sure about my decision. I loved my old job, but you reach a point where you burn out. I had travelled the world, had fantastic learning opportunities, but I spent all my time at work and on weekends, I would just sleep – there was no time for family or friends. Besides, shifting careers was a calculated risk. I was young enough and had no personal or financial commitments since I had moved back with my parents. My start-up costs were barely R2 lakh to R3 lakh, which I used for a website, a logo and stationery.



Working the look

Today, I have a growing business, with a mix of corporate and personal clients, and offer a variety of services – I teach corporate dressing, business etiquette, communication skills, grooming and public speaking to employees at Heinz, Vodafone, Croma and others. Some clients also hire me as their personal shopper. I now have people who won't even buy a handkerchief without my approval!

Here's how it works: I first meet individual clients for a chat, during which we determine what problems they need addressing. I objectively assess them and then send them a proposal of the modules we'll cover, which might include a makeover, grooming tips, etiquette tips, communication skills, the time this will take, and the costs involved. For the personal shopping service, I charge by the hour. And for corporate clients, I have rates for half-a-day, one-day and two-day training sessions. I also counsel students on career guidance and offer interview assistance.

Many happy returns

I don't make even half the salary I used to, but I'm 100 per cent more satisfied than I was back then. And the feedback from clients is overwhelming – one referred to me as "her angel". I remember dealing with a divorced man in his early 30s. He used to dress very soberly, and I wanted him to buy red shoes. He resisted for three hours, but he bought them, and then was delighted because so many people complimented him on his new look! One client hired me just to teach her how to pronounce designer names.

Nothing is too small or awkward for me to address – for corporate clients, I cover airport and flight etiquette, and for the grooming sessions, I carry in a box of deodorants and explain that a spray works

better than a roll-on. I also don't feel intimidated walking into a room of older people – I think people want to learn from younger individuals these days, and my education gives me credibility.

One handicap of this business is that word of mouth does not work – clients don't recommend you to anyone else – so it grows slowly, and social media is also not helpful. I get a lot of clients via my website, and LinkedIn has also proved helpful. In five years, I want to get to a position where I can hire a team and have an office. That's my goal for now.

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How to do the same

Weigh your risks and liabilities before starting a new venture. My main risk was giving up a fantastic career, my liabilities were non-existent.

Do something that you feel strongly about, and are good at.

Play to your strengths. Leverage your knowledge and skills when doing something new.

Don't belittle the corporate job. It can give you credibility, a solid grounding, provide great exposure and instill discipline.

Never stop learning. I read many newspapers, magazines and books to keep myself abreast of events and potential clients.

From HT Brunch, April 28

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