

BE YOUR OWN *boss*

Can't find employment ...
experience the freedom of
employing yourself

By Lisa Evans

When Vancouver's Julie Gao was laid off from her job as a settlement counsellor in 2011, she embarked on a job search but with no success. With few job prospects, the Chinese-born Gao, who has master's degrees in psychology from both Liaoning Normal University, China, and the University of British Columbia, decided to strike out on her own.

"I had always thought about opening a private practice, so when I was looking for a job and didn't find one, I decided that maybe this was the time for me to finally open my own practice," says Gao, a registered clinical counsellor.

With no business background and little understanding of Canadian business culture or the tax implications of being a sole pro-

prietor, Gao decided to register for the YMCA's self-employment program — a 48-week program offering workshops on topics such as presentation skills, goal-setting, self-awareness, marketing, social media and financials, providing new entrepreneurs with the skills required to formulate a business plan and advice on operating a successful business in Canada. After completing the program in 2012, Gao opened her private practice in February of this year, offering individual and family counselling to Vancouver's Chinese community.

Gao is one of many immigrants who, in their struggle to find suitable employment in Canada, join the ranks of the self-employed. In other words, instead of looking for a job in

their field of expertise, they market themselves as independent consultants, freelancers or open a small firm, like Gao's Jieren Vancouver Counselling Services.

While Statistics Canada reports both immigrants and Canadian-born workers contributed to the increase in self-employment in the 1980s and 1990s, a new trend emerged in the late 2000s in which immigrants sought self-employment opportunities even more than non-immigrant workers. By 2010, 19 per cent of immigrant workers were self-employed, compared to only 15 per cent of Canadian-born workers.

Why self-employment?

The reasons for becoming self-employed are vast. Flexible work

arrangements, the opportunity to work from home, job satisfaction, and the independence and freedom that come from being one's own boss are all motivators that drive many to choose self-employment. For newcomers, perhaps the impetus toward self-employment comes also from the inability to find sustainable work in their chosen field after immigrating.

This was the case for Allen Stern of Thornhill, Ontario, who emigrated from South Africa in 2000. While Stern had been an entrepreneur in South Africa, owning several retail shops and a marketing consulting company, he arrived in Canada with hopes of landing a management position. He quickly became disillusioned. "I was either over-qualified wherever I applied or

Julie Gao opened up her own counselling practice in Vancouver after losing her job.

Photo by Bini Ball

I didn't have enough Canadian experience," says Stern.

After dabbling in several fields including insurance, automotive and retail, Stern struggled to find his niche in Canada. At one point, he was working part time as a sales assistant for Home Depot and Future Shop. Stern says although the positions weren't desirable or lucrative, they did offer him insight into the Canadian business landscape when he finally struck out on his own, creating Allen Stern Marketing in 2012, a company that offers promotional products and marketing services. While entrepreneurship was comfortable for Stern — his many years of self-employment in South Africa had prepared him for the lifestyle — fully navigating the Canadian business landscape was anything but.

Struggling to adapt?

Carla Kendall, director of the YMCA of Greater Toronto's self-employment program, says immigrants often struggle to adapt to Canadian business culture when deciding to strike out on their own. One of the biggest differences she sees is how some newcomers deal with business contracts. While in some countries a handshake is accepted as an agreement to do business, in Canada, only a paper contract holds any worth in a business deal. "Canadian business culture is much more formal," says Kendall.

Andrea Welling, director of the YMCA's self-employment program in Vancouver, says many of her Asian clients struggle to adapt to the Canadian way of acquiring customers. While buying gifts for prospective clients may be the standard in these cultures, Welling says "when you do business with people in Canada you can't be shown as trying to gift your way into their business. People might think you're trying to buy influence from them."

But such cultural differences are small obstacles that newcomers can overcome with time and practice. In fact, despite such cultural differences, Kendall and Welling agree immigrants are well-suited for self-employment in Canada.

Persist and take risks

"You have to be willing to take some risks [to succeed as an en-

trepreneur]," says Welling. While the lack of job security can cause many to fear self-employment, immigrants, because of the risks they've already taken to come to Canada, may be better prepared for the uncertainty that comes from being self-employed.

Kendall believes immigrants are better suited as entrepreneurs than their Canadian-born counterparts, saying immigrants have more determination, passion and perseverance; intangible attributes that they have gained as a result of their immigration process to Canada. It's these attributes that Kendall points to as being most vital to the success of an entrepreneur. "These are qualities that can't be taught. I can't say to you, now you have perseverance, now you have motivation, now you're focused. These are things that come from within the individual," she says.

The trick is to then harness these traits in the right way to succeed as a self-employed professional. And the best way to do this is with proper planning.

Start with a plan

You know what services you have to offer, but do you know how you will organize your time, promote yourself, handle your finances? Just like any other small business, there are plenty of considerations when becoming your own boss. Kendall and Welling say any entrepreneurial venture needs to start with a plan. In fact, the end goal of the YMCA's self-employment program is the creation of a business plan.

Here, Kendall and Welling share six tips for creating a business plan to guide the self-employed.

1. Determine how your business will fit your lifestyle. Decide whether you want to have a small part-time business or be a sole proprietor making a full income and how much time you will have to devote to your business. If you're a single mom and want to spend every evening with your children, perhaps opening a restaurant where you'll have to be onsite from the afternoon into the early morning hours isn't the best business for you.

2. Decide what product or service you will offer. Kendall says

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while many prospective entrepreneurs ask her about the sectors that are most in-demand or the products and services that have the potential to be lucrative, she advises them to look inside themselves and let their passion guide them toward their business venture. Welling agrees, naming passion as the most important determining factor in an entrepreneur's success. "[Running a business] is going to take persistence. You're going to have challenges and if you don't care about it enough, if it's not engaging enough to you, if it doesn't inspire you, don't do it," she says.

3. Examine the marketplace.

Do some research to discover whether there is a need for your product or service. "[Your business] has got to be a combination of what you can bring to the table — your skills, experiences and passion — and matching that with something you see as a customer need," says Welling. Examine market trends, and do research on where there are existing gaps in the marketplace and where your business could be competitive. Examine the competitors in the industry and ask whether your business could be viable in this environment.

4. Profile your target customer. Create a profile of the consumers who will be purchasing your product or service. How old are they?

Where do they shop? Are they active online? Where are they likely to find out about your business? This is the time to think about marketing strategies and how you're going to access that target market.

5. Show me the money. Financial statements are a crucial component of a business plan. If you watch CBC's *Dragons' Den*, you've likely have

seen many entrepreneurs berated for not knowing their numbers. "You should do at least two years of a basic cash flow statement where you're looking at how much income you think will come in, what expenses you think you'll have and what financing you'll need to support those things," says Welling.

6. Look for support. Being self-employed can be an isolating experience, making finding a professional support network a crucial component of any sole proprietorship. Welling says prospective entrepreneurs can benefit from joining as

many networking groups as possible. "You may not like all of them, but you're going to find something that works for you," says Welling. Networking events can not only help you find new clients, but fill in the gaps in your skills and experience. "If you're a great baker, but you're not good at finances, perhaps you can benefit from connecting with an accountant," says Welling. 🌟

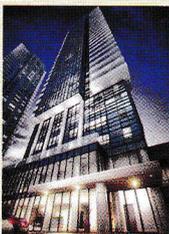
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