

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS *entrepreneurs' guide*

Accidental wedding planner

Organising marriages is a business that calls for diplomacy, patience and top co-ordination skills

Rosheen Rodwell

Evelyn Mills fell into the marriage business by accident rather than design. After 16 years of working in the hotel and events industry, she stumbled on an idea for her own business while helping out at a friend's bridal gowns shop.

Walking through the shop was a line of exhausted brides, overwhelmed by table plans, guests lists and family politics and desperate for any advice they could get about the organisation of their weddings.

Ms Mills realised she could use her events management skills and her experience in organising weddings and parties for friends to set herself up as a "wedding planner".

A tentative offer of her services to one of the brides visiting the shop was greeted with open arms. Suddenly, Ms Mills had a business to run. She called it Marriage Maestros.

At the time there were not many wedding planners in Hong Kong, and Ms Mills found that there was plenty of work. She decided early on that her fees would be charged as a percentage of the total cost of the wedding, and she accepted work mostly at the highest end of the market: weddings that cost between \$800,000 and \$1.2 million.

Ms Mills wanted to offer the ultimate service to these clients, which meant restricting her workload to two weddings every three months. "It would be unfair to my clients to juggle too many weddings," she said.

After 18 months, Ms Mills was getting regular requests for her services, through referrals and word of mouth. She decided to open her own office and hire an assistant.

"It felt like a huge commitment," she said. "But I am a risk taker. I just thought: What's the worst that can happen? If I can't afford the rent, I'll just have to work harder."

Working hard is a prerequisite in Ms Mill's profession. The hours can be punishing, mostly because her clients expect to be able to call her at all hours of the day or night, and are unable to meet during the day because of their own work commitments.

Ms Mills also takes on board the mental and physical challenge of organising a large event, together with the emotional baggage that comes with a wedding.

She has learned the hard way to become a master diplomat and negotiator, between the bride and groom, and between the happy couple and their parents.

"The most difficult are the parents," she said. "Particularly in wealthy Chinese families, where the parents are paying for the wedding and expect to have their say."

Ms Mills said she was amazed at how much patience she had acquired over the years. "People who know me as a friend, ask: How do you manage? It helps that I make it clear from the start that if the family cannot agree, I will go with the bride's decision."

Extracting decisions from brides, however, is far from easy. "Brides are notorious for changing their mind," she said.

Her most stressful time is one month before the wedding, when she has deadlines for decisions on guest lists, table plans and favours.

Besides the diplomacy required for the job, Ms Mills has to use master organisational skills. Mapping out the wedding day for the myriad of service



people involved is like completing a giant jigsaw puzzle.

The big day is organised with military precision. Each "vendor" (florists, chauffeurs, entertainers, photographers) is armed with an action list that breaks down the day's chores into 15-minute segments.

Ms Mills also brings in a team of four to six staff of her own. They are put in charge of aspects such as food and beverages, transport, entertainment and decorating. She co-ordinates proceedings with a series of mobile phones and walkie-talkies.

"I'm the octopus," she said.

She even employs an understudy in case anything happens to her.

Despite the stress of her work, Ms Mills enjoys her job, particularly being her own boss. But it can be a struggle in years not considered auspicious for marriage, when cash flow is limited, and more recently

because new wedding planners were springing up across the territory.

Ms Mills has been occasionally challenged on her pricing, but this has taught her a lesson in appreciating her own worth.

"We are not inexpensive, but you get what you pay for."

10 THINGS *i know*

1 You have to be strong to run your own business. I used to be soft, easily persuaded to reduce my fee, and regretting I was taking calls at midnight from anxious brides. Now that I know what I am worth, I am less likely to negotiate.

2 I used to let my business run my entire life. Now I try to find balance in what I do. The only reason to work is to have a better life, so I try not to take calls on Sundays. I try to set some boundaries for my clients.

3 I cannot live without my mobile phone, and am trying not to cave into a BlackBerry. The other tools of my trade are my Swiss Army Knife (mostly for the

scissors and the nail file), an old-fashioned pen and notebook, and my watch. My iPod is also indispensable, because it keeps me happy.

4 The hardest lesson I have learnt in business is that the decisions I make may not always be right, and I have to accept that and learn from it. Starting a business means that if you are successful, you have a lot of people to thank. But if you are not, you have only yourself to blame.

5 The most difficult thing I have to deal with in my line of business is the constant demand for shark's fin soup at weddings. I have to provide it

even though it goes against my principles, and the amount eaten is incredible. The richer the family, the more we are required to serve.

6 Sometimes I find it difficult being the boss because I am a people person, and there is only so much you can inspire and motivate in yourself. I often turn to my husband for ideas and support.

7 The atmosphere in the office is important to me. The first thing I do in the morning is switch on the music and light the candles.

8 It is very difficult to leave work behind at the end of the

day. I am constantly thinking about it, and most of the time I can see clients only after work or at weekends. Also, people just love to talk about weddings, so I can never get away from it.

9 I love working for myself because I pretty much work my own hours. If I really need to sleep in I can. I can take lunches, have massages during the day, take the day off when I feel like it and go on holiday when I need to.

10 I take great pleasure in treating my staff the way I want to. I am not constrained by office politics and so I can take the time to listen to them, to be compassionate and empathetic.

Pregnancy no grounds for dismissal

Case highlights need for bosses to know the law, writes *John Cremer*

EMPLOYERS WHO TALK about hi-tech solutions and corporate vision sometimes trip themselves up when handling more fundamental issues. Consider, for example, the volume of unlawful discrimination cases relating to pregnancy that still occur in Hong Kong companies, big and small.

These commonly relate to recruitment, promotion, bonuses, discretionary benefits and opportunities for training.

One recent case serves to illustrate a number of issues that can arise. Early in her pregnancy, Liza (not her real name) regularly fell sick and had to take days off work.

Her boss, apparently concerned about her well-being, suggested she take unpaid leave up until the time of her statutory maternity leave.

Because Liza was financially stable, she agreed. She later learned that the company had taken on a temporary replacement to handle her responsibilities.

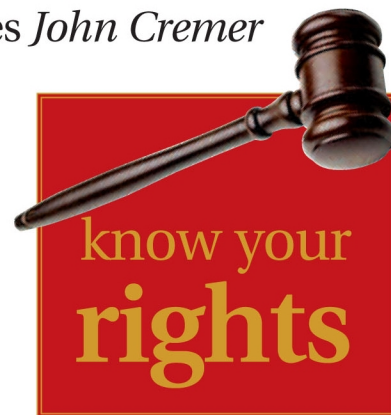
After giving birth, she returned to work as scheduled. On the first day back, however, the boss informed her that her contract was being terminated for supposedly unsatisfactory performance. A few days later she was told her replacement had been offered the position full time. Liza contacted the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) for advice. The investigator confirmed that even though the dismissal took place after her maternity leave, she could still file a complaint if she believed this had happened as a result of her pregnancy.

It was explained that many employers believe that if they have complied with the requirements set out in the Employment Ordinance (EO), they can then dismiss a new mother. In so doing, they fail to distinguish between the terms of the EO and the employment-related provisions in the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO), which covers discrimination relating to pregnancy.

When contacted by the EOC, Liza's now former employer could provide no written evidence to support the contention that her performance had been unsatisfactory. Similarly, claims that she had caused trouble in the workplace were not substantiated. Possible concerns about time absent from work while pregnant, or the comparative ability of her replacement, were not material to the case.

The parties agreed to settle through conciliation, which is generally faster and less expensive than starting legal proceedings. This resulted in the company paying Liza compensation.

The crux of the issue was not when the action took place but that the dismissal could be attributed directly to her pregnancy. Although the employer did not admit this, it was reasonable to draw that inference



on the basis of the circumstantial evidence.

If Liza had been dismissed for reasons clearly related to poor performance, it would not have been unlawful under the SDO. However, according to the EO, an employer cannot fire a pregnant employee other than in cases of serious misconduct.

In resolving the case, the EOC reminded the employer that allowing a substitute to permanently replace an employee on maternity leave could be seen as evidence of pregnancy discrimination. It also warned that staff taking part in wrongful dismissal of this kind may be held personally liable, even if acting under their employer's instructions. Further, the EOC said it was important that companies had a clear leave policy and made reasonable accommodation for employees who were sick.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Between September 1996 and July 2005, the EOC received 1,951 employment-related complaints under the SDO, of which 825 involved pregnancy cases in the field of employment.

Under the anti-discrimination laws, the EOC may reject a complaint relating to something that had happened more than 12 months ago, unless there are extenuating circumstances.

However, if the complainant decides to instigate formal legal proceedings, this can be done within 24 months of the alleged act of discrimination.

The District Court may also use its discretion to hear claims relating to cases more than two years old, if it considers it just and equitable to do so.

A woman is not legally obliged to give her employer formal notice of her pregnancy by presenting a medical certificate, but it makes sense to do so to qualify for maternity benefits.

Theoretically, if the employer has no idea that a female member of staff is pregnant, dismissal would not be unlawful under the SDO or EO. However, if may be difficult to prove such lack of knowledge. Even without formal notification, the employer may have knowledge of the pregnancy or have been informed by another member of staff.

WHAT THE LAW SAYS

The Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO), passed in 1995, makes it unlawful to discriminate against any woman on the grounds of pregnancy. Dismissal during pregnancy is not unlawful under the SDO if it is based on justifiable reasons and the employer can provide proof to support the action.

However, employers should also note the terms of the Employment Ordinance, which state that a pregnant woman can be dismissed only for serious misconduct.

In line with the provisions of the SDO, a pregnant woman should not be discriminated against whether she is married, single, separated, divorced or widowed.