



THE EXPAT SHIFT

Adding up to more than the sum of your parts

By Anju Cawthra

Fourteen years ago, I arrived in Singapore from London for a six-month stint with my fiancé. (Ha!) As a wide-eyed graphic designer at the start of my career, I was happy to take a short break and start a Big New Adventure. Little did I know, it wouldn't all be thrills.

I was used to working in small, boutique design agencies, contributing equally within a team, proposing ideas, being client facing and very sociable. I wasn't prepared for the design landscape I found in Singapore back then; formal, limiting, and hierarchical.

I didn't know how long I was going to stay or what I was going to do, until I stumbled on something interesting: a small write-up in *Expat Living* magazine covering a fundraising event for a charity in Jaipur. Growing up, I've always had an affinity with Jaipur and – having just gotten married there – it struck a chord. I reached out to find out more and ended up offering my design skills (and boundless time and energy) for a plight I believed in. Along the way, I learned about event

planning, budgeting, resource allocation, and, ahem, the art of diplomacy! Most unexpectedly, I soon built a solid network of real friends - some of my closest friends today.

By word of mouth, I gained clients for freelance design projects and started on the path of running my own business creating branding, corporate stationery (remember that?!), brochures, books, and websites. Slow, steady, and flexible, it suited my expat (read "itinerant") lifestyle very well. I soon built up a strong portfolio and enjoyed solving my clients' problems with creative solutions. That is, until I had children.

With my first daughter, born ten years ago, I fell into the trap of trying to do it all. I survived for four years managing the house, the baby, and the business, with no helper and a traveling husband – and it nearly broke me. Thank goodness I had another baby – granted, not an obvious solution, but one that brought our wonderful helper into our lives. Hallelujah – I had support!

I took three years out of my working life to focus on my family. I needed to pause and take stock. During this time, motherhood was joyous and fulfilling *and* isolating and demoralizing. I was missing a piece of my life. My career path had been stunted and I felt undervalued and dependent. I wanted to do more, give more and BE more but I had no idea what.

Once again, a decade after my first foray, I hit up my design industry contacts in Singapore. While I had more experience and agency, I also had children to look after, and unfortunately, flexibility is not on offer in this world. Rather than go backwards (I would be learning new design tricks from Gen X, Y and Z), I decided to put a bookmark in that particular chapter and look for new opportunities.

A by-product of not having a plan is learning to go with the flow – and being open. All my experiences have led me to believe that the Universe provides what you need when you need it. This is exactly what happened next.

A friend who knew my position saw an ad and pinged it over: “Online community group seeks motivated self-starter for flexible opportunity in relationship building and marketing.” It was low-key and vague, but something about it spoke to me. Some moments just stick with you: I remember exactly where I was and the feeling in my gut – this could be the start of something.

Seasoned Singapore Expat Women had been active for two years when founder Nici Schueler reached out with *that* ad. I felt inexperienced, but knew I was a “people person,” an excellent communicator with creative ideas, and was

willing to learn. Nici took a chance on me (or maybe she knew what she was doing?!) and the next chapter began. I started with basic marketing and quickly sidestepped when the administrative assistant left. Again, I felt out of my depth: I’d never “assisted” anyone or “done admin” or accounts, but I said YES, asking myself at every turn, “What’s the worst that could happen?” The more I did, the more I found I could do, and the more I enjoyed it and wanted to contribute. Before I knew it, I was spinning all kinds of plates, including managing clients, creating content, and planning strategy. I’d come a long way, baby!

Last year, as Covid loomed, Nici decided to relocate back home to Australia and asked me to take the reins. To my surprise, I realized all those little roads over the years had led me *here*. I was using a suite of creative skills; copywriting, photography, strategy, problem solving. I was enjoying serving the expat community that I’ve been a part of for so long; bringing people together and continuing to provide a positive space for like-minded, marvelous women in Singapore. This community is so special: experienced and supportive, yes, but also compassionate and erudite. Every day there’s a new lesson to learn, and a new opportunity to bring people together. Long Live the Wisetribe!

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Anju is the Director of Seasoned Singapore Expat Women, an online community and safe space for women who have been in Singapore for at least 3 years. Truly “seasoned” herself, Anju is British expat with over 14 years in Singapore. Anju is a girl-about-town and avid culture-vulture who delights in the varied experiences that Asia has to offer.