



# How to Shatter the Glass Ceiling: Go Outside

Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result?  
Maybe it's time to start your own business.

By **Elaine Pofeldt** | November 27, 2012

Adrienne Leigh, 52, left behind a corporate career to work for herself—and hasn't looked back.

At that time in 2003, Leigh, now 52, was recently divorced with a five-year-old daughter. She'd earned a six-figure salary as the managing director of an international consulting firm in Los Angeles and, after moving to a suburb of Houston, had joined the staff of an outplacement firm but gotten downsized.

As a newly single parent, she needed to work but didn't want to go back to the long hours of the corporate lifestyle. She thought back to frustrations she'd had about the unequal pay women faced in the consulting world. "In our field, there was definitely a difference in how men and women were compensated," she says.

So Leigh made a bold move. She borrowed \$50,000 from her 401(k) and became a licensee for a franchise-brokerage chain. By 2007, she'd joined a different chain, Murphy Business & Financial Corporation, where she could advise clients on buying and selling businesses outside of the franchise world, too. She invested \$29,000 in the franchise fee.

Leigh says she's happy she went out on her own. "I really liked being able to control my own destiny, make my own hours and reap the benefits of my hard work," says Leigh. "I have certainly made more money on my own than I ever made in the corporate world." In her best years, she's made 250% of her former corporate salary, she says.

If you've gotten frustrated that it's hard for women in your own field to get their due—particularly if they're juggling work with major family responsibilities—starting a business like Leigh did may be a smart way to direct your professional energy. But entrepreneurship isn't without its own obstacles for women. Here are some questions to ask yourself (and by the way, these work if you're a frustrated corporate guy, too):

**Is it impossible to break into the old boy's network?** Once you've reached a certain level of seniority, it can be tough to penetrate a company's inner circles of leadership—and to gain the sponsorship from higher ups you need to move to a higher title. Lacking the right title, in turn, may limit the projects you can tackle and the salary you can earn.

Starting your own business can be a good way out of this situation. As CEO of your own firm, you'll be free from any gatekeepers who say you have to hold a particular title to work on the plum projects or to earn the big paychecks they result in.

Of course, there's a flip side too: In your own business, the onus will be on you to win customers and persuade them to pay you to tackle great projects. And in many fields, winning new accounts will be heavily dependent on your professional connections. If you never had time to make it to professional events or gatherings with coworkers because you had to rush home from work to tackle household responsibilities, you may find that your professional network is pretty skimpy—leaving it hard to make sales.

"Women tend not to make the connections they should because they have competing demands on their time," explains Karen L. Mallia, 57, an advertising veteran who tried freelancing at various points in her career but eventually became an associate professor of advertising at the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina.

**Have you struggled to get credit for your accomplishments?** A common frustration for women is that when they've done the heavy lifting on executing projects at work, the men on their team seem to score more points with the boss. "Men tend to be much more self-promoting, which helps in corporate America in terms of who is getting ahead and getting attention," says Bruce Bachenheimer, a professor of management at Pace University.

Starting your own business can be a way to reap more rewards from your hard work, as Leigh discovered. If you keep customers happy, you're the one who will see your revenues rise. However, to get clients to pay you what you're worth, you may have to get better at tooting your own horn to clients, as you would to a boss. "In small business and growing ventures, you have to be out there and say how great you are," says Bachenheimer.

**Have you been penalized for needing flexibility?** While more firms offer flexible arrangements like telecommuting for working parents, many women discover that using them can land them on the slow track. That's generally not so in your own business, where you will typically have more latitude to set your own hours than in a corporate job. Clients tend to judge you on results, not on how many hours you spend in your cubicle.

**The downside to limiting your hours in a small business:** If you're not available when customers need you, you may find there are limits to your success. "At some point, if you decide that your objective is to maximize revenues, then you won't turn down calls and meetings," says Bachenheimer. Then again, it'll be you—and not a corporate boss—who gets to decide if and when you ramp up. For many women (and increasingly, men), that's worth a lot.