



Kathryn and Ross MacMillan of Nine2Three - Building Flexible Solutions

By Women in Focus | Latest Update Apr 24, 2013 2:05 PM

Ross and Kathryn are husband and wife co-founders of flexible recruitment agency, Nine2Three. Founded after Kathryn herself, had troubles re-entering the workforce after having a child – it's a company based on personal experience that offers real results and it's forging change within the recruitment industry.



The company itself is a working model of success too – with every employee being seen as a partner in the success of the business and all working flexible hours. As part of the In Her Shoes series, Nicole Watson spent a day with the Nine2Three team to learn more about their winning ways – and how Kathryn and Ross struck gold with their work/life balance model.

You're in the business of connecting people with a position or career that suits their unique needs. How does this work?

Nine2Three started out as the conduit that brings together people looking for some flexibility in their working life, and businesses that are happy to offer flexibility in return for the length of tenure, skills, maturity and life experience these candidates bring to the business.

Connecting people and businesses in this way gives both parties a unique opportunity to really forge a strong partnership, that will see the business grow and the person cultivate work/life balance. These days you hear a lot about using the technology of recruitment, online advertising, software that will do the job for you, and application forms that cull your candidates for you; but we have built our business on having an in-depth understanding of the needs of people, that is both clients and candidates. We look at their unique needs; understanding the psychology of each and matching the skills of both parties.

You also connect small business with affordable HR solutions to help manage risk. How do you do this?

Most small businesses do not have a HR person or much understanding of HR needs. Our clients ring us for example, when they want to take a new person on and need a Contract of Employment. They may also need to manage a staff member, need to implement some policies to protect their business or just some coaching around how to speak to their team members and build a better functioning team. We use an Industrial Relations Law Firm to complete the legal documents and then work with the business to customise these documents to their business and implement them into total HR systems. We do as little or as much as the business needs – from one document to designing whole WHS systems and recruitment processes. Our documents are Fair Work Compliant and we become the HR department for the business and even do a no-cost review every 12 months!

Nine to Three is a unique business model approaching recruitment in a different way. What are the benefits to your clients?

We are like no other recruitment company. We believe in quality of placement and as such work exclusively with our clients to place the perfect candidate into their business. The standard 'Fee on success model' that most recruitment companies employ does not really work for either the company or the client. From the clients perspective, the recruitment company is so intent on getting a candidate into the role as quick as possible, (because if another company beats them to the placement, they will not be paid for their work), so quality is reduced and speed is increased.

The fees you pay need to be substantially higher to offset the risk that the recruitment companies run working for nothing if they miss the placement. From the recruitment companies' point of view, they bear all the risk with this model. So you have to question the depth of work that may be completed on your behalf when there is no guarantee of payment for them.



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All our clients work exclusively with us on a staged payments system. This means that our percentage rates for permanent placement are lower and we work with the client to achieve the desired result; being paid as we reach certain milestones. All our clients are happy to work this way, and our reputation is so strong that very few new clients have any issues working this way as they can see the benefits for themselves. Additionally, clients love Nine2Three as we have an Executive Division for management and senior staff and our own employees stay with us long term. This means if you call us today and then call us for another role in a year's time, you will speak to the same consultants; meaning we develop a really solid understanding of your business needs. Customers love this!

From humble beginnings in a home office, you're now in a great office space with a buzzing team. Can you share your start up journey?

The concept for Nine2Three was developed with my husband, after my own experiences trying to return to the workforce and having a young child. I still remember us discussing the name in the kitchen one night. We were a home based business for 12 months and it was basically me and one employee to help me out a day or two a week.

We were lucky enough to be approached by the Sutherland Shire Hub for Economic Development (SSHED) which is a business accelerator. We then moved to a little office in the SSHED where we stayed for four years; being the grateful recipients of fantastic mentoring and business assistance. When the staff started comparing our office to being in an elevator, I knew we needed a bigger place.

We moved to our current location in Sutherland about 5 years ago and use this as our head office with a serviced office in Australia Square for our CBD clients. It has been a fantastic journey and I love the business and my team. I am prodigiously proud of them all and what we continue to achieve!

What was it like having to start your career all over again?

My confidence totally disappeared! I knew inside that I was a capable person with much to offer any business, but I had a few issues. Like no higher education, no tertiary education, no references, no work experience other than entrepreneurial and a child that had to be dropped off and picked up from school.
I mean – why wouldn't you employ me!

It was totally debilitating to realise that others could not see my potential. If only I was given a chance, they would see what I could offer them – but no chances came. I started to retrain myself at the local TAFE and eventually found work through my personal network. If only I had a spokesperson to help me – and now this is what Nine2Three is for hundreds of women.

You co-founded the company with your husband. How do you both make a personal and professional partnership work?

Ross and I both have very different personalities, work styles and talents. It is our immense differences that actually make us such an amazing team. In a professional partnership, understanding the other person really well and acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses means that you can work together by working on different aspects of the business where your talents lie. In a personal relationship, time apart is really healthy (especially if you are working closely together). Having common goals that you aspire to, gives focus to what you are doing and places it all into perspective. My favourite saying is, "life is for living." So we are always focused on creating the best life for ourselves, and our family, and enjoying every minute of it!

Working together can have its challenges. How have you both overcome these?

We have overcome the challenges of working together by realising very early in the business that it is best not to work together!

By that I mean not working on exactly the same aspect of the same project; as this can lead to challenges because we both have very different working styles. What we do best is recognise each other's talents and leave the other person alone to complete their project; and then work together on the big picture items.

What is the most rewarding part of working together?

Having that other person to share your dreams, disappointments and wins! Having someone to run things by and get another perspective on issues and of course drinking the occasional bottle of bubbly when things are good!

What is your vision for your business over the next five years?

Nine2Three will continue to grow and expand across all four of our divisions. That is, SME Recruitment Solutions – the essence of Nine2three really, with flexible staffing options for small businesses; MacMillan Corporate Recruitment Solutions – our executive division, working with more large firms, expanding our government contracts and being a preferred supplier to the banks; HR Management Solutions – continuing to work with small businesses and assist them to become Fair Work compliant and build better functioning teams; and last but not least - Candidate Solutions – with a consultant entirely focused on this growing division we run workshops for women returning to the workforce, assist candidates with resume re-writes, and conduct interview skills sessions to help people with their personal manner and career coaching.

Do your staff at Nine 2 Three also work flexible hours?

YES! However our office is open from 9.00am – 5.00pm Monday to Friday. I realised at the beginning, if I was going to tell our clients, that I could find them a better quality candidate, who would stay with their business longer, be more connected to the business and bring not only work skills and experience, but life skills, to the business, if only they would offer a little flexibility - then I would have to prove the model worked too. So for the past ten years, no person at Nine2Three has had set work hours. We choose the employees we want, and then create the roles around them. Some people start early, some late, some leave to do school pick up, some work later.

I know I will always put my family above my business, so if I recognise that fact in my employees also, I can facilitate a work/life balance for them too, so they can be there for the East Bonnet Parade, or drop their partner to a meeting, or take time to care for an elderly parent. What I get in return is huge connectivity to the business, staff that regularly go above and beyond, and people with amazing skills who know they are valued and have a career path. And, almost unheard of in recruitment, a team who stays with me long term. In an industry where attrition rates run at 30%, ours remained at 0% for over 5 years. When many in our industry were casualties of the GFC, we came through without losing one staff member, and developed even greater relationships with our existing customers and many new clients. This is the power of a team that has the ultimate work/life balance.

You can connect with  Kathryn MacMillan through the Women in Focus Community.