

GARDEN DESIGN JOURNAL

SGD

NEWS/GARDEN DESIGNERS/PLANTING/SUSTAINABLE DESIGN/BOOKS/COURSES/EVENTS
THE JOURNAL FOR THE SOCIETY OF GARDEN DESIGNERS

COLLECTIVE VISION

THE ECLECTIC GARDENS OF
CHANTICLEER IN THE US

Bridges, crossings
and boardwalks

Profile of Robert Myers

Difficult partnership
business models



NOT GOING IT ALONE

It's sometimes assumed that practicing alone as a designer is the best option but, as Matt Haddon finds out, going it alone is not the only route to success

Growing designers choose to operate their businesses in three different ways and as a profession there is no standard model operating the business. Many have found their ideal business model through trial and error, or through knowing how they perform in their field, or when they self-assessment gain a period of time to discover what works for them. As for SOI in a profession, where membership is based upon the competence of individuals, operating alone could be seen as the way forward, especially after not against the market's loss of legitimate designers. However, many solo practitioners realize they are supported by others and, while this may not self-selecting, it does have its advantages. In the following section of case studies, designers discuss why not going it alone in business has been the right choice for them.

50:50 PARTNERSHIPS

1 Andrew Fisher, Partner M300
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

2 Dan Savage M300
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: Andrew has worked for the last 10 years and the last 5 years he has been working alone as a landscape architect. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients.

"Working alone was a great decision for me. I had a growing client base and I was enjoying the work. I had a growing client base and I was enjoying the work. I had a growing client base and I was enjoying the work."

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3 Dan Smith and James Roberts M300
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: Dan and James have been working together for 10 years. They have a growing client base and are currently working with a growing number of clients. They have a growing client base and are currently working with a growing number of clients."

"The process of choosing a business model is a personal one and it's not always clear what the best option is. It's a personal one and it's not always clear what the best option is. It's a personal one and it's not always clear what the best option is."

4 Helen Sherry M300 and Sally Crum M300
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: Helen and Sally have been working together for 10 years. They have a growing client base and are currently working with a growing number of clients. They have a growing client base and are currently working with a growing number of clients."

5 William E Jackson M300
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: William has been working alone for 10 years. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients."



"When a professional is considering options, it's important to consider the long-term implications of each choice. It's a personal one and it's not always clear what the best option is. It's a personal one and it's not always clear what the best option is."

6 Lisa Edge-Davies, Pro Registered Interior Designer
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: Lisa has been working alone for 10 years. She has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients. She has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients."

7 Heidi Whittaker, Pro Registered Interior Designer
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: Heidi has been working alone for 10 years. She has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients. She has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients."

"When a professional is considering options, it's important to consider the long-term implications of each choice. It's a personal one and it's not always clear what the best option is. It's a personal one and it's not always clear what the best option is."

8 Christine Jones, Pro Registered Interior Designer
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: Christine has been working alone for 10 years. She has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients. She has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients."

9 Stephen Jones, Pro Registered Interior Designer
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: Stephen has been working alone for 10 years. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients."

"When a professional is considering options, it's important to consider the long-term implications of each choice. It's a personal one and it's not always clear what the best option is. It's a personal one and it's not always clear what the best option is."

10 Christopher Jones, Pro Registered Interior Designer
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: Christopher has been working alone for 10 years. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients."

11 Stephen Jones, Pro Registered Interior Designer
in *Shore of Kings Team*
4 hours

Working history: Stephen has been working alone for 10 years. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients. He has a growing client base and is currently working with a growing number of clients."



Owning a larger practice



8. Patricia Fox MSGD
Owner and Lead Designer at
Arslia Garden Design

Working history: Started practising independently, expanding to include a freelance designer and progressed to where the company is today: employing a practice manager and four full-time designers, including Patricia.

"Working as part of a team of designers provides multiple benefits and opportunities which may not be available to those working independently. Together we can critique each other's work, providing thinking from different angles and backgrounds to produce a more carefully considered product. We can also present ourselves as a more professional organisation: there will always be someone a client can reach at any time, even if staff are absent due to illness or are out on site. Some practices may have 'back-office' and 'client-facing' staff, but I'm developing a firm that's based on having a team of award-winning designers.

"When I began to expand, I found a resistance from clients to deal with anyone but myself. The most difficult transition I faced, however, was having another designer working with me in my own space – although this was partly due to my office being at home at that time."



9. James Scott MSGD
(also on the SGD Council, in charge of PR & Awards)
MD (Co-Director) and Lead Designer
at The Garden Company Ltd

Working history: Started as a designer/contracts manager then set up his own design and build company, as a co-director,

"I have enjoyed a long and successful collaborative working relationship with Andrew Wenham MSGD on a freelance basis. Typically, we would meet a client, come up with a concept, Andrew would often do the initial layout and I would get more involved with the planting, but we weren't based in the same office. Two years ago, due to the sheer volume of work, I decided to take on a full-time designer. This allows me to provide much more input throughout the design process, as we are located in the same office, but it is now more intense with all current projects on the drawing board in the office.

"Working together means we challenge each other to always look for the best solution, and are more analytical of the process. For me, it is more satisfying to see a project designed and built as part of a team."



10. Judy Knight,
Pre-Registered Member
Partner at Eden Garden Landscapes

Working history: Started designing alone but now has a family-run design and build partnership.

"It was increasingly difficult to survive on design fees alone and so I initially went into partnership with my son Adam (a skilled landscaper who was in any case building all of my designs) as we were so busy, and to avoid a duplication of insurance and accountancy fees. More recently, my husband sold his business and joined the partnership as Project Manager.

"Our partnership draws on three distinct skill sets from each of the three partners – design, build and marketing – and this allows us to build our business, offering new services based on these skill sets. Clients' perceptions of a

"WORKING TOGETHER MEANS WE CHALLENGE EACH OTHER TO LOOK FOR THE BEST SOLUTION"

design and build firm are positive and they warm to a family business which can handle all aspects of a project in a smooth and professional manner.

"A family business is a delightful set-up that works very well for us. We are all like-minded and are acutely aware of running a very professional operation. It is a business model I would recommend to couples and families who get on extremely well as we are entrepreneurial and live for work."

Some people find, though, that they do not thrive when working within a partnership or practice and the following case studies examine their experiences:

When working for yourself is best



11. Jade Goto,
Pre-Registered Member
Owner at Jade Goto Landscape Studio

Working history: Has worked for large landscape architecture practices but wanted more creative input and so decided to start up on her own three years ago.

"I work alone but with a network of people in support. This replaces the knowledge base available working in a large office. I do miss working as part of a group, but am now working to my own schedule. You can really follow your own path and create your own style which makes you much stronger as a designer. The danger is that you never relax and can't switch off at the weekend and there are also the financial concerns of not having a regular wage" →

"WE HAVE BOTH SAID MANY TIMES THAT WE WOULDN'T STILL BE IN BUSINESS IF WE WERE WORKING ON OUR OWN"



12. Kate Eyre, Pre-Registered Member
Owner of Kate Eyre Garden Design

Working history: Began in a three-way partnership then became a solo designer and now employs an assistant designer.

"When I was in a partnership I was very ambitious to make the partnership succeed, more proactive getting business in, and so because it was apparent that I was hungrier for bigger things, I decided it was better for me to go it alone. It can be difficult in a partnership to critique because everyone does things slightly differently.

"Design is why I love the job so much and because it is personal and emotional you can take it to heart and feel very involved. However, working with someone else provides another person to talk to – you can feel very isolated working alone. Designers need to justify their thoughts and ideas with someone else – communicating and getting feedback is important. Being alone you could lose confidence quite quickly."

13. Guy Petheram, Pre-Registered Member

Owner of Guy Petheram Garden Design

Working history: Initially worked as a gardener before concentrating on garden design. Then four years ago, he set up a design and build limited company with a landscape architect he met while freelancing for another garden design company. He is now reverting to being a sole trader and is leaving the partnership.

"I took the opportunity to go into partnership to expand into larger scale projects more quickly than I would have been able to on my own. The presentation of wide-ranging experience is also easier to show in a partnership and you have the confidence to take on and deliver a wider range of work, and larger projects.

"I was, however, being pulled away from what I liked doing in a more corporate direction. If becoming a different animal and although hugely enjoyable and educating, it was not the direction that I want to go in. I now need to develop my revenue streams through teaching, talking, writing, gardening and garden design. I expect to take a small step back financially but that would be an even larger step if I relied solely on design."

WHAT TO BEAR IN MIND

If you are considering which option is best for you, other designers' experiences may help:

Is working in a partnership the best business model, do you think?

Sally Court: "Some people are better with other people around as garden design can be a very lonely business. If you decide you don't want to work on your own, make sure you are both on the same wavelength from a business point of view. It is not enough just to be good friends, you have to be very mature about your choices."

Nicola Warnants: "Find the right person to collaborate with. A partnership is hard to fashion if you need to look for the right person."

Vanessa Faulkner: "We have both said many times that we wouldn't still be in business if we were working on our own. Becoming a professional garden designer was much more difficult than we thought and provided various business challenges. We took courage from the two of us together as partnership provides someone to support you in difficult situations. A partnership is really good from the word go. People will change as time goes on but there is something special about starting out as a partnership together because of the speed you can establish yourself and share your learning experiences."

Andrew Fisher Tomlin: "We actually took the proactive decision to run a small business which enables us to turn down work we don't want or need, rather than having a large staff that requires feeding and I feel is often more about vanity than good business practice. It's also very important to embrace new business practices and technology to make it work. We run our business in line with more modern practices, i.e. a small core team but with a larger range of specialists who can be called upon for individual projects. They are our partners, they don't own shares but we build good business-to-business relationships and, to all intents and purposes, they are stakeholders in what we all do together."

Although you are leaving a partnership, and returning to being a solo designer, do you have any regrets?

Guy Petheram: "I am glad I entered into a partnership and it was interesting along the way. The most important thing is to go into a partnership with an open mind and to understand the implications, knowing that things will change. It's a fluid thing and you constantly need to reassess if you are both happy."

Are there any business considerations when looking to form a partnership?

Ian Smith: "You need to consider all implications and draw up a partnership agreement (though we didn't follow our own advice as the business grew organically and we had nothing to lose but everything to gain). How will you apportion responsibilities and payments from the business?"

Vanessa Faulkner: "The current VAT threshold is a turnover of £79,000 per year, so in a partnership VAT is likely to be a reality, particularly if the business does more than simply design. Planning is the key as you can't charge more than people who are not VAT-registered – so we needed to plan to accept a drop in our margins with an increase in our turnover."

AND FINALLY...

What is your advice for those who decide not to follow the formal partnership route?

Helen Billetop: "The key is to believe in yourself and your abilities. Never shy away from asking friends and fellow garden designers for advice and join in seminars, conferences and local cluster groups to build a network of colleagues."

James Scott: "A designer should build allegiances and collaborations with other designers which can be both a source of work and an opportunity to be recommended."

Dan Bowyer: "Take every opportunity that comes along, especially if that is going to work for another designer. Don't be scared to try your luck." ☺