

FAST FASHION BURNOUT TO FREELANCE WRITER



If we'd bumped into each other in 2017, you'd have met a woman who was always rushing, a woman with a wardrobe full of clothes where her bank balance should be.

I worked for a big fast fashion retailer in central London. But don't let the snazzy outfits fool you. It was a carousel of long hours, late nights, little recognition and – despite what I'd imagined when I graduated – limited creativity.

In eight years, I'd worked my way up from office dogsbody to manage a small department. I'd made it! My dream job! Yes, I thought working until 10 pm, barely taking holidays, feeling like my whole personality was a flaw and going out on the lash every weekend to block out the stress was the dream. I saw a superior click their

fingers at an assistant to get their attention. I saw friends told not to wear a specific garment due to their body type. I saw colleagues humiliated in front of their peers. I saw bullying, sizeism, ableism and sexism.

Around the time the penny dropped that this was not, in fact, my dream job, another realisation hit home. At work one day, we were ushered into a room and shown *The True Cost*, a 2015 documentary that exposed the truth about working conditions in garment factories. When the film finished, we were given a nice little pep talk on how OUR company wasn't like the others. WE would never treat workers like that.

But something in my brain was fizzing. What about all the times I'd haggled the cost of a garment down by a few pence? And the times we'd penalised suppliers for circumstances outside of their control? And what about when we'd cancelled orders on a whim based on what some celeb wore out at the weekend, leaving the factory to shoulder the cost? Meanwhile, we were rewarded for our 'efforts' with glamorous Christmas parties, annual bo-

nuses and discounted clothes. And while those perks seem enormous compared to the wages in garment factories, to me, they felt pitiful. Because those Christmas parties and discount codes were mere scraps compared to what others further up the chain were enjoying. That year, the top bods in the brand I worked for earned upwards of £3 million.

And while I was never going to earn that kind of money, I realised, no matter how hard I thought we had it, we were in a jazzy head office in London. We took home a wage we could live on. Our jobs were relatively secure. Could the same be said for the women making the garments we chucked around the office



with such abandon?

Suddenly, it all started to feel slimier than an armpit after a day in a cheap polyester shirt.

I'd always told myself my job empowered women. "I help people feel and look great no matter their budget," I'd bleat. But now, I believe brands themselves help create the gaping hole in our self-esteem which we try to fill with inexpensive, throwaway garments. How could

I, as a feminist, keep contributing to such a system?

So, I stopped.

I handed in my notice. They were relieved, I'd become pretty shit at my job by then.

I was 30 years old and the career I'd been building for almost a decade was in tatters.

So, I made a textbook third-life crisis decision: bought a sec-

ond-hand backpack and a one-way ticket to Myanmar.

In the bars, hostels and buses of Southeast Asia, I met countless people who weren't tied to one location by their work.

They were also doing something which to me seemed radical: working according to their beliefs and values.

On an island in Cambodia, one eye on my dwindling bank balance, I started writing blog posts for businesses. I'd always been good at expressing myself in writing, it came in handy for those seedy fast fashion negotiations.

One of my earliest writing jobs was with an ethical and sustainable clothing brand. I knew the founder through a friend. That client led to another and eventually I had myself a niche. I've now been writing for sustainable and ethical businesses for almost four years. I help people who share a similar worldview tell their story, talk about their mission and promote their products.

I've written for an organisation dedicated to ending sexual violence, a zero waste deodorant brand and a sustainable fashion marketplace. I've even helped one of the biggest brands in the world think more sustainably. On the side, I write a newsletter encouraging and celebrating the small business superpower of running in alignment with your values.

And about that location independence? When I started out, I lived in Bali for a while, then I

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moved to Namibia. I've since lived in Portugal and now, Spain. I've travelled through Asia and Africa, firing up my laptop in seafront apartments, tents, hammocks, hotels and ashrams. Aware of my impact, I offset my travels and do carefully chosen pro bono work in the countries I visit.

I know that I have enormous privilege to do what I did. But what I've learnt from the experience is to accept change. For me, my views and feelings about my job flipped completely. It took me a while to listen to myself, but when I did, it opened doors. We aren't meant to stay the same forever. Our personalities aren't predetermined or permanent. Our past choices never have to define our future.

HOW TO WORK ACCORDING TO YOUR VALUES

First, think about what matters to you. If your current job doesn't feel aligned, could you niche or sidestep within your industry? Perhaps there's a way to make your mark where you are already? You might be able to push for change in your organisation, volunteer or advocate for the causes you care about.

If you're starting out or thinking of a change, where do your skills and your values meet? Is there somewhere you can upskill to close the gap?

SALLY FOX