



Because they care

Who better to run a childcare firm than two working mums?

JEREMY STEVENS reports

Melissa Harrison and Anita McInally are on a mission to help the struggling working mothers of Australia. They've been there themselves and understand that frantic junction of parenthood and professionalism. Based in Sydney, they formed Abacus Ark Corporate Childcare late last year and are set to go national.

The company provides three specialist services to employers and their workers: new parent care, nannies who can travel on a business trip and short notice care.

The pair met in a mothers' group and realised they had the same shared frustration — juggling motherhood, work and partner's work commitments.

Most of their colleagues were facing the same issues. Knowing they shared complementary skills and a broad range of business experience, they researched strategies, adapted overseas templates and implemented it all last August. They've been full-time since January this year.

As Anita says: "We have done everything ourselves, except for a little bit of help financially, and owing to the viability of the product it's been a relatively easy path.

"We are very clear about the values of our business, the quality of staff. We are extremely passionate about childcare. We want other mothers to be able to access the same level of care we want for our children."

Melissa adds: "We originally targeted the white-collar sector but already there has been interest from wider groups and we want to expand on that. Just last week a frozen food company approached us, concerned with their workers.

"We are only operating in the wider Sydney

area at the moment, but we plan to move into the other states over the next year."

And Anita notes the child care sector itself recognises the need for the service.

"Childcare centres have spoken to us positively as well; they see us as a complementary service not a competing one. In general, people can see the added benefits of us being around," says Anita.

Hundreds of potential nannies have applied with only a small percentage chosen.

About twenty nannies are on the books at present but a steadily growing client base has seen constant recruiting.

Anita says staff are paid direct by Abacus Ark (rather than client companies), to ensure quality control and a better-integrated team.

"We can't afford to compromise in any area of business," she explains. "We use the service ourselves and want to have assurance, so we pay our nannies very well, as much as double, because we absolutely feel carers should earn well. They shoulder a lot of responsibility and should be rewarded appropriately."

Melissa adds: "We run the business with a principle of open communication and complete transparency, entirely open to new things and our employees' input. We are constantly reading up on the market shifts and developments and we select people with similar principles to come into our team.

"In five years we want to be a national company and, from there, spread into the Asia-Pacific region," she says.

"We have a creative approach that differentiates us, to a degree, from much of the other services. We may look a little different, come from a different place — well we are. The greatest reward has been knowing we had a good idea, sensing a gap in the market and seeing our instinct rewarded and confirmed: just being able to work at what we love and believe in."



Neo-nannies: entrepreneurs Melissa Harrison (left) and Anita McInally with sons Jude and Joshua
Picture: GRAHAM CROUCH