

Samantha Keen

OCCUPATION: MEDITATION COMPANY DIRECTOR



Journalism is a career of high pressures and looming deadlines. Meditation is the polar opposite, but former *IFA* contributor Samantha Keen has found a way to combine her talents, leaving journalism for VitalSwitch, the meditation company she founded with partner Stefan Gorzkiewicz. She talks here to **Julia Newbould**.

You were a financial services journalist used to demanding deadlines, tension and constantly ringing phones. How do you get from there to your new career in providing guidance on work and life balance?

It actually was a long way around. Essentially, in 1997 I came down with chronic fatigue and was working for a wire service. It took me a long time to find out what was going on and another two years to find a cure. It was 2002 before I really got better.

When I recovered I had a great understanding of the issues that people have with burnout, fatigue and stress.

It was interesting for me to go to the doctor in Australia and the UK and the message was the same: "That's what's happening to people now and you have to find a way through and you have to live with it."

Of course, I didn't buy that and it gave me a broader picture of what's happening to people in modern times – that there are high levels of fatigue, stress and burnout. People are working in unsustainable ways and at the same time I became passionate about meditation for one's own personal development. Those things dovetailed into a strong feeling with other people and also stepping towards the corporate world because that's where I think there is a real need.

Was there a defining moment for you when you just thought "I'll make the move now"?

We started this business idea in March 2007 and there was a lot of development that happened until Christmas. We held workshops in London and Singapore and it was now that we decided which way to go. I needed to put all my energy into this and we have some great people backing us now and great support and jobs set up in the Philippines.

What exactly can you do to help someone achieve a work and life balance?

The number one is the quality of sleep. In the

1800s, the average sleeping hours was 10 and now it is 6.9. For people who are working in high pressure situations, you forget sleep is important and people can do practical things to make sure sleep quality is better. Take time before bed to unwind, do relaxation techniques before going to sleep and also spend more time in nature. There are actually studies now that if people walk in nature for 30 minutes three times a week it improves their quality of life.

The core of our talks and workshops is the concept of chi – life force, vitality. If people know about chi, they can look after their bodies on a practical level and take easy steps to improve their life quality.

What type of people benefit most from what you provide?

We aim our workshops for people who are key decision makers in business and their teams. We like to work top down because that's where we believe that change can happen and we also like to work with groups of people and businesses that are progressive in their culture.

Some businesses really embrace training and that's a way to be progressive or others who are trying to be carbon neutral. Some companies have a want to bring things like life-work balance to their teams. In the UK, progressive status is giving training like meditation to people in a move to enhance work-life balance.

Is the need for your service greater in any particular industry?

We do seem to have a fit with the financial market because I have this background of connectivity for so long with people in that area and have an understanding of what they do, what they need and how we can help them.

Do you look at things differently now, and if you were to undergo job pressures from your past would you be equipped and more



able to handle them now with your new knowledge and skills?

Yes, already I went back to full-time work a couple of times, and definitely noticed [a difference] and I had feedback from people around me that noticed I was calmer, more contained and more organised and when I manage my energy it actually brings more clarity and I'm more efficient. The time spent looking after myself creates more speed and focus and ability to direct myself in my work and that's why we call it performance enhancing because that's what it does. I wasn't always like that.

How is your system different from any other meditation? Is there good meditation and bad meditation?

Our system is different because we focus on chi and have simple steps that can take anyone into the steps on inner peace, stillness and calm. It's not just luck; it's systematic.

In terms of good and bad meditation, people should really check out the types of meditation they are doing and if it's not working for them look at others.

The meditation is only a small part. We also do simple chi exercises and vitality exercises that people can do at their desks, at the computer and how to work with technology in ways that are less draining.

In the afternoons there is a heaviness in offices and people go out and get a coffee. It's a down time and there are tricks to give people a lift in energy at that time and there are others that work for chronic fatigue and burnout. □