

The cheque that CHANGED MY LIFE

Redundancy needn't spell the end. An increasing number of newly jobless are discovering that even a small payoff can finance exciting new beginnings, as these three women discovered

Report RUTH TIERNEY

**Opposite: big-day
businesswoman
Andri Benson**

'MY FUTURE IS ALL ABOUT HAPPY ENDINGS'

When Andri Benson, 35, from London, lost her job as a costumier at the BBC, she used her £13,000 redundancy payout to set up a wedding-planning business.

The 30 of us who worked in the BBC's costume store were given six months' notice that our department was being shut down in February 2008.

I had adored my job. It was like playing in a giant dressing-up box, and in my seven years I'd sourced outfits for TV series including *Silent Witness* and *Hotel Babylon* and films such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. As I switched off the light on our last day, I was choked at the thought of never seeing the place again. Some of the older staff were so devastated they couldn't even face saying goodbye to colleagues.

The BBC organised career-counselling courses before we left. I went along not having a clue what to do with my future. I'd always worked in costume, and knew getting another job would be hard, especially as I'd gone part time since having my son three years earlier. But when the course leader asked, 'What would your dream job be?' out of nowhere I said, 'Wedding planner.' I'd never considered it before, but as soon as it popped out of my mouth, I realised that was exactly what I wanted to do.

I'd organised my own wedding six years earlier, and loved every minute of it – from the gown and invitations I designed myself, to the elaborate ceremony at our local Greek Orthodox church. And I always came up with reams of suggestions whenever a friend got engaged. So, I reasoned, why not base a business plan around my own dream day? It seemed the perfect career to make the most

of my creative flair and helpful nature. With my redundancy payout I could afford to take a few months off as well as do two wedding-planning courses, one business and marketing focused, the other covering wedding services I could offer.

I launched Always Andri in March this year, taking a stall at two wedding fairs where I talked to prospective brides about the range of services I offer – from fashion advice to planning the whole caboodle, which costs around £2,000 and involves at least 250 hours' work.

There was a lot of interest in my on-the-day coordination service, which allows the bride to plan the wedding for herself but leaves all the tricky last-minute stuff for me – and, at £300, it's more cost-effective. I was overjoyed when I got my first booking to do this – troubleshooting problems throughout the day, from sourcing extra ice cubes to buying emergency concealer for a bridesmaid.

There's a lot of theatricality in a wedding, and liaising with brides is a little like working with actors, so I'm a dab hand at calming them down before they face their audience, making sure everything fits and the set looks just so.

I've since had numerous coordination bookings, and I hope to break even in my first year. I spent a lot on my website, advertising and stalls at the wedding fairs so I'm trying to recoup those costs. I'm planning a full 'big fat Greek wedding' for next year, and I'd like to do more whole wedding packages.

My husband has such confidence in what I'm doing that he recently left his administration job to study to become a social worker. We know it's risky, but I think there'll always be a market for the happy ever after of a fairy-tale wedding. ►

For information, and Andri's blog, visit alwaysandri.co.uk

SAM HOLDEN