

Don't tell me I can't...

go from a police officer to matchmaker

Tara McDonnell changed career in her forties

My days are spent carrying out background checks and conducting interviews - working out if I'm being lied to - skills I've honed after 10 years in the police force. Only these days it's not suspects who I'm trying to suss out, it's potential clients for my business - a dating agency.

Matchmaking is an area I've had a vested interest in. During my thirties, my unpredictable police shifts meant it was hard to find love. Working for up to 22 hours at a time, I struggled to meet anyone special.

My only option was online dating agencies but they were expensive and offered no guarantees. I lost count of the number of times I'd get my hopes up about a man only to arrive and find he was very different from his online profile. One was a good 10 years older than the picture he'd sent, another turned out to be married.

Feeling despondent, I focused on my career - first working with victims of domestic violence and the perpetrators, then in the serious and organised crimes division. I got a thrill out of interviewing and surveillance work, and I felt proud when my cases appeared in court and justice was served.

Then, in 2008, aged 40, I *did* find love. I'd never considered Dave, an officer at the station where I worked, as a potential partner. But I went sailing one weekend and he was there. With a shared interest, our feelings grew and we became a couple.

But by April 2010 I wanted a change - not from Dave, but my career. Since I found court cases one of the most interesting aspects of my job, I decided to go to university, for the first time, to study law.

Afterwards, I found a job in a law firm, but, in September 2014, after seven months, I was made redundant. Perhaps I should have felt upset, but it gave me a push to think about other ideas that interested me.

I thought back to my online dating

experiences and wondered if I could help other women like me. I decided to launch a bespoke service where each client was vetted and then personally matched.

With my police training, I had people skills, patience and a knack for spotting liars. I also knew how to carry out a thorough background check and by interviewing every client to establish their deal-breakers, I could ensure any matches I made were more successful than just an online algorithm.

Dave, then 53, thought it was a great idea and I spent the next few months conducting market research, as well as finding a firm to make my website. I also attended the UK's Matchmaker Academy (yes, it really exists!), where I learnt everything from how to find clients to tips on marketing myself as a brand. Those skills, combined with my police training and intuition, meant that in December 2014 I was ready to launch South Downs Introductions.

I was excited, but not all my friends were enthusiastic. One asked when I was going to get a real job. It made me determined to prove them wrong. And I did.

I soon had dozens of clients, paying just over £100 a month. Each one had a different reason for joining. One had lost her husband in her thirties, another had survived cancer and wanted to take back control of her life.

'I HAD A KNACK FOR SPOTTING LIARS'



Tara spent 10 years in the police force



She's used her skills from her time in the police to her advantage

I arranged an hour-and-a-half interview with each one. It helped me uncover *exactly* what they were after in a way a form couldn't.

During this stage, I discovered a man trying to shave a few years off his age and another whose answers about his education didn't ring true. I turned them both down. Yes, it meant losing money but I wanted a business founded on integrity.

After meeting all my clients, I was able to find more accurate matches. In fact, I've successfully matched two thirds of all my clients after just one date.

But the more successful I am, the more new clients I have to find. So this year, I'm holding events like sailing weekends, where singletons can meet without the pressure of a traditional blind date.

While I loved being a police officer, I'm so glad I've found my vocation and I'm making a difference to people's lives.

* southdownsintroductions.co.uk

Yes, you can BUT REMEMBER...

* **Assess your skills:** Any jobs you've done in the past, including being a stay-at-home mum, will have given you transferable skills like time management and team building, which will help you set up your own business.

Visit jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/ and search for transferable skills.

* **Get help:** There are lots of forms to fill in to register as self-employed. For advice, go to gov.uk/starting-up-a-business.

ARE YOU PART OF GENERATION Y NOT?

Generation Y Not! are 40-plus women like you who are grabbing life with both hands. Let us know how you rewrite the rules on Facebook and Twitter or by email. For details, see page 3.

