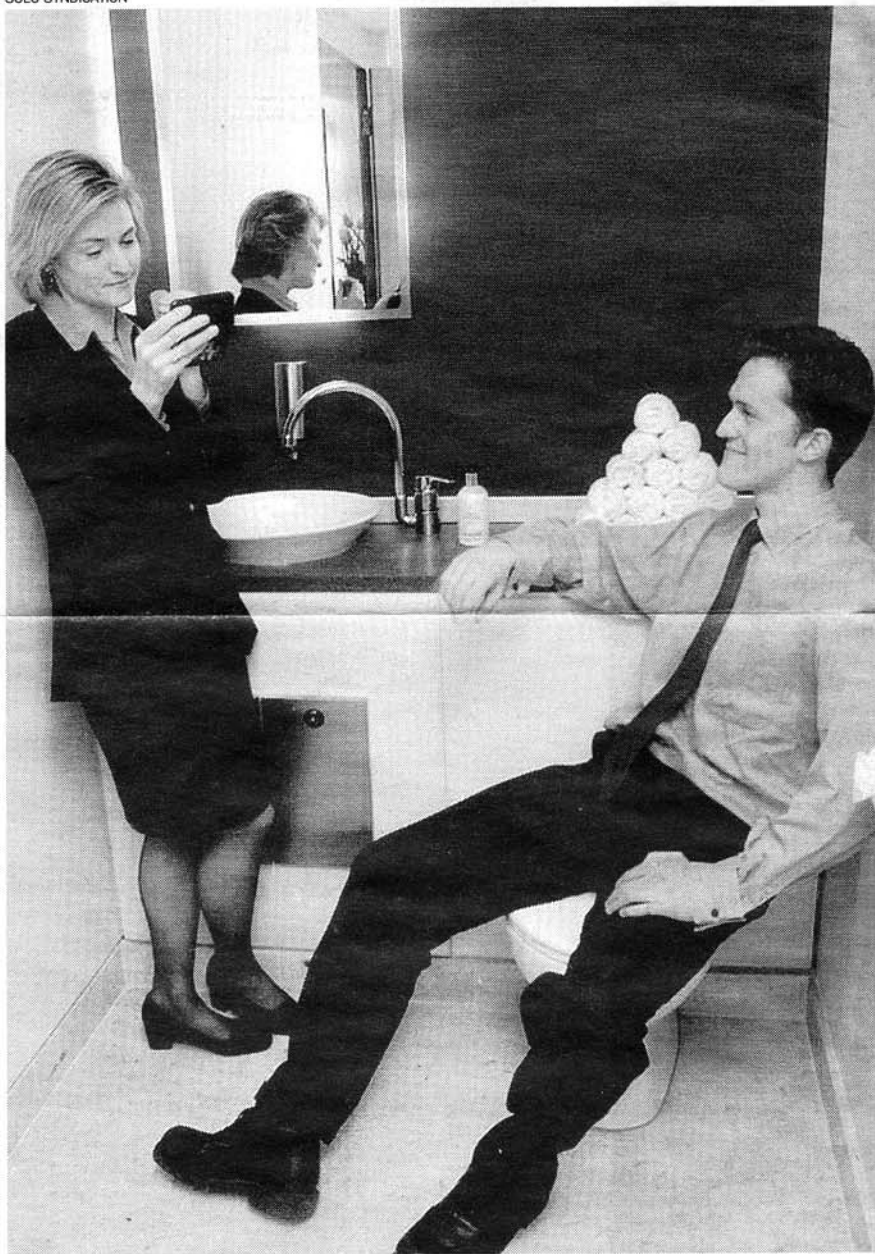


A handle breaking on the office toilet could easily threaten your business efficiency, without a handy book-keeper to save the day



SOLO SYNDICATION



WE EMPLOY two men in our little company, out of twelve employees. It is not that we are against men — some of them are my best friends, as they say, and I am even married to one. No, it is simply that what we do for a living seems to be more attractive to women than to men.

Two men; and two lavatories. One is slightly larger, lighter (a big exterior window that opens) and brighter. The other is smaller, darker, has a window that doesn't open and an extractor fan. About a year ago, my partners and I received a delegation from the younger, female members of staff. They would like designated lavatories; one for the boys and one for the girls.

Now you may be wondering why I am sharing this intimate information with you. This column highlights the highs and lows of running a small business. Anyone contemplating leaving a large company employer for the entrepreneurial life should be aware that you suddenly become responsible for things that you used to leave to other people, such as systems or building services.

Overnight you must become your own maintenance man, IT wizard and human resources supremo. Oh, and plumber, too. Time that could be spent acquiring business is spent on dealing with personnel issues and tinkering with cisterns. In small business, you have to pay attention to the detail — but all too often, it's the wrong sort of detail.

So how did I solve the bathroom dilemma? Personally, I have no problem with *Ally McBeal*-style unisex loos. We have them at home; with three sons and a husband, I would be trying to enforce the impossible with a girls-only WC. But the issue was clearly something that had a lot of support among the female members of staff; and so it was duly agreed.

The girls (unsurprisingly) got the larger and brighter one. However, the strategy has not been without its problems. The asset allocation has given rise to lengthy waiting times. Female members

of staff mostly take longer to use the facilities provided than their male colleagues.

But being confronted with a locked door may prove to be the least of our problems. The cistern handle on the men's loo broke the other week. When it was brought to our attention, a female colleague who has plenty of other things to do ran out to a builder's merchant to

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buy the requisite part. But, cisterns not being her speciality, she finally had to get the visiting book-keeper to help her. He costs us £50 an hour, so I guess it's cheaper than a plumber.

Do I sometimes yearn for the luxuriously appointed ladies' room at my former place of employment? Not often, but I do sometimes think about outsourc-

ing maintenance and the like. Some small businesses use concierge companies — www.lifes2short.co.uk and www.buy-time.co.uk are two that provide support to small businesses as well as individuals.

Meanwhile, it seems that the unisex loo debate is preoccupying other little businesses. Two of my female friends run a small company in Battersea that has six employees, all of them female, and one lavatory. When I mentioned the girls-only debate to them, thinking they would never have this problem, they put me straight immediately.

Their business receives a stream of couriers and tradesmen, many of whom are male and often ask to use the loo. Their staff would prefer to have an office loo used only by girls. So, to avoid appearing inhospitable to sweaty, unshaven motorcycle couriers, they have made an "out of order" sign and hung it permanently on the door of the loo, pointing apologetically to it when the need arises.