



Jeremy Allen/Edipresse

A La Maison helps working mothers leave their troubles at home

By Jeremy Allen

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As a mother, Sol Mason knows some of the challenges that parents face when juggling work with bringing up children. After giving birth to her son, she realised that as a Spanish mother in Switzerland, without family nearby to help, it could be a struggle – especially with a job to go to. So she set up her own home-help business last summer -- and 60 percent of the clients are expats.

Mason believes that a big problem in Switzerland is that there is no structure for mothers who want to work, something that she realised while bringing up her son. " I didn't want a maman de jour who just puts a bunch of kids in front of the television."

So, seeing a niche in the market, she set up A La Maison, a business that supplies a choice of cleaning ladies, babysitters, pet carers, plus help with homework and assistance for the elderly. Based in La Tour-de-Peilz, next to Vevey, she works with a lot of nearby companies such as Nestlé and Philip Morris. Some 60 percent of her clientele are expats.

The main non-Swiss nationalities she works with are spread out among Americans, British, Germans Swedes and Italians, who are increasingly hearing about the service by word of mouth. The business's turnover between February and March was boosted by a third, compared to a 25 per cent increase in the previous month.

Mason says that her international customers are mostly interested in having a cleaning lady or someone to look after their children, while her Swiss clientele is more interested in having someone look after an elderly relative. " Many non-Swiss are used to such services and so are very trusting - they might go on holiday for two weeks and leave their keys to a cat-sitter. The Swiss are much more cautious," she says.

A La Maison says its recruitment process is strict. Each interview with a nurse (to care for an elderly person), a cleaning lady or a nanny, lasts an hour. Full qualifications are essential or, in the case of a babysitter, at least two solid references from previous families. In all, 40 employees currently work for the company, plus there are more who have gone on to sign fixed contracts with the owner of the household where they work (for which Mason's business gets a commission fee).

The company's staff have always been recruited officially under contract with paid holidays and contribution to the AVS state pension fund. However, measures taken to discourage non-declared work with a fine, by obliging private individuals to declare wages paid to domestic staff, has made Mason's life a lot easier.

" Before we had to spend a lot on advertising to find suitable people, and many of them didn't want to declare their income. Now many cleaning ladies present themselves because they are scared of being fined," says Mason.

But while this presents less of a headache for Mason, she says that some cleaning ladies are not necessarily happier since the law came in. Many still ask how much they will earn in a week, focusing on the deductions, without realising the advantages of paid holidays or other benefits.

" I have seen many situations where people were made to work 50 hours per week at 1000 francs per month! Or staff who have worked for rich families and are told suddenly to leave, and end up with no possibility of claiming unemployment benefits because their pay had not been declared."