

BUSINESS BOTTOM LINE

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Women in business | ARIANNE Montréal Relocation Agency takes a personalized approach to helping employees, entrepreneurs and entire companies set up shop in Montreal.



The mural behind Shelley Chapatis (left) and Manon Dumas in their new office depicts their agency's namesake, Greek mythological figure Ariadne (ARIANNE in French).

DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE

Agency solves maze for newcomers

SARAH DOUGHERTY
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

The weather. Cost of living. The political situation. The ins and outs of the art scene.

These are some of the usual questions Manon Dumas and Shelley Chapatis field from their clients, who are professionals relocating to Montreal.

But every once in a while someone wings a real curve ball. "One client

asked if we had to carry guns in Montreal," said Dumas. "We really had to set them straight."

Dumas founded **ARIANNE Montréal Relocation Agency** five years ago after identifying a niche for a personalized approach to helping employees, entrepreneurs and entire companies set up shop in Montreal. The agency handles everything from finding housing and

the right schools to hooking up with a good dentist.

Chapatis, an expert in Web marketing, came on board recently to help ARIANNE expand its clientele. Now the agency is receiving more and more inquiries from individuals thinking about moving to Montreal and willing to pay for help to ease the transition.

ARIANNE itself just relocated: the seven-person company recently moved into a low-rise, red-brick building on Notre Dame St., home in the 1940's to an arms manufacturer.

The space lends itself to customization. That suits Dumas and Chapatis just fine; they asked a local artist to cover their walls with a mural depicting the Greek myth of Ariadne, (ARIANNE in French), the company's namesake.

Ariadne lent Theseus a ball of string so he could find his way out of the Cretan labyrinth. Dumas and Chapatis picture themselves helping clients navigate a strange city.

"It's better than a big map," said Dumas of the mural. "We want to make the space warm and welcoming."

ARIANNE has office space now, but it started in Dumas's home and got off the ground with personal credit-card debt.

When Dumas, a former director of employment services at the Montreal Women's Y, tried to sell banks on her idea of a relocation agency, she got the cold shoulder, which still irks her.

"Their answer was 'You are new,'" Dumas said. "It's a problem when you are in a service industry where you don't have tangible goods like T-shirts."

But Dumas persisted, doing informal market research and making pitches to companies. She hit the jackpot with her very first client: she landed **Softimage**, a leader in computer-generated graphics that was, at the time, being bought out by **Microsoft** and relocating many employees to Montreal.

The Softimage contract kept Dumas going for a while and helped her grow through referrals.

ARIANNE now has clients in all major Montreal industries, including aerospace, pharmaceuticals, multimedia and biotech. About half of its clientele is from the U.S., with the

balance from Europe and the rest of Canada.

Dumas is not surprised ARIANNE has taken off; her previous experience convinced her there was a need out there.

In her work at the Y, she continually ran into women accompanying partners relocating to Montreal.

"With the R&D tax credits offered by the Quebec government, many companies are relocating here."

Manon Dumas

"They were getting no help integrating into the community," Dumas said. "We would help them find work, paid or unpaid, go back to school and make contacts."

Counseling spouses is a big part of the work ARIANNE does. Dumas and Chapatis say their holistic approach - taking the needs of the whole family into account - is unique among relocation agencies.

They also say it helps companies save a lot of money. "The cost to corporations of a failed relocation can run into the hundreds of thousands," Dumas said. And the No. 1 reason relocations fail, and many do, is because partners and family fail to adjust.

Finding a comfortable neighbourhood, enrolling children in the right school and extracurricular activities, helping set up a bank account and putting families in touch with other expatriates are some of the services ARIANNE offers.

The agency also helps companies set up entire offices in Montreal, finding lawyers, accountants and tax experts and scouting out any relevant government incentives.

"With the research-and-development tax credits offered by the Quebec government, many companies are relocating here," Dumas

said. "We expect that to continue."

Dumas and Chapatis also expect that many companies will continue to contract out the work of relocating employees. "Human-resource departments are too overworked to take care of each employee's needs," Chapatis said.

"And employees who are relocating often don't want to reveal all their difficulties to their company," said Dumas. "They may be in a same-sex relationship or have particular religious needs, for example."

So far, ARIANNE has grown mostly by word of mouth. But Dumas has decided it is time to take advantage of the Internet to grow the business. That's why she brought in Chapatis, an expert in communications and Web marketing, to head up business development. "You can't be all things as an entrepreneur," Dumas said.

Dumas is also convinced you don't need extensive business experience to start your own company. "I have a BA in women's studies," she said. "What you need is a vision and to surround yourself with partners who have skills you don't."

A partner also makes it easier to balance work and other responsibilities, which is important to Dumas, who is a single mother and chair of the board of Carrefour Jeunesse Emploi (Montréal Centre-Ville), a youth employment organization.

Although their work often extends beyond regular office hours, Dumas and Chapatis work hard to maintain a quality of life for themselves and their employees. "It is important for us to be thought of as a good employer," Chapatis said.

Dumas agreed. "I see a lot of professional women dropping out of big corporate structures to implement their vision of how they want to work," Dumas said. "We've made that decision."

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