

# The MULTI- hyphenate

Premium member (and former *Latte* editor!) VALERIE KHOO is a passionate creative who juggles a diverse portfolio of professional and personal projects. She talks to AMELIA KING about how she keeps all the balls in the air.





Looking at Valerie Khoo's diary can make your head spin. The first thing you notice is that it's packed. Next, you realise that it's stacked with such a diverse range of activities, you'd be hard pressed to figure out what her role actually is.

Premium member Valerie is one of the increasing number of multi-hyphenates who are not content to pursue just one career in life. They want it all.

Don't know what a multi-hyphenate is? The term refers to those humans that seem to pack 48 hours into a day. They're people who have descriptions like this in their bio: 'writer/singer/entrepreneur' or 'digital activist/cafe owner/dolphin trainer'.

Valerie's bio would be best summarised as CEO/artist/curator/podcaster/author. And that's even leaving a few hyphens out. So we had to find out how she does it. After all, if she has the formula for getting 48 hours into a single day, we want in.

To paint you a picture: for the past 14 years, Valerie has been CEO of the Australian Writers' Centre – the country's leading centre for writing courses. "One of the most rewarding things about building a community of creatives is watching their talent unfold and seeing them succeed. I love it when I receive emails from students telling me they've scored a new book deal, or they've managed to change careers as a result of our courses," says Valerie.

We're not just talking about a handful of students here. The Centre has had more than 50,000 students and Valerie oversees campuses in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, as well as a burgeoning online community.

#### DISCOVERING A NEW PASSION (AND ANOTHER CAREER!)

Around two years ago, Valerie discovered the world of art and now also earns a full-time income as an artist. She creates original artwork and limited-edition prints, and now has collectors from Australia, Asia and the US.

Recently, Valerie released a new line of notebooks, totes and accessories featuring her artwork. So how did her journey as a visual artist start?

"A couple of years ago, everybody in my life told me that I had to get a hobby!" she reveals. "They thought I was too focused on work and that I needed another outlet to channel my energies into. I ended up doing some art classes and absolutely loved it.

"The trouble with being so passionate about



"Last year I doubled down and set some financial goals around my art. That was scary at first because I didn't know if I was going to achieve them, but fortunately I did."

something is that you want to spend a lot of time on it. Last year I doubled down and set some financial goals around my art. That was scary at first because I didn't know if I was going to achieve them, but fortunately I did."

To build a strong foundation for her work in art, she also completed a Diploma of Design last year. If her diary wasn't full enough, the City of Sydney appointed Valerie to the position of Curator of the Sydney Lunar Festival – an arts and culture festival that attracts more than 1.4 million people. It's a festival that involves performances, talks and events throughout the city, including iconic art installations that line Sydney Harbour.

#### THE DOWNSIDE OF BEING MULTI-PASSIONATE

"It would be safe to say that 2018 was my 'year of no sleep,'" Valerie confesses. This lack of sleep comes as no surprise as Valerie also finds the time to release two podcasts each week. One focuses on her love of imagery – *So You Want to Be A Photographer*, which she co-hosts with photographer Gina Milicia.

The other focuses on her passion for words. *So You Want to Be A Writer* is the podcast she co-hosts with author Allison Tait that has surpassed over one million downloads on iTunes. The duo have also co-written the new book, *So You Want To Be A Writer: How To Get Started (While You Still Have A Day Job)*.

"While staying up and getting things done meant that I could get some real momentum behind my artwork, I ended up getting the flu a couple of times and being knocked out for a week each time. So it was a false economy. This year, I'm committed to sleeping more and I'm happy to stay I've stuck with that!" she says.

#### VALERIE'S STRATEGIES FOR FITTING IT ALL IN

Aside from long hours (and a newfound commitment to sleep), we asked

Valerie about her secret to getting everything done all at once. "There's no silver bullet," she says. "I wish there was! I think it's about ruthless time management and clarity on your priorities." Nevertheless, if you want to pack a lot into your life, Valerie suggests the following:

##### 1 Truly own your diary

"A few years ago, I realised that my diary was filled with other people's appointments! I was saying yes to meetings and coffees that weren't actually that convenient for me – and that weren't particularly useful either. It sounds really obvious, but it's important to master your own diary. These days, this is the No.1 thing I mentor creatives on. More often than not, they're



One of Valerie's many projects is curating the Sydney Lunar Festival

overstretched and their time is not their own because they've allowed other people to set their agenda."

##### 2 Set up ready-to-go work stations

"I realised that I would procrastinate about an activity if I had to set anything up. Like if I have to set up an easel, I might not be bothered to start painting. Or if I have to go get my laptop from upstairs, I'll just keep watching Netflix downstairs instead. What can I say? I can be lazy! So I remove the barriers to starting by making sure I have workstations ready to go. I have my easel and paints set up in different spots so that while I'm waiting for paint to dry on one canvas I can get started on another one."

##### 3 Leap instead of ladder climb

"Look for opportunities where you can leap instead of ladder climb. We're often taught that we have to make incremental progress on our goals. And, sometimes, that's the ideal way to proceed. However, if you see an opportunity to leap ahead, take it. Put your hand up for a role or opportunity that you might think is out of reach. Pitch for a client who you think might be looking for someone more experienced than you are. Of course, you need to back this up by providing quality work, but just remember that someone's going to get the gig – why can't it be you?"

##### 4 Find mentors

"You can waste a lot of time if you don't have a clear direction to head in. So finding the right mentors can really fast track your goals. I have a business mentor and an art mentor. I meet with them (separately) fortnightly and they help me with clarity on what to have laser focus on. If I didn't have mentors, I'd still achieve my goals eventually – but it would just take me longer to get there."

##### 5 Outsource when you need to

"Feeling overwhelmed can be debilitating. And while your well-meaning friends might tell you not to get overwhelmed and overloaded in the first place,



that's not particularly useful when you're drowning in a sea of tasks that you just need to get done. When that happens, don't be afraid to outsource what you can so that you can get some sanity back. Last year, I'd have some especially frenetic times and the last thing I wanted to do when I got home was cook dinner. I mean, I didn't even have time to do the grocery shopping. So I got a meal delivery service for a while until I could come up for air."

##### 6 Think outside the square

"Some productivity hacks aren't immediately obvious so it's wise to think laterally. Recently I wanted to learn the Indonesian language. But I don't have time to go to a class or even to learn via a one-on-one

Skype lesson. I realised that the ideal time for me to learn would be when I'm in the car because I spend time travelling to meetings or commuting. I was hoping to find a language tutor who would be happy to talk to me in the car. But then, and I know this sounds crazy, I found an Indonesian-speaking Uber driver who I now use regularly so I can kill two birds with one stone!"

##### 7 Take time out

"It seems counter-intuitive to getting things done, but it's vital to relax. Of course, you just can't run on empty all the time. I have to admit that I love TV and I always made time to watch my favourite shows because that just helped me unwind. And if I completed a major project, I'd reward myself with a pedicure or massage. What's the point of working so hard if you don't pamper yourself?!"

##### 8 Stop listening to naysayers

Valerie says she initially resisted the idea of being a multi-hyphenate. "So many people, particularly in the personal branding space, kept telling me that you have to be known for one key thing," she says. "That stopped me for a long time. They said that people would get confused or that I'd dilute what people had come to know me for."

"I listened to that advice for a while. I even considered releasing my art under a different name! But I've come to realise that advice might be well meaning, but it's misguided. I'm passionate about all the paths I'm pursuing. Sure, it's true that I can sometimes be pulled in different directions, but doing what I love simply makes me happy." ✨

Valerie is a Premium member of Business Chicks. Connect with her at [businesschicks.com](https://businesschicks.com) or find out more at [ValerieKhoo.com](https://ValerieKhoo.com) and [WritersCentre.com.au](https://WritersCentre.com.au).