

GABRIEL SZABO



Fit for purpose: Aimee Rogers was made redundant by the NHS in Sheffield. She now works as a personal trainer at



nd loves being her own boss

Penpushers catch the start-up bug

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over proposed cuts to public sector pay and pensions.

Aimee Rogers was a gym instructor but was made redundant by NHS Sheffield in March. Soon afterwards, she launched Revitalize Fitness, her own personal training business.

"I wish I had done this years ago, I'm glad I was given the push," she said. "There's none of all that policy and procedure of my old job. I love being my own boss and I find I can fit the business around being a mother by working nights and at weekends."

Rogers' friend Becky Jones, previously a biological scientist

at Sheffield Children's Hospital, has started Scarlett Parties, which organises parties for children and adults.

"I'd just had it with the health service. I couldn't go on," Jones said. "Now I'm doing something I really enjoy and building something for me. I'm really struck by how much help and support there is out there in the business community to help you get up and running."

Hang on a second. The public sector? A hotbed of entrepreneurial talent? Is this the same public sector so often meanly portrayed as a lethargic domain of "job for life" nine-to-fivers?

Darren McCabe knows all about taking it easy in the public sector from his days in a university IT department.

"There were days when you would go out for a cigarette break with a football and come back two-and-a-half hours later," he said with a chuckle. "And if we had a job in one of the buildings over the road we would come back via the pub."

Despite the odd bit of "blue sky drinking" in office hours, McCabe worked hard. He was promoted, but was frustrated that not all of his colleagues were quite so industrious.

Earlier this year he and a friend launched Techmonkeys, an IT support consultancy based in Wakefield.

"There's no way I would be doing what I am doing now if it wasn't for my time at the university," he said. "The training I received there was fantastic. There were so many courses on offer and all you had to do was sign up."

Techmonkeys' revenues are close to passing the initial first-year forecast and McCabe was nursing a well-deserved hangover when *The Sunday Times*

ensuring educational establishments do more to encourage people to consider working for themselves.

"At school and university I felt I was guided into being an employee," she said. "There should be more encouragement and practical advice on how to start your own business."

With 330,000 public sector posts expected to disappear between now and 2015, the government will be hoping many other state workers follow Rogers' example.

"It's excellent news to hear about so many people leaving the public sector and starting off on their own," said David Frost, director-general of the British Chambers of Commerce. "The big advantage entrepreneurs with a public sector background have is that they will have a feel for how government works. Even in these times, the public sector is potentially a big customer and these people are in pole position to win work."

Emma Jones, founder of Enterprise Nation, a support

WORKING THE NIGHT SHIFT

Some public sector workers are known for working strictly nine to five, but there are others who also work from five to nine.

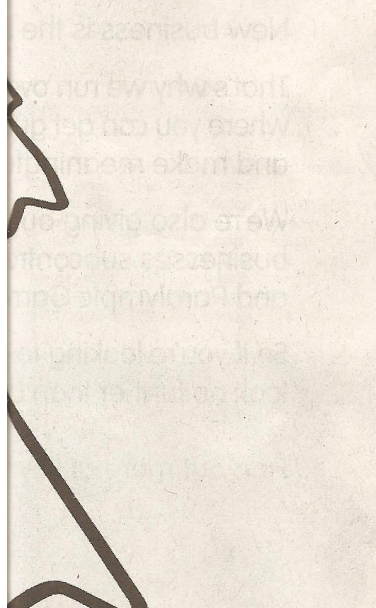
By day, Kelly Brett, 32, is an administrator in one of the government's Sure Start childcare centres. Once her two children are tucked up in bed, she and her husband begin work as the directors of

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 And again.
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A ONE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP, GRAND PRIX and related marks are trade

called. That was because Techmonkeys had won the title of best new company at the Wakefield District Business Awards on Thursday night. The judges were particularly impressed by McCabe's ability to win contracts that had previously gone to larger rivals.

That need to win business is perhaps the most striking difference between surviving as an entrepreneur and life in the public sector. But attracting customers is not the only challenge public sector workers-turned-entrepreneurs face.

Over the past year Tina Wright, 52, has overseen the transformation of Pearls — a firm that provides materials to schools, nurseries and community groups — from a public sector-backed business into an independent enterprise.

Pearls had received £100,000 a year from Rochdale borough council, but when Wright found out the local authority was cutting the funding she suggested to staff that they try to run the business themselves as a co-operative.

"I remember we had a meeting to tell staff of our plan," said Wright from the Aladdin's cave where Pearls sells cut-price recycled paper, card, paint and a host of other materials. Someone asked, 'So what happens to work-life balance?' I just laughed."

After starting out with "just £50 in the till and a lot of hope", Pearls has managed to maintain the same turnover it did when operated by the council — but with half the staff.

Freed from the shackles of public sector procurement regulations, Wright and her three colleagues have become more entrepreneurial about where they source their goods.

At times they have had to get by on half wages, but even that has not been the greatest challenge.

When Pearls was run by the council she had access to all the IT support, accountants, human resources and health and safety advice she needed.

"In the old days we just rang someone for help. Now we're on our own," Wright said. "Getting that help now costs money. I do think there should be government help for those of us who take on a council service and turn it into a co-operative or business."

"It doesn't have to be a grant, a loan would do. But with the banks not lending, people need help when they are starting out."

Rogers feels the government could help by

Piddley Pix, a company that designs and sells pictures for children's bedrooms and nurseries.

"It can be tiring but we really love it," said Brett. "Ultimately, it would be great to go full-time, but in the meantime, it is good to have the security of my day job."

Brett is not alone. Soon after Dave Clayton touches down from a day as an RAF trainer, it's back to work as the boss of Biglaces.com, a business that sells shoelaces of every colour you could imagine.

Barbara Steadman, 42, juggles her role as finance director at a further education college with running Another Gorgeous Day, an online boutique that sells wedding stationery and a range of other home accessories. She has now taken on her husband, who was recently made redundant.

service for start-up businesses, believes there are other reasons why the public sector can be a good incubator for entrepreneurs. "A lot of those leaving the sector will receive pretty good payoffs," she said. "That may give them the start-up capital and the financial cushion they need to give it a go."

"And while the public sector is often said to be risk-averse, being able to make calculated risks can be a crucial skill when building a business."

Is that a new call to arms you can hear? Public sector workers, rise up and start your own businesses. You have nothing to lose — except perhaps those final-salary pensions.



Sam Whitworth: takeaway venture