

BUSINESS IN BRIEF

27 QUICK-WIN TIPS TO HELP YOUR BUSINESS PROSPER

WIN GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS, CUT YOUR OVERHEADS, MARKET YOUR BUSINESS ONLINE, DEAL WITH DIFFICULT STAFF, IMPROVE YOUR COMPANY IMAGE, MAKE THE MOST OF WORKSPACE AND MUCH MORE...

INVEST IN THE FUTURE

APPRENTICES CAN BOOST UK BUSINESS MARKET

More businesses than ever are turning to apprenticeships to meet their recruitment needs, according to recent research by the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) and the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC).

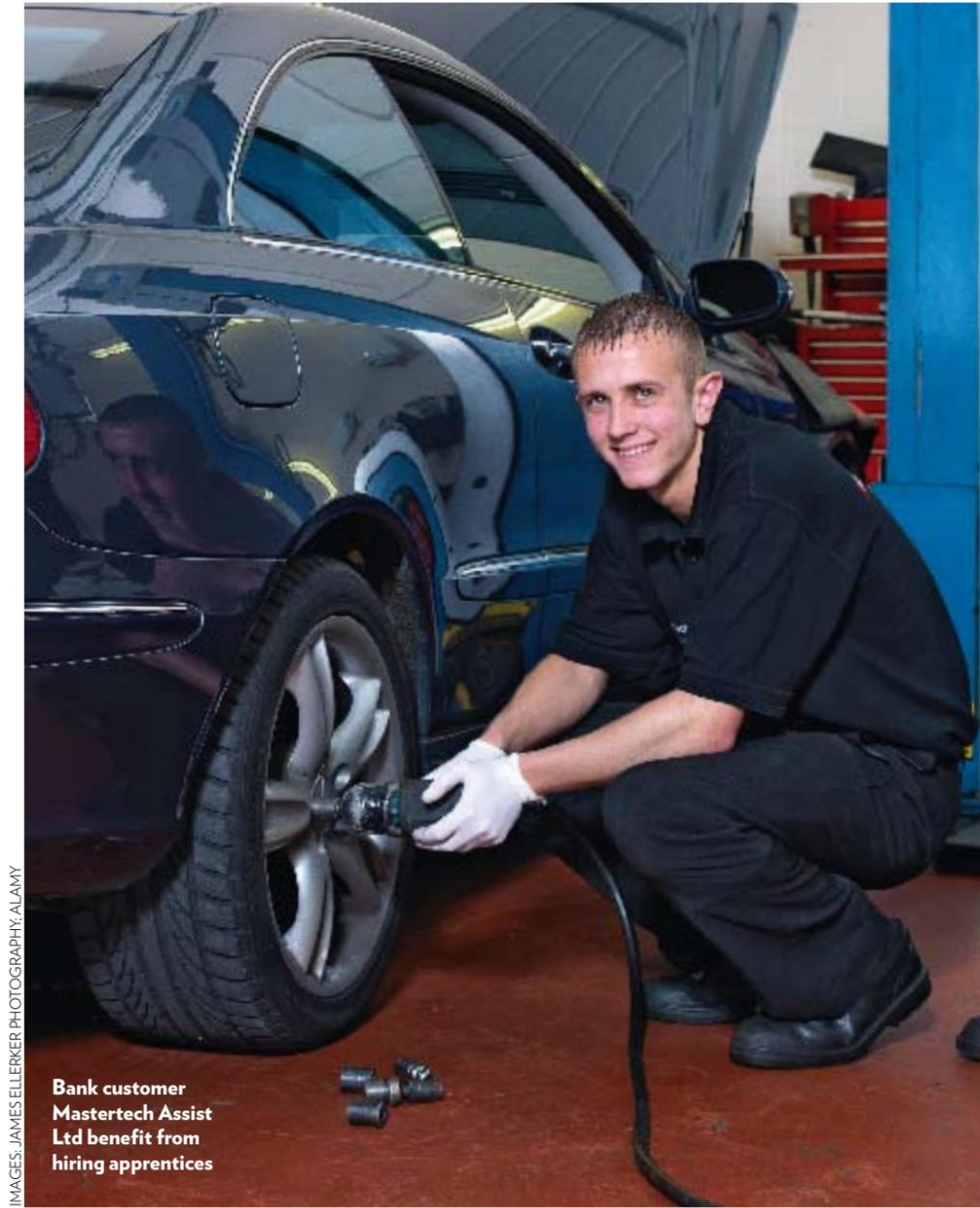
The same research points out that the most common skills employers are looking for are drive and enthusiasm – something that most young apprentices are not lacking.

Apprenticeships minister Kevin Brennan says: "In the last year we have seen a record increase in the number of people starting an apprenticeship. Skills will be key to the recovery of the UK economy and apprentices can be vital to businesses looking to innovate and grow."

Simon Waugh, CEO of the NAS agrees: "The time is right for businesses of all sizes to hire apprentices. Our research shows that firms that have taken on apprentices are in better shape for the recovery."

David Frost of the BCC concludes: "The recession has taught us two key things – businesses' long-term commitment to investment in their workforce really pays off, and young people must be effectively brought into employment."

For further details on apprenticeships, visit apprenticeships.org.uk



IMAGES: JAMES ELLERKER PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY

Bank customer
Mastertech Assist
Ltd benefit from
hiring apprentices

IN BRIEF

BID FOR NEW BUSINESS

Olympic opportunities

With the Olympics just two years away, businesses may believe that the majority of London 2012-related contracts have already been snapped up. But that's not the case, according to Government website competefor.com

The site has been labelled a 'business dating' website, and has already matched up 5,000 Olympic contracts with British-based companies.

There are £1 billion worth of Olympics-related contracts still to come to the market, and according to Ian Lucas, minister for business and regulatory reform, there are still plenty of unique business opportunities: "The finish line isn't in sight yet; there are still many more contracts up for grabs for small to medium-sized businesses."

Mike Mulvey, chief executive of the London Business Network sees the contracts as a great opportunity: "We would encourage businesses to use [CompeteFor](http://CompeteFor.com) as a key tool in their business development portfolio."

FREE BUSINESS INSPIRATION

Smarta launch ebook

Internet business support network Smarta.com has launched its first business ebook aimed at providing budding entrepreneurs and SMEs with inspiration for their businesses over the next 10 years.

The ebook, titled *The Smartest Brains in Business: 2010 and Beyond*, is available to download now, and what's more – it's completely free. It features 30 of the smartest brains in business, including Craigslist's Craig Newmark, entrepreneur Doug Richard and Smarta founder Sháá Wasmund, talking about how the business landscape will change over the next decade.

All Smarta are asking for in return for the book, is that people who like it spread the word to others via their websites, tweets or facebook pages. To download the ebook, go to smarta.com/smarta-2010-business-ebook



PROFIT FROM WASTE

Recycle ink cartridges and earn money

Are you missing out on free money? For every ink cartridge your business chucks in the bin, you are forgoing reimbursement that could earn your company hundreds of pounds each year.

Empty Cartridges Ltd has created a hassle-free service that makes recycling a more attractive prospect than ever. Register at emptycartridge.co.uk and once you have amassed a minimum of 30 empty cartridges, you can request a courier to come and pick them up from your business. Your rubbish will be disposed of responsibly, and in return you will receive a cheque.

A box of 30 Dell A920 cartridges will make you £36, while a crate of 100 HP DJ Colour Cartridges will result in £258 to boost your Christmas party pot. The service could also save you money on waste disposal. Around 250 million empty toner cartridges, which can take over 1,000 years to decompose, are dumped in landfill sites every year. Just five per cent are currently being recycled. So don't bin your cartridges, help the environment and make some money. emptycartridge.co.uk



GET PAST SPAM FILTERS

Yahoo! to price spammers out of the market

Email newsletters pose a constant challenge for marketers: how do you obtain and retain the consent of the recipient? Get it wrong and your corporate message can be tagged as spam, stopping future communications reaching your target audience.

A creative solution to this issue is being developed by Yahoo! Its CentMail system will require senders to donate one US cent per email to charity – the donation shows up as a ‘stamp’ in email signatures. Spammers are priced out of the market, charities benefit and customers are less likely to delete the email because of its higher perceived value.

Yahoo! is calculating that the cost of CentMail is low enough to appeal to corporate users. Internal company emails will not be charged, and external emails are priced so that even if an employee sends 10,000 emails a year, the cost of CentMail would only be \$100.

For companies that already make large charitable donations, CentMail could be regarded as an alternative donation method, potentially reducing spam at no additional cost.



LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Life shouldn't be all work

For many people, switching off after a long day at the office can be challenging. Indeed, research has shown that four in 10 of us struggle to forget the worries of work. But according to Kevin Duncan, author of *Run Your Own Business and Small Business Survival*, failing to set aside ‘you’ time will not only affect your wellbeing, but will also turn you into a “one-speed bore”. These are his top tips for switching off:

3 When you take time off, be genuinely unavailable. Turn your computers and phones off or, better still, don't take them with you.

4 If you have had a good day, reward yourself – you deserve it. Far too many people soldier on for years on end without pausing to remind themselves what they have achieved. It shouldn't be a permanent slog. Pat yourself on the back occasionally.

1 Take the issues seriously, but not yourself. It is quite possible to be grinding through the nastiest business problems and still retain a sense of humour. Customers and colleagues will hugely appreciate it if you do.

5 Get your working environment right. You can't lighten up the world from a darkened room. Decide what kind of space and mood you need and set about arranging it.

2 Don't forget to build time off into your year plan. You work to live, right? So don't design a business that has you working all hours and every day of the year. Create something with a little space.



ACCESS FREE BUSINESS SPACE

NatWest teams up with Regus

NatWest and Regus, the world's largest provider of flexible workplace solutions, are set to offer NatWest's business customers free access to Regus business lounges. Regus has more than 100 UK and 1,000 worldwide locations providing meeting places for clients and customers. The offer will allow a year's unlimited free access to these professional business spaces and includes free refreshments and free internet access. For information about this offer, and to register your interest, please get in touch with your Relationship Manager.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF FREE SUPPORT

Expert help when you need it most

With economic conditions still proving tough for many UK firms, you may want to take advantage of NatWest's free Business Hotline. The Hotline provides access to an experienced team of banking professionals, who will work with you and your Relationship Manager to help get your business back on track if you are finding conditions difficult.

Contact the Business Hotline on 0800 158 5977 (Typetalk: 18001 0800 158 5977) or email businesshotline@natwest.com CALLS MAY BE RECORDED

DEAL WITH DIFFICULTIES

Face conflict head-on

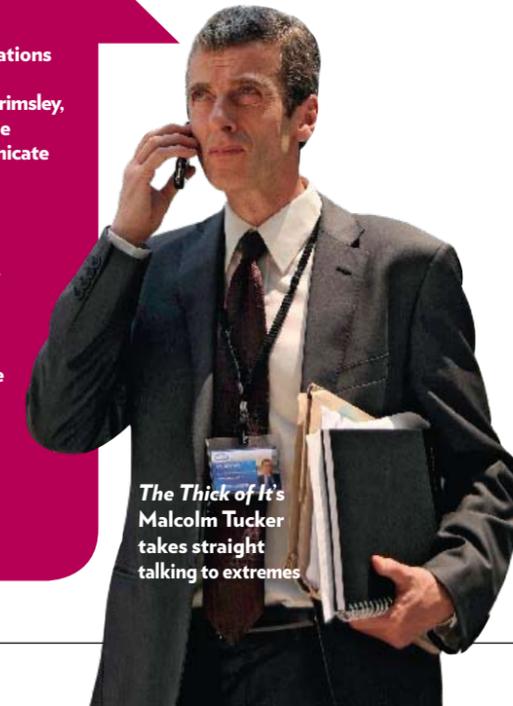
No one likes talking about difficult subjects, but a new book is warning that avoiding such conversations could put your business at risk.

According to *Vital Conversations* author Alec Grimsley, common mistakes made by business owners include dodging performance issues and failing to communicate business challenges to the workforce.

“Take the time to write down the long-term consequences of not having the conversation and weigh those against the short-term consequences of having it,” says Grimsley. “Most people overplay the conversation in their heads, worrying that the person will cry, get angry, storm out etc, but they underplay the fact that the business and their peace of mind could suffer considerably if the issue is not addressed.

“Be crystal clear about the issue, practise the first 60 seconds where you will address the nub of the issue, avoid using inflammatory language, and remember you don't have the monopoly on being right – instead be curious and ask ‘how are we seeing this differently?’”

IMAGES: VIEW PICTURES; ISTOCKPHOTO LP; ALLSTAR/BBC FILMS; GETTY IMAGES



The Thick of It's Malcolm Tucker takes straight talking to extremes



STREAMLINE YOUR GOALS

Focus your core business aims

It's easy to lose sight of key goals while running a business, but even simple exercises, like writing down key goals, can help you achieve what you want.

“Remind yourself and your team what your core business aims are by condensing complicated strategies into bullet points,” says Bill Bartmann, author of *Bailout Riches*, who claims that the

critical elements of your business should be able to fit on a napkin:

“Cut through information overload, and get down to the true essence of what your business is about and where it's heading. You'll reach your goals faster, not to mention all the headaches and trees you'll save.”

So, get out your biros, find an unused napkin, and begin summarising what you're doing.

KEEP CUSTOMERS INFORMED



Improve communication with Twitter

Twitter is a useful marketing tool. Not only can you keep customers updated with new products and promotions, it's also a useful tool for handling feedback. Intranet and CRM service provider Glasscubes, uses Twitter as an official business communication channel. Director Wayne Pope says: “We follow our customers and respond to their questions/requests here as quickly as possible: sometimes it's just quicker and easier to tweet.”



ENCOURAGE CLIENT FEEDBACK

Set up web-cam meetings

Online marketer Intergage had a problem seeing clients face to face. Often the journey time was prohibitive, or the client was too busy to commit to a meeting. The solution was to supply web-cams to clients to allow face-to-face meetings over the web. Marketing manager Richard Watts says: "They've made a huge difference. Quiet clients are more likely to talk to us and, since we adopted web-cams, we've had 121 meetings. Of these, 49 per cent of the clients had not previously taken up our offer of a review meeting in the previous 18 months. That is concrete proof that web-cams work, and of course, they are greener too!"

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"We need to push the envelope and think outside the box"

"Let's run it up the flagpole and see if it flies. It's time for some blue-sky thinking"

CUT THE JARGON

Straight talking works best

Company employees may think jargon is an efficient method of communication. But recruitment consultants Office Angels have revealed that the phrases used in the office as we enter the new

decade have got out of hand. The Plain English Campaign highlights the problem with using jargon: "It makes people feel hoodwinked, inferior, defiantly frustrated and angry." So take a bite out of the reality sandwich, and encourage your office to cut the jargon.

"We'll suggest a ballpark figure, but let's touch base offline"

"Keep me in the loop about what they're bringing to the table"

GET THE RIGHT LOOK

Image training could be a smart move

Could a staff makeover boost your business? Image training aims to improve employee motivation and morale, help to reflect company values and improve the impact of personnel on clients.

City lawyer-turned-image-consultant Lucinda Slater (below) believes it's vital to promote a professional image: "Your staff represent your greatest and most powerful opportunity to communicate your company's values and beliefs," she says. "One of the things that helps is how we dress. When we look good, we feel good – people treat us differently. That creates a positive cycle."



GAIN RECOGNITION

Biggest ever NatWest everywoman Awards

Nominations for the 2010 NatWest everywoman Awards are now open to female business owners across the UK. The awards, run by everywoman, the UK's largest female business community, will take place on 1 December and have more categories than ever before, with the introduction of the Hestia Award for rural companies and the Gaia Award for ethical businesses.

In addition to the profile boost an award can give your business, just submitting an application can be a useful exercise as it makes you think objectively about your business's unique selling points. Last year's

NatWest everywoman Award winner, Jan Ward (left)

believes that the secret to writing a successful application is to "try to get across to the judges what sets your business apart from the crowd." To enter, visit everywoman.com/ewawards



GAIN SUPPORT FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Renewables sector support

NatWest has created a new team whose role will be to assist businesses in the renewables sector by providing tailored advice in that field. Renewables is a growing sector – from businesses focusing on waste management to those in renewable energy – but it can often be difficult to find traditional funding or support from financial institutions, due to the relatively novel, yet fast-moving nature of the industry. NatWest's dedicated renewables team hope to address this, so if you think your business could benefit from their help, please call Aaron Boland on 020 7591 4029. Security may be required.



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EXPLORE NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Vive la France

The French Government has launched a new organisation – the Paris Region Economic Development Agency (PREDA) – aimed at attracting UK businesses to Paris. French President Nicolas Sarkozy has targeted foreign companies to bring outside investment into Paris and wants to make the process as simple as possible. With easy London-to-Paris links, UK businesses are seen as ideal candidates to set up offices in the French capital. PREDA's website (paris-region.com) offers helpful contacts and advice for UK SMEs looking to expand into the country.

EXPLOIT THE INTERNET

Get the most out of your website

While SMEs now recognise the importance of having a good website, 77 per cent of firms are failing to measure any 'return on investment' on sites they have invested in, according to research from web hosts Fasthosts. Kevin King, director of Createanet, offers this advice:

"Google Analytics is a great way of getting started. Look at the volume of web

users who have searched for the product or services you offer. If you are not getting a decent amount of traffic, it normally indicates a poorly optimised site. Identify your top entry pages – is there something, for example, you can cross-promote on these pages to engage your visitor? Build good conversation and then look at building your numbers."



CUT PHONECALL COSTS

New apps for cheaper calls

If you make a lot of international phone calls, you might be interested in the wave of new technologies that allow you to hammer down the cost. Applications such as Truphone route calls through the data network, rather than voice network, so you are billed only for a local call. Truphone cuts the cost of a call to India from a pound a minute to a few pence. These apps are processor-heavy though, meaning only the top-end Nokia, Android and iPhone handsets can handle them.



STAY OPTIMISTIC

"Tough times build tough businesses"

Despite some of the gloomy headlines in newspapers over the last 18 months, it's comforting to know that *Dragons' Den* star and entrepreneur Theo Paphitis is still feeling positive.

In fact, he believes that 2010 will be an important year for SMEs. "Now is a great time to start a business," he told UKTI *Springboard* magazine, "because tough times build tough businesses. If you can make it now, then you can thrive when things get better."

"There are almost five million SMEs here [in Britain] and they represent a whacking 58 per cent of the private-sector workforce. They are the engine room of the British economy."

Paphitis hasn't always enjoyed success in business and has experienced some tough times: "I did have a dark, very depressing, but enlightening and educational period of my life when I was out of work for a few months," he continues.

"The important thing is to get up, get back on that bike, and keep going," he adds. "If times are tough right now, try not to get downhearted."

AVOID TAX PENALTIES

Pay your PAYE on time

From May 2010, HMRC will be able to impose penalties on businesses that do not pay up for their PAYE on time. The penalty can be up to five per cent of the amount that was due. "Employers must pay their tax and National Insurance contributions by the 19th of each month, or the 22nd if paying electronically," advises Steven Tucker of The Payroll Site. "A quarterly scheme is available for the smallest employers."

Tucker believes that many businesses remain confused about the rules, and will risk penalties when they come in. "Thousands of businesses don't realise they have

to pay their tax throughout the year, not just at the end of the year. I recommend getting on top of your PAYE now, and marking the 19th in your diary every month."

Should any problems arise, Darlene Coker of HMRC suggests taking prompt action. "If businesses can't pay what they owe, the most important thing to do is to contact HMRC straightaway. If you are worried that you might not be able to pay on time, you can call our Business Payment Support Service seven days a week."

You can find further advice and information at hmc.gov.uk