

# Life after the civil service

These three people have successfully left the civil service for senior jobs in the private and voluntary sectors. But it's not always easy to cross that divide: **Suzannah Brecknell** gathers advice on how to follow their lead

**First, the** good news for civil servants looking for a new job outside government. The latest employment outlook survey from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development shows that, although the overall employment picture is bleak thanks to planned public sector redundancies, the private sector will continue to generate jobs in the next quarter. Unfortunately, there is also some bad news: more than half of private companies are not interested in hiring ex-public sector workers, believing civil servants are “not equipped to join their business”, according to a survey by the *Financial Times* and Barclays Corporate.

The government's chief operating officer Ian Watmore wrote to the *FT* denouncing these stereotypes; but nonetheless, this is not the sort of news designed to fill employees in a rapidly-downsizing civil service with hope. It does, however, emphasise the importance of getting two key things right when job hunting: at a time when the private sector is sceptical about public sector workers, those looking for work must both know their skills, and know how to sell them.

## First steps

If you're facing redundancy or considering a move out of the civil service, first “stop and take stock,” advises Lincoln Coutts, head of knowledge management, research and information at HR consultants Savile Group. Many people, he says, “just have a knee-jerk reaction, particularly when facing forced redundancy, of thinking they must find *any* job.” But preparation is key. Start preparing early by taking full advantage of any help on offer in the shape of outplacement support, he says; and before you begin to scour job sites, take time to really understand your financial position – meaning: how long you have to find another job.

“The reality is that, as with any complex task, finding a job often takes longer than you think it will,” says Coutts; though “having said that, you can find a job tomorrow if you really need to”. Take time to consider matters such as when you want to retire before thinking about the sector and roles you might wish to move into.

Coutts's advice is echoed by Giorgina Soane, now a self-employed talent management consultant, who left the civil service last year after nearly 38 years. She describes a phased transition since leaving the civil service, which began with her setting aside time to take stock, look after herself, and carry out “personal accounting” so that she could “leave the civil service positively”. She sought advice from others who had been through a similar journey, and found several pieces of advice particularly helpful.

Firstly, something which applies particularly to those who are close to early retirement age: “In this phase of our lives, there are no rules and footholds”. While in the past people were born, educated, worked and then died, there is now a much longer phase of post-work life; this should be “regarded as a discovery phase”, she says. Second, there will be ups and downs, but “you just have to go with that”, she says. “Don't worry if you get down; you'll bounce back”. Finally, she says, “do what you enjoy doing, and experiment”.

## Know thyself

Understanding your own skills, characteristics, needs and ambitions will help you decide what to do next. You may, for example, be attracted to the idea of self-employment – but it takes particular attributes to make a success of this, according to David Mellor, an executive mentor and author of ‘From Crew to Captain’, a book on making the transition to self-employment.

Self-employed people must have a vision for the business, says Mellor, plus “rock-solid self-belief” and plenty of drive and determination. “If you've got those three, you've got quite a good platform on which

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**Out in the wide world:** From top: Simon Godfrey, senior director of the public services business unit at Oracle, left the civil service in 2007; Ruth Bravery, director of volunteering for Marie Curie Cancer Care, made the leap in 2010; Simon McNeill-Ritchie, director of Franchising Works, exited in 1998

## Moving into the voluntary and community sector

For public-spirited civil servants seeking a new place to find job satisfaction, the voluntary and community sector may seem an obvious fit. A move to the ‘third sector’ may offer less of a culture shock than diving into private business, says Ruth Bravery – now director of volunteering at Marie Curie Cancer Care – because the cultures of both sectors are “remarkably similar”.

Bravery joined Marie Curie in 2010, after 20 years in HMRC. She had previously spent six months with the charity on secondment, having applied for the post after she began to feel “a bit institutionalised” at HMRC. Asked to name the biggest single benefit of moving to the charitable sector, she replies: “A greater freedom to get on and deliver services”.

The secondment, Bravery believes, was key to helping her make the move. While she says that charities “highly value the kind of skills that civil servants have in terms of people management, strategic planning and operational delivery – and even policy work, to a degree”, many “take great comfort in recruiting people who are already in the charity sector or have experience of the charity sector”.

“The route to get experience is through secondments or to do some volunteering,” she suggests. Volunteering opportunities can be very flexible and available at a variety of levels, she adds, enabling civil servants to use existing skills or learn new ones. At Marie Curie, for example, volunteers support senior staff and board members, developing a good understanding of the organisation while “getting your name known, and experience on your CV.”



**On a voage of discovery:**  
Georgina Soane left the civil service last year and is now a self-employed consultant

to build.” People also need the integrity to build and maintain a personal brand, along with passion for what you’re doing: “One of the key things you’re going to have to do is go out and make your passion contagious. If you can’t do that, it’ll be hard work”.

Of course, developing an understanding of your own skills is easier said than done. There are a variety of tests to help identify people’s strengths, weaknesses and personality traits; but the process of redundancy, even when voluntary, can make it hard for individuals to perceive and value their own skills clearly.

Coutts recommends seeking feedback from workmates, former colleagues, family and friends. Ask others “what you do as an individual which makes the difference to those around you,” he says. “You might just think: ‘It’s something I do’, but to someone else it could be a key thing. People always do more than they realise, and they’re always capable of more and have more experience than they recognise.”

### Sell thyself

Having identified your skills, it’s important that you communicate them effectively to prospective employers. Many people find it hard to write effective CVs; but civil servants, used to the particular requirements of application forms and managed career development, may find it particularly difficult. The key, says Soane – who now advises individuals seeking work or new careers – is to present your skills in way that resonates with your prospective employer: job seekers must “tell their story in a way that meets the needs of the organisation”.

## Advice on self-employment

For many civil servants, self-employment seems an obvious way to use their accumulated skills and contacts. And certainly, says executive mentor David Mellor, starting your own business provides a one-off opportunity to design a job and work pattern which suits your preferences and personality.

One common challenge when setting up a successful business, says Mellor, is making the transition from a narrowly-focused expert practitioner in a large organisation to a jack-of-all-trades who can manage everything from tax returns, to procurement, to invoicing. Other common challenges include the difficulty of securing payment from creditors, and of making accurate forecasts about your cash flow: take your first year forecasts, halve the income and double the costs, “and you won’t be far off”, he says.

Georgina Soane, a self-employed talent management professional, names another complication for small companies: “When I started bidding for work, I found that I fell at the first hurdle because I haven’t got three years of trading statements,” she says. To address that problem, she’s ended up working in partnership with other companies.

For many civil servants, like Soane, self-employment means setting up as a consultant or interim, or developing a ‘portfolio career’ as an adviser or board member to a number of companies. Simon McNeill-Ritchie, who became self-employed in 1998 after 14 years in the diplomatic service, says this type of work presents particular challenges.

“I think it’s important to distinguish between the challenges and problems that face most start-up businesses, and those peculiar to self-employed professionals,” he says. The latter must cope with the usual business concerns, he says, “but they can also suffer from a lack of motivation, plus loneliness and a loss of status.” For these reasons, Mellor suggests that it’s important to find external and independent personal support as you start your business.

## Advice on franchising

Franchising Works, a social enterprise that supports unemployed people to start their own business, describes franchises as “supported self-employment”. As a franchisee, you licence intellectual property and business support from a franchisor and run your own company under their brand. Compared to most start-up companies, it’s a reliable business model: 90 per cent of franchises are still operating five years after opening.

The good news is that civil servants may be very well suited to the franchise model, suggests Simon McNeill-Ritchie, programme director of Franchising Works. “Some of the best franchises that we’re going to see are going to come out of the civil service,” he says. “You’ve got an educated, managerial workforce that is used to working with systems or processes, which is really what working with franchises is all about.”

Starting a franchise does require capital investment. A redundancy package may help with this – and banks will lend around 50-70 per cent of the costs, advises McNeill-Ritchie, because they recognise that franchises begin life with a leg-up in terms of support and brand recognition. It’s important that people considering becoming franchisees do some intensive research before getting involved: the British Franchising Association is a good place to start, and executive mentor David Mellor advises talking to other franchisees of the same brand for honest appraisals of the business.

McNeill-Ritchie is himself a former civil servant who left the diplomatic service in 1998. “I know what a big step that looks like when you’re on the inside,” he says – but he adds that he has never regretted his move “one jot”. From his experience, he believes civil servants “are going to be perfectly capable of competing successfully in the private sector, providing they get off to a good start. And franchising might be that start.”

Civil servants might find this daunting: if you have little experience of an industry, it may not be obvious which skills they need. Again, Coutts advises civil servants to turn to friends, family and former colleagues to build their knowledge of other sectors and roles.

Simon Godfrey, a senior director at technology company Oracle, has worked in both the private and public sectors. He suggests that civil servants should emphasise the different perspective they can bring to the private sector, turning perceived negatives into positives. For example, he says, many private companies value the broad and intelligent understanding of risk which many civil servants develop. The civil service’s institutional risk aversion need not be seen as a negative, he says – civil servants are only risk averse because it is public money. In a commercial setting, under a different approach to risk management, officials’ understanding of reputational as well as financial risk can be a valued asset.

### Know your network

Coutts also suggests that jobhunters “don’t just spend time reacting to adverts” – an approach which can be draining and demoralising – but instead tap into networks to find opportunities. “Every company has churn. People leave and people join. People retire; go on maternity leave; contract opportunities arise. There are thousands of jobs out there which are not advertised – the way to get access is through your network and the relationships you’ve formed,” he says.

People are generally willing to help, he continues; though you need to approach them in the right way. “People don’t like to be asked in the sense of: ‘I’m looking for a job’,” he says. “But if you go to them and say: ‘I’m looking for advice’, nine times of ten people will point you in the right direction.”

Coutts believes that senior civil servants often have well-developed networking skills: they are used

to working across departments and with a variety of stakeholders. They may not, however, be used to social networking via tools such as LinkedIn, which Coutts describes as “a fantastic resource” for the jobseeker. If somebody has recommended a particular role, says Coutts, LinkedIn enables you to identify others performing similar roles and see how they describe themselves and their experience; even, perhaps, to discover that you have a connection with them. “It enables you to find out about people within companies and industries but also, more importantly, relationships you didn’t know you had,” he says.

### Persistence, and patience

Yet good networking skills and a strong list of contacts will not always lead to quick results. After spending some time taking stock, and having decided she wished to return to work in some capacity, Georgina Soane began to look for projects where she could use her skills to support other people. “I did a lot of networking,” she says, “and the truth of the matter is that I hoped that in the first three months, given that I had a pretty good address book and people had said lovely things [about her work], that people would say: ‘We just need Georgina to come in and do some coaching’, or: ‘We just need Georgina to come and write us a talent strategy’.”

But nothing happened. Her experience reinforces the message that this will be a tough market for many civil servants – even those seeking, as she was at that point, to work for free. But projects eventually began to come in; Soane decided to set up her own company, and soon had two or three pieces of work in the pipeline. Most initial expressions of interest will fall by the wayside, Soane warns – civil servants must be realistic about just how many other senior leaders may be offering similar skills to their own – but some will come to fruition. And Soane remains positive, saying you need to “act generously and be flexible” as you build a new career. To succeed against the competition you must pursue work doing something you love, she says; something you do “authentically and generously.”

Oracle’s Godfrey also mentions the importance of persistence – there are plenty of opportunities, he suggests, and as a manager he is impressed by candidates who are “politely forceful” in pursuing them. As Soane found, the transition out of the civil service is not easy: there are bound to be knock-backs, and consequent lows. So Coutts advises making sure that you’re “in a good frame of mind when you apply and fill in CVs, otherwise you’re never going to truly get yourself across in the way you deserve.”

Perhaps those wanting to lift themselves out of a low patch should seek out a copy of the *FT* letter written by Ian Watmore – a man who’s spent most of his career in private business. It’s on the Cabinet Office website, and outlines with great passion the talents of his colleagues across government. “Forget the myths and stereotypes, you will get a great recruit from the public sector,” he writes. “I cannot think of a single skill that one needs in the private sector that people don’t develop in spades in the public sector.” ■



**Going it alone:** David Mellor warns the would-be self-employed that they’ll need to develop a set of new skills

**CSW’s sister company Westminster Explained will be holding conferences on career opportunities outside the civil service on 31 March and 16 June. For more information visit [www.gotgo.co.uk](http://www.gotgo.co.uk)**