



# A Safe Pair of Hands

By Mike Southon

Gordon Brown once said that his ambition was to be seen as 'a safe pair of hands'.

If I want to find safe hands, I look away from Westminster and concentrate instead at the millions of 'sole traders' around me, a group of people for whom this term could have been invented.

Sole traders are often overlooked in discussions about entrepreneurship, which generally focus on growing the business, hiring more people and looking for a suitable exit. But these people are an essential part of the economy.

The career path of the sole trader often follows a well-trodden route. They generally spend their twenties learning their craft working for someone else. In their thirties, they have found their niche and have built up a client base of people willing to hire them directly, rather than from the company they work for. This can be doing anything from high-powered consulting to fixing the boiler.

Some take on other people and grow their businesses, but many prefer to work just for themselves, using trusted associates when they need to deliver large projects.

Ian Sanders has written a book about his experiences as a sole trader, called *LEAP! Ditch Your Job, Start Your Own Business & Set Yourself Free*. The title sums up perfectly the allure of being self-employed: freedom; an end to boredom; the ability to make a real difference, both to yourself and to the people around you.

But freedom brings with it insecurity; working for yourself is a

lonely and often terrifying prospect. As a consequence, much of his book is focused on providing the motivation to 'go for it' in the first place.

The prospective sole trader has to understand that they will have to do all three jobs in business: sales, delivery and finance.

Delivery is not usually a problem; the sole trader has to be good at something. In Ian's case it was about delivering large projects for Unique Broadcasting, a media company founded by Noel Edmonds. These projects spanned radio production, live events and providing broadcast facilities. They involved a heady mix of demanding clients, challenging briefs, broad disciplines, tough deadlines and the inevitable hurdles along the way. Ian learned how to cope with extreme pressure and still deliver on time and to budget.

Finance does not have to be an issue, either. Your first hire should be a good bookkeeper, probably on a part-time basis in the early days.

The real challenge is sales. Many people find the actual process of selling very uncomfortable.

But the successful sole trader knows they need to be selling all the time. This is not insensitively launching into a sales pitch to everyone they meet, but always making sure they are mixing socially with potential customers and telling interesting and relevant stories of customer problems they have solved. Ideally, selling is not just about finding pieces of business; it is also about generating a consistent pipeline of work. But even in good times, this is hard to do. Sole traders have to learn to live with this: Ian says his sales pipeline is rarely more than three months full. He remains confident that

something will turn up — and it nearly always does.

So being self-employed is not for the faint-hearted. In my *Sales on a Beermat* workshop I explain that the process is essentially very simple. First, you need to find people with problems and money. Then, you get them to like you, in the first instance by being nice (easy to deal with), local (just around the corner or otherwise easily accessible) and reliable (you deliver on your promises).

If you fulfil these three criteria, happy customers will tell all their friends, generating referral business. The world will then beat a path to your door — or, if you are a politician, they will re-elect you. This is because, like Ian Sanders, you are indeed considered as 'a safe pair of hands'.

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## About the Author

Mike is a serially successful entrepreneur, mentor and best-selling business author.

Mike is co-author of several best-selling business books, including *The Beermat Entrepreneur and Sales on a Beermat*.

He is also a very experienced entrepreneur mentor, having provided face-to-face mentoring for over 1,000 people in the last 10 years.

Mike is proud to be Business Ambassador and Entrepreneur Mentor for the City of Liverpool.

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