

Call Britannia aims to show you can do the right thing and make money

SimplySwitch founder Karen Darby's call centre company plans to get people back to work and 'bag some cash'



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- [David Teather](#)
- [guardian.co.uk](#), Wednesday 11 November 2009 18.30 GMT
- After his first couple of months out of work, Karlton Ramsey felt his confidence start to slide. The 23-year-old had worked at Woolworths in Peckham, south London, for six years, joining pretty much straight out of school, and like thousands of others, lost his job when the retail chain went bust.

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Over the next 10 months, he applied for between 50 and 100 jobs, some in retail, but also for office work, in restaurants and even as a cleaner, "basically anything", without any success.

He started to doubt the value of the HND in business management he had studied for while working. He was constrained by not having a computer, which meant spending money in an internet cafe to trawl and apply for jobs.

But last month, he was given a break. Through his local job centre, he landed one of the first jobs at Call Britannia, a call centre firm that has been set up with the core purpose of getting people who are unemployed into work, backed by the investment arm of the Big Issue and a new social enterprise fund run by Sir Ronald Cohen's Bridge Ventures.

The firm has been set up in Croydon, an unemployment blackspot, and is the brainchild of Karen Darby, the founder of the now defunct comparison service, SimplySwitch. It will act as an outsourcing call centre, and is pitching for work with utilities, telecom companies, government and charities.

At the moment there are just six frontline staff, sitting around an island of desks to one side of a large and empty open-plan office. It has been vacant for a couple of years but was previously a call centre for Vodafone. The business is hiring a second team of 10, and the aim is to have 60 unemployed people back in work within a year.

Others in the initial intake are Hassan Omar, 25, out of work for six months and with a partner expecting a child, and Jodie Marks, 21, who has only had part-time retail work since dropping out of university about 15 months ago.

Call Britannia is Darby's third business. She sold her first call centre firm, The Decisions Group, for £800,000 in 1990 and banked £5m from the £22m disposal of SimplySwitch to the Daily Mail and General Trust (DMGT) in 2006.

She has remortgaged her home to invest in Call Britannia and alongside her management team will have a controlling stake. By her own admission, she has spent the money she made from the sale of SimplySwitch, in part on a seafront flat in Eastbourne for her mother, who until then had been living in a council flat. "£5m doesn't go anywhere these days," she says, with a booming laugh. She flirted with television but decided she wanted to go back into business – this time with more of a social mission – inspired in part by watching staff she had hired losing their jobs when DMGT closed SimplySwitch.

The business has been set up to be profitable and Darby again has her eye on a potentially lucrative exit. But the management team has been set social impact as well as financial targets and will be rewarded with further equity if they succeed. At least one-third of the intake must be among specific groups, such as the long-term unemployed, black and ethnic minorities, lone parents, the disabled and ex-offenders. One aim, down the line, is to offer work to some of the homeless Big Issue vendors. A percentage of revenue will also go into a foundation that will give employees support in areas like buying suitable work clothes, counselling, childcare and further education.

Nigel Kershaw, chairman of the Big Issue group, describes Call Britannia as a "pioneering" business. Antony Ross, a director at Bridge says: "We spent time with Karen thinking what do we have to commit to, to make this a proper social enterprise, rather than just a business with some other stuff tagged on. If we can demonstrate to philanthropic investors that the business is sustainable, and they are also getting their money back to reinvest, then it is far more attractive than a traditional donation."

Workers hired by Call Britannia are given a month's training to rebuild confidence, work on communication skills, and even brush up on numeracy and literacy. "We've got this disengaged labour force of young people and it is a national tragedy," she says. Darby says she could easily have been one of them, raised on a nearby council estate, skipping school, leaving with one O-level and getting a job selling ad space on her local newspaper. "People get branded with this 'Shameless' tag and it is very unfair."

Darby hopes to turn the notoriously high attrition rates in call centres to advantage and staff will be actively helped into new jobs after a year or two, to make way for new hires. "We don't want people to stay forever. And call centres act as a fantastic springboard for bigger and better things; the skills you learn are transferable, how to communicate, how to sell, how to have empathy and rapport with a customer."

She hopes to set up 10 call centres in deprived areas, each employing around 200 people, and getting 10,000 people back into work within seven years, .Darby says her staff will be as good as or better than other call centres stuffed with graduates. "Our guys aren't in robot mode, they haven't plateaued, they aren't doing a job that is beneath their skills, they are doing something exciting and challenging for them and we think they will give real passion down the phone." Unless people are stretched, "they are flicking Maltesers at each other across the desk, daring each other to put phrases in conversations and are not engaged with customers".

She is canny enough to know the social mission will give the business an edge when pitching for work, particularly from charities and government. Despite the recession, now is a good time to launch a call centre business as many companies are moving their operations back onshore from India, she argues. "You've got social enterprise and you've got making profit and they are perceived as two separate things," she says. "But they are not mutually exclusive. You can make money and make the world a better place. The new model is social entrepreneur but also bagging some cash for yourself. And why not? I want to create a model to show you can have a sustainable, successful, profitable business doing the right thing."

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