



Talent spot: Sandra Beale, Founder of SJ Beale HR Consult & HRZone blogger

Posted by [Jamie Lawrence](#) in [Strategies](#) on Wed, 08/05/2013 - 16:30



Running her own HR consultancy, [SJ Beale HR Consult](#), means Sandra Beale has to keep abreast of the latest employment law and HR issues, because her SME (small, medium enterprise) clients don't.

Beale is basically an HR emergency service for small firms: "SMEs often can't afford or don't want to employ a dedicated HR manager, but any business that employs staff will have HR issues from time to time," she says.

She typically helps small firms deal with big issues such as TUPE, redundancies and tribunals, though she's proud that none of her clients have ever been taken to a tribunal, because she's been careful to "close off all the angles". Beale is also often called in to help companies deal with sensitive staffing issues. "I'll be called in on difficult meetings, such as talking about poor performance. A lot of managers are tentative about doing these meetings and talking about touchy subjects," she says.

When she's not helping clients directly, Beale is sharing her advice in the [HRZone blogs](#).

The first half of her career, however, was far removed from HR. She'd originally gone to university to study French and Linguistics, but quickly realised that she'd chosen the wrong course. Rather than change subjects, Beale decided to quit university at the end of the first year and go to secretarial college.

Beale spent five years working as a PA at a travel agent and then an estate agent, until the mid-1980s, when she stopped work paid work altogether for the unpaid, but highly rewarding job of being a mum. For the next eight years, she was a full-time mum to her three children.

"I thoroughly enjoyed it, but I started to get a bit bored," she remembers. "Because I'd been away from the coalface for so long, I got a job as a receptionist and then started to apply for secretarial jobs."

<http://www.hrzone.co.uk/topic/strategies/talent-spot-sandra-beale-founder-sj-beale-hr-consult-hrzone-blogger/137748>

Eventually, she started working for the probation service in Northamptonshire. She was only supposed to stay six months, but in the end she stayed with the probation six years and began to get involved in personnel. Once she was appointed as an HR officer she began to study for HR qualifications.

Keen to put into practice the knowledge she'd gained from her studies, Beale joined Northampton Borough Council. She stayed with the council for two years, but she felt frustrated that she wasn't really using her HR skills. "The job wasn't stretching me, so I resigned and looked at starting up my own HR consultancy. It opened up a whole new world for me," she notes.

So, in 2003, she set out on her own and was lucky enough to quickly land an interim contract with Warwick University. Many other interim positions followed, which gave her the breadth of HR experience in areas such as TUPE, benefits and rewards in organisations, coupled with a breadth of sector experience, working in the private sector, NHS and charities. As her experience grew, she was able to increase the seniority of the interim work to strategic HR director-level positions.

"There was a lot of project work involved. I'd go in and set objectives to complete strategic projects. It gave me so much more experience that I wouldn't have had any other way," believes Beale.

Alongside the interim work, Beale was building up the SME consultancy business, which now dominates her time. A key focus for her currently is helping SMEs prepare for pension auto-enrolment. "A lot of organisations are burying their head in the sand. I went to a free seminar by the Pensions Regulator which was meant to be for employers. Only myself and an independent financial adviser turned up," she points out.

Some companies will already be in trouble. It takes nine months to a year to set up auto-enrolment. That means many medium companies with 350 to 499 employees will begin their pensions staging in January. Beale has already put in the legwork to understand the legislation and draw up a workforce template to employers to make it easier for SMEs to get on top of the pensions changes.

Who do you admire most and why?

Richard Branson, because he's so personable and is so successful at what he does. When he's made mistakes, they just fade away. He's also great at promoting himself.

What's your most hated buzzword?

"Blue sky thinking." What the hell's that all about?

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

To be myself and to be sure I can deliver what I say I can deliver.

How do you relax?

I've got an allotment and I love going up there and digging the soil.

SMEs and auto-enrolment obligations

Beale explains the steps SMEs need to fulfil their auto-enrolment obligations.

1. Make a plan

Implementing pension auto-enrolment takes about nine months to one year, so it is important to start planning as soon as possible. It is a statutory process and cannot be ignored. There are key staging dates that an employer needs to be aware of (the staging date is when an employer has to start auto-enrolling their employees), although it is possible to implement pension auto-enrolment before the planned staging date.

The employer needs to nominate a contact within the company who will be responsible for implementing the process. Working backward from the staging date, the plan should incorporate sufficient time to complete the required processes detailed below, as well as developing administration procedures and setting up payroll.

2. Analyse the existing pension scheme

An existing pension scheme must meet the eligibility guidelines laid down by the Pensions Regulator. If no pension scheme is in place, then the government [National Employment Savings Trust](#) (NEST) scheme should be implemented.

3. Assess the workforce

The workforce should be categorised into eligible jobholders, non-eligible jobholders and entitled workers.

Eligible jobholders are workers aged between 22 and state pension age who have qualifying earnings which means they will be automatically enrolled. Non-eligible jobholders are aged between 16-21 or between state pension age and 74 and have qualifying earnings; they have the right to opt in if they wish. Entitled workers are people aged between 16 and 74, who do not have qualifying earnings. They also have the right to join the pension scheme.

Assessment should be an annual process once auto-enrolment has been implemented.

4. Communicate to the workforce

Employers must provide information about pension auto-enrolment in writing. This should be by template letter. Employers are also recommended to run meetings with staff to provide them with information and answer their questions. It's also a good idea to develop an information booklet, which could be given out during an induction process to new starters.

5. Inform the Pension Regulator and keep records

An employer must keep certain records that will enable them to demonstrate their ongoing compliance. These record-keeping requirements should be embedded in their existing processes. The scheme also needs to be registered with the Pensions Regulator.