

HOW TO SUCCEED BY TRYING REAL HARD

As the newly-elected chairperson of the Dataflow Special Interest Group (SIG of the ROCC Computer Users' Association), Information Management thought the time was appropriate to publish a profile on Julie Bootle. In October 1987 she was made redundant. By February 1988 she was running her own company.



Bootle... "I've had no special training either in how to run a company or in computers."

At only 29 and armed with five O levels, experience, home-grown common sense and bags of enthusiasm, Julie Bootle is managing director of her own company, Datacentre Ltd, a computer data entry bureau in south London employing 44 full-time and 10 part-time data entry technicians. Though not the usual image of a 'yuppie', she nevertheless comes complete with Filofax and cellular telephone peeping out from her handbag. Bootle is effusiveness personified, helped no doubt by her spunky south London upbringing. Her diminutive five-foot-nothing height is the complete antithesis of her business philosophy. She runs her business with a large

"Some people say that you should never treat your business clients as friends, but I always do," Bootle said. "That's possibly

why so many of them rang me up when I was made redundant. This also applies to the girls who worked with me in my last job before we were all made redundant. Now most of the girls that work with me are from my former company."

At age 16 she left school to become a key punch operator for Lloyds Bank in the City of London. She married in 1977 and to augment their income in 1980 she took an evening job also punching cards for a small bureau. After six months, she accepted a temporary position as supervisor offered to her by the bureau. Another six months later, she left her bank job to work full time at the bureau supervising 12 key punch machine operators.

She was characteristically enthusiastic about her work, but also cared about her colleagues and the company for which she worked. In 1981 the bureau's boss talked about the need to think of future needs for more efficient ways of working. On her own initiative and with a colleague, she visited a company which they had heard made computers to replace the old punch card machines. This was her first introduction to ROCC Computers. She then returned to work and excitedly told her boss all about the great computer she had seen and how it would help 'their' business. Her boss was not equally impressed.

With a few days (mid-1981), one of the bureau's largest customers said that due to an anticipated increase in volume of work and need for greater speed of response, if the bureau did not start using a computer key-to-disk system within six months the work would go to another bureau.

The bureau boss then looked at three systems with the help from Bootle and a colleague, and bought one. The bureau was fully computerised by January 1982.

At the Savoy Hotel on March 11 1987 Bootle went to a meeting sponsored by ROCC Computers. The meeting was open to all people like her who were data entry managers and supervisors, whether they used an old key punch or computerised system of any make.

ROCC's meeting announced the intention to form a special interest group (or SIG, in computer parlance), with the goal of ensuring that they were trained to recognised, established professional standards and officially recognised by employers for the valuable contribution they made to their employers' businesses. It discussed the parallel situation in the USA, but where the managers were recognised and organised by what was called the Data Entry Management Association (DEMA).

At that meeting, the UK's Dataflow Management Association (DFMA) was born; it was to be run independently, but ROCC's User Group would fund it during its fledgling years.

Thinking it was a great idea, Bootle was the only one to write to ROCC saying this in her letter and offered to help. She said she had tried for years to get herself and colleagues recognised in this way.

Bootle's job had become more than just a data entry supervisor. She was genuinely a departmental manager with 54 staff, but without the official title. She had also acquired a degree of self-taught computer programming.

In June 1987 the DFMA met at Effingham Park and ROCC announced a competition. DFMA members could win a one-week trip to Boston in the USA by writing a paper on the future of data capture. The trip was to visit the DEMA organisation and to talk with organisers and members and to sit exams for the DEMA professional qualification. Bootle was one of three who won the trip, and she sat and passed the DEMA exam.

She arrived home from Boston on Friday, October 30. On the Monday morning, she was told that she, and the 54 others, were being made redundant.

"It was a real blow," Bootle said. "But I was more worried about some who had families to support, and I was also worried about some of our smaller clients.

"It was the DEMA people in the States who gave me such enthusiasm and drive to successfully come out of this terrible situation," she said. "The DEMA visit gave me the confidence to go on with lots of enthusiasm. I felt part of something that I never felt part of before. I didn't think I could mix with 'computer people' before, but this trip made me realise that having passed the DEMA exam, I was one myself! Without DEMA I would not have been able to do what I did then."

What she did then, was to start her own company. On that Monday she was made redundant; in five months she had her own business fully operation (from Monday, March 7, 1988).

"When I got home, I had 14 messages on my telephone answering machine with offers of work from client/friends. I got my marching orders on the Monday, but was in temporary work from the Tuesday morning. I realised then that I did not like the feeling that I could be doing the same job for another six years and possibly be made redundant again.

"A colleague, who had a similar job in a bureau in Acton called Datacentre Ltd, encouraged me to set up my own company and we looked for premises together. "I then learned that her data capture bureau was going out of business. We decided to both be co-directors of a new company. I spoke with an ex-client and friend, who said I should approach my bank manager for a loan to start my own business and that he would give me a reference.

"I got a new business loan from the bank for about £20,000. I did not need the money to buy the business. The owner was willing to sell it to me for only £2500, because Datacentre had technically already ceased business at the time I was interested in buying it," she explained. "The owner's options were to either put the company into liquidation or sell to me.

"This was Christmas 1987 and by February 1988 I signed for the entire company outright," Bootle said.

"I have to say, however, that one of the overriding reasons for buying Datacentre was because I was familiar with its ROCC computer system. I was not going to buy a company with a system I was unfamiliar with and I could not afford to buy my own computers, and equally importantly, I was able to take over the 18 months left running on the computer's lease.

"I knew I had a good dataflow manager and at least two good operators from my former bureau who wanted me to succeed. We moved into our new premises on February 29, 1988, and on the following Monday, March 7, we were keying in work for clients.

"We shortly had 15 people on the payroll; now we have 44 full-time data entry technicians. I don't like the title 'key punch operator' because it's not accurate, and I don't like 'data entry operator' because it doesn't reflect the importance of the job. So I call my staff data entry technicians. In addition to the 44 full-time data entry technicians, we employ about 10 more at home who now work on Amstrad PCs.

"We recently did a mailshot to about 100 of my former client contacts and most of them replied by personal letter even if they didn't have work for me. That kind of business relationship is rare, but one that I value. Up to now we haven't had to do any selling at all for the bureau; that's quite lucky, I guess.

"I like to think that we are innovators, too. I recently wrote a computer program for what we call 'multi-punching' on our ROCC computer. You will not find many other bureaux that can do that. It is especially for market research work and it allows us to key multi-punching in column binary which few bureaux can do unless they have the old punch cards.

"I've had no special training, either in how to run a company or in computers. It's all come by experience – and having to learn fast. A few months ago, however, I did take a one-day course in public speaking; that's been very useful.

"My co-director and dataflow manager left in August and she did the bookkeeping, too, so I have now hired a bookkeeper. Meanwhile my husband, Steve has become a director of the company. My new dataflow manager is Jackie Rickard and she has been with me since the first day of my new company.

"People often say business associates aren't really your friends, but I treat them all as my friends. And I think that that's reflected in the way my company and its business has developed. Bootle's next step is to develop a second office and a training school. She has strong beliefs on the importance of training and the importance an employer must place on employees.

She also has strong feelings on the importance of what she calls data entry technicians, regardless of whether they work in a bureau or an in-house data entry department.

Bootle has already had her eyes on a big old seven-bedroom Georgian house in Bristol that she wants to turn into a training school for data entry technicians. "I would probably run it as a residential school," she thought aloud. "I could open it in about six weeks, put a complete ROCC computer WMS system in there and train six to ten students at a time. With what we know, we can teach anyone with some experience to become totally proficient in a week. For anyone like a school-leaver with no experience but typewriting skills, we could fully train to a high standard in three weeks. We could get trainees to the same level that any other company would need up to six months to do."

Also in Bristol, Bootle runs a homeworker scheme. This enables women to use PCs to key in information in their own homes. Bootle has bought 10 PCs and this venture is working very successfully, mainly thanks to very advanced data entry software developed by ROCC Computers Ltd. In fact, the homeworker scheme is going so well that they keyed in Datacentre's share of the recent British Steel flotation's share application work.

In the near future, all the PCs will be linked by a communications network to the new computer which is planned to go into the training school. Another goal is to start an employment bureau for highly trained and experienced temporary data entry technicians, for which there is much demand but few human resources in the London area.

Julie Bootle has plenty of ideas and stamina to take her fledgling company onward and upward. Perhaps this is why her company logo of a hot air balloon is so appropriate.

Editor's note:

In spite of the fact that Bootle has started her own business and the Dataflow Training School, she is still enthusiastically and closely involved in the Dataflow SIG. Almost single handedly, with the backing of ROCC's chairman Michael Aldrich, she has done more for the promotion and increased membership of Dataflow than any other and the success of the Dataflow SIG owes much to her hard work. ■