

# How to become more entre

## Independent Nurse BUSINESS SKILLS FOR NURSES

The term 'nurse entrepreneur' is not clearly understood and has no single meaning. According to one dictionary definition, an entrepreneur is a person who organises and manages an enterprise, usually with considerable initiative and risk. So a nurse entrepreneur may be somebody who founds, or makes a change in, a service, or kick-starts a new enterprise or venture. Nurse entrepreneurship involves recognising opportunities for making a difference to patient care and endeavouring to achieve this.

Opportunities taken now may, in the future, be perceived to be as significant as those created and taken by Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole. These early pioneers were entrepreneurial leaders who strove to improve the health and social well being of others. They set us an example and we must continue to work for the benefit of our patients.

### All nurses can be entrepreneurs

These opportunities are not for an elite minority of health professionals, but have everything to do with ordinary nurses. Nurses working in primary care and the community may have greater opportunities for entrepreneurial activities than their colleagues in the acute sector.

Entrepreneurs could be healthcare assistants or directors of nursing, as long as they have an understanding of patient needs and a concept of how these might be better met. Nurses are ideally placed on both counts, and could succeed either as NHS employees or as self-employed practitioners.



Mary Seacole: her pioneering spirit sets an example to today's nurses

Entrepreneurial nurses (see box, right) tend to share a number of characteristics, such as self-belief and vision, both of which could be developed by, for example, participation in PCT meetings and on

boards. They identify their personal strengths and are quick to build up experience or access training in areas in which they lack expertise. They are energetic networkers and tap into the knowledge and skills of

family members, friends, colleagues and perhaps even certain patients, such as those who are lay members of the PCT's professional executive committee (PEC) or part of a practice's patient participation group.

### Broad range of sources

Innovative nurses also read widely about developments in healthcare and opportunities for nursing and take an interest in relevant non-nursing books and publications, which cover business skills and leadership. For example, useful advice is provided in the RCN's 'Information for would-be nurse entrepreneurs: turning initiative into independence' and I would heartily recommend 'Elizabeth 1st, CEO: Strategic Lessons from the Leader who Built an Empire' which draws dozens of business lessons from the life of Queen Elizabeth 1.<sup>1</sup>

Organisations, whether PCTs or GP practices, which place an emphasis on creativity and leadership, can foster an atmosphere that generates ideas. Entrepreneurship can thrive in a culture that believes in feedback not failure. It takes courage, confidence and foresight to look beyond the expected health service norms, to speak up for what you believe in and to take a risk and accept the associated responsibilities.

Any new enterprise carries risks and we can learn as much, if not more, from what goes wrong as from what works. From a young age we learn from experience, engaging in our environment and learning about the world. Children are essentially entrepreneurs, experimenting with ideas, making and adapting their models of the world based on the evidence before them.

Opportunities for nurses to be entrepreneurial are increasing as the NHS evolves. Enterprise may be hampered by cultural and historical organisational boundaries but much can be — and already has been — achieved.

The introduction of nurse-led

### How to behave like an entrepreneur

- Develop self-belief, vision and leadership skills, all vital to entrepreneurs. These qualities could be boosted through training and by attending PCT meetings, getting involved in the PEC, offering to share your expertise with other organisations and volunteering to lead small projects.
- Network with fellow nurses, health professionals and other business contacts whenever opportunities arise. Use a range of media, including internet forums. Listen and learn.
- Tap into the knowledge and skills of family, friends, colleagues and even patients. The lay members of health committees or members of a practice's patient participation groups may have expertise that they are willing to share.
- Identify your training needs and seek out opportunities to learn new skills. Invest not only in skills related to healthcare, but in training that provides practical business skills. Try to brush up your computer skills, for example Microsoft Power Point, which can be used to make presentations.
- Keep a notebook handy and jot down ideas as soon as you have them. Prioritise actions and review regularly in order to stay on track.
- Don't feel constrained by lack of job security or frustrating employers. There are many opportunities for nurses to go it alone in today's NHS.

# preneurial

If you can identify innovative ways to improve services for patients, it's time to use your initiative, start thinking creatively and develop your entrepreneurial side, writes **Janet Wild**

clinics and nurse prescribing are two examples of successful innovation in recent history. There is also the development of services under practice-based commissioning and the growth of public/private partnerships in primary care.

Not all entrepreneurial activities are large-scale ventures. Small but significant improvements in services (the kind often identified by nurses working on the front line) do not necessarily involve detailed research, or making an official presentation to your PCT.

For example, engaging with your environment can improve the patient experience: rearranging seating in reception areas into sociable U-shapes enables patients to chat while they wait, while asking a local school or art college to paint a mural brightens up the area. Approach local businesses for funding as part of their 'social responsibility'.

You could also participate in one of the voluntary sector schemes that assess access and environmental issues. If there is none in your area set one up, as it can be a morale booster and help provide direction for further improvements.

## Planning your proposal

The box on the right lists some of the key steps you may need to take before developing an innovative proposal. However, a simple notebook can be an important tool when you have identified something that needs changing or developing; whenever you think of a relevant point write it down straight away before you forget it.

These humble jottings could lead to a theory about how to change practice and improve patient care, when followed by careful research to explore its validity. Make note of supporting evidence plus any evidence that does not back up your cause. This will balance your presentation and discussions with others and show that you have taken all factors into account. If nobody

appears to have instigated or investigated the changes you are proposing, ask the vital question, why not? This may be answered by your research and subsequent analysis.

When undertaking analysis of costs and potential benefits of a new or improved service, experience suggests that you should forecast over a minimum of two years. Include everything right down to paperclips in your costing and build in a contingency of at least 25 per cent. Discuss your proposal with the PCT's designated accountant for your service or department.

Analytical tools like SWOT (strengths; weakness; opportunities; threats) and PESTLE, which considers the political; economical; socio-cultural; technical; legal; and environmental factors of an idea, will provide guidance and give a

clearer overview of any situation. Give plenty of thought to evaluating the impact of change: all transformation must enable sustained growth and address capacity, resources and, above all, integrity.

This process should enable you to develop an initial proposal for colleagues, senior staff or your business adviser, which could be developed into a formal business plan at a later date. Circulate the proposal documents in-house to interested parties, also listing external contacts or organisations identified as potentially having a vested interest in contributing to funding.

## Preparation is important

Good preparation will give you the best chance of winning support but, all too often, even good ideas fall by the wayside. Occasionally, barriers

become apparent, frustration sets in and opportunities are lost.

For those committed to improving patient care but disillusioned by the attitudes of their employers or uncertain about job security, making the transition to self-employment could be a way forward.

There are growing opportunities for entrepreneurial nurses to join or set up partnerships in general practice, or to establish businesses providing direct patient care or training to other nurses or members of the public in an expanding variety of specialties. The RCN highlights opportunities such as: working as an expert witness; setting up a care home; setting up and running a nursing agency; and providing complementary therapies or a counselling service.

Nurses bring with them all the skills and experience the NHS has given them and can apply these in a new arena or domain of healthcare. A positive attitude plus self-belief can turn a seemingly negative event, such as redundancy, into something positive. Indeed, it appears that, rather than fearing working alone, many self-employed, entrepreneurial nurses tend to fear the thought of going back into employment.

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## Developing an entrepreneurial idea

### 1. Clarify your aims, including

- The rationale behind your proposal.
- What you expect to achieve.
- What would happen if you did nothing.
- Who will be interested in this developmental proposal.

### 2. Do your research

- Conduct an audit (access your PCT's audit department for guidance and assistance if you can).
- Find out whether what you are proposing has been done elsewhere.
- Predict the benefits to patients, staff, your organisation, and partnership organisations.
- Assess your proposal using analysis tools such as SWOT or PESTLE.
- Predict the cost and potential benefits of your proposal over two years, building in a contingency of at least 25 per cent.

### 3. Think ahead

- Before introducing your idea to colleagues, senior staff and

business managers choose and develop a clear understanding of your evaluation model.

- Prepare a basic hand-out to demonstrate the rationale behind your proposal.
- Circulate your proposal for general discussion. Presenting it to one person can stall the process indefinitely while sending it to several people safeguards your research and authorship (copyright belongs to your employer).
- Work in collaboration with others who have knowledge and skills – you may not have to drive the project forward.

### 4. Formally present your proposal

- Set a date and time for a meeting to discuss your proposal more formally. Issue an invitation to all personnel on your circulation list to attend this presentation. This invitation could be included with your initial documents.
- Arrange further discussion with external contacts and representatives from your organisation.