

# guardian

- Julie Ferry
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## State security

Traditionally viewed as bureaucratic and staid, public sector careers are back in fashion as new jobseekers seek safer alternatives to corporate uncertainty. Julie Ferry reports



Nikki Jenks was considering working as a social worker before being offered a job by a PR firm. Photograph: David Mansell  
Photograph: David Mansell

Despite the doom and gloom facing graduates on the job front, there is one sector where jobs are available and, it would appear, safe. The public sector is less likely to be hit by huge job losses, so is therefore a good bet for those who are just starting out in their career. However, it can also be an attractive option for those who have recently fallen out of love with the private sector, offering good salaries, interesting work and opportunities for career development.

The snag? Some people who have switched from the private into the public sector report culture shock. But is this simply a myth or is there a wide chasm between the sectors, leaving inventive corporate types wrapped up in government red tape?

"The general perception out there is that the public sector is slow moving but I don't think that's reality," says Fred van der Tang, managing director of Randstad UK's professional services division, which places candidates who want to make the move to the public sector. "Of course there are differences, but now those differences stand for job security and stability."

Alan Clarke, sector engagement manager for Lifelong Learning UK, which runs programmes that help people who are interested in transferring from the private sector to work in further education, agrees that longheld views of the public sector are outdated.

"People think the private sector is innovative and the public sector is staid and I don't think it's like that at all. The culture shock is more likely to be felt by people moving from a large to a small organisation, where the decision-making processes are quite different."

Arthur Browne is one of those who made the switch from the private to the public sector when he went from working at a PR agency managing public sector clients to doing the same job within the civil service, at the Central Office of Information (COI).

"I enjoyed my previous job but I wanted to be closer to the process of policy making and the COI provides that opportunity," he says. "I didn't make the move because I thought I'd be safer, but many of my friends in the private sector are envious of me because they think the public sector is a better place to be during a recession."

A complete change in career direction saw Paul Robertshaw swapping a stint as an insurance broker for a teaching career in the Sheffield area. He works as a primary school supply teacher after completing his PGCE in August and cites job satisfaction and security as reasons for making the change.

"I love my job and I also feel that as a teacher you have good job security," he explains. "I prefer the challenges I face now – when you've had a rewarding day and you know the children have learnt a lot, there is no better feeling." Of course the public sector doesn't suit everyone, as Nikki Jenns discovered when she decided to pursue a career in social work. After failing to find a job in her degree subject of marketing and PR, she decided to enrol for a master's in social work at the University of Plymouth.

"I had started looking for work in my final year of university, but I wasn't getting anywhere so I decided to reassess my situation," she says. "At the time I was very driven by the thought of helping people but I also knew social work provided a guaranteed salary, which was a big draw."

However, after completing a placement in children's services Jenns began to have doubts about her suitability to the sector. "It was emotionally draining and very tough. Yes, I had a guaranteed salary at the end of it but at what price? It really does take a certain type of person and there is a lot of red tape to deal with."

Luckily, between her first and second years of study Jenns was contacted by one of the agencies she had originally applied to, which had an opening. She decided to leave the master's course and take up an account executive role with Fareham based marketing and PR agency LCM. "I wouldn't rule out a move into the public sector again," she says. "But it would have to be in a PR role." Yet many within the current crop of students think the public sector presents a good option. In a recent survey by TARGETjobs, students and fresh graduates named the public sector as the most attractive job sector for the second year running.

The NHS says it has experienced an 83% rise in the number of applicants for its graduate management training scheme this year, with 12,000 applying for around 220 positions.

Nicola Fair, spokesperson for the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement, which leads the scheme, puts this down to the breadth of opportunities the organisation provides.

"Graduates are looking for a job that offers a lot of variety and the chance to give something back, and the NHS provides both of these things. The service is also a big enough organisation to have a career in a number of areas, so even if the government agenda changes or two trusts merge, there are still other doors that are open."

However, graduates shouldn't assume the public sector will escape this recession unscathed, warns Jonathan Davis, managing director of Armstrong Davis chartered financial planners in London. "In the boom years, the three sectors of the economy which took on most jobs were construction, financial services and the state, so it isn't certain that the public sector will keep on growing," he says. "Most jobs appear to be safe for the moment. But the current financial climate is presenting challenges that we haven't seen before and considering current levels of government borrowing, policies are likely to change after the next general election."