



Valeria Berrazueta, co-founder of Shepherds Grooming, said she had benefited from being forced to take time to think strategically

HELP TO GROW

## Fledgling businesses thrive with government scheme to cultivate talent

Hannah Prevett

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It is safe to say that when James Morris heard about the government-backed Help to Grow management course in the summer of 2021 he was sceptical. “Academics, and especially academics in business schools, can have no concept of [the pressures] of running a business,” he said.

But he needed help. At that time he was reeling from the pandemic’s “brutal” impact on his business, Trafalgar Marqueses. “We lost 90 per cent of our income almost overnight,” Morris, 34, said. He was in the process of shifting the focus of his business to being less reliant on corporate events when Mark

Hart, a professor at Aston University, got in touch to tell him about the scheme.

Today Trafalgar is back to “70 to 80 per cent of our best year, but with a healthier margin than we were doing before”, Morris said. It also has eight full-time employees. Morris credits part of that renewed success to what he learnt from the 12-week scheme, which is being delivered by 38 business schools across England.



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The government hopes that 30,000 small and medium-sized businesses with at least five staff will take part in the £520 million scheme over the next three years. Michael Hayman, chairman of Small Business Charter, the organisation responsible for providing the scheme, said there had been 3,500 registrations so far. The Treasury is covering 90 per cent of the cost, leaving participants to pay £750.

Having studied Russian at university followed by a stint in the RAF, Morris said he “fell into running a business”, but wanted to improve his business acumen. He said that contrary to expectations the expertise of the course tutors made it a valuable experience. “Mark Hart and Melanie Bryan, one of the facilitators, really know their stuff. They are very in tune with small businesses and were very mindful that we were also running our own businesses.”

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Rosie Boullin-Barrett, finance director of Seacat Services, has also completed the training. Her company owns a fleet of catamarans that deliver equipment and personnel to offshore energy facilities and has £10 million in annual sales. She said it was a substantial time commitment. “I started work a bit earlier and worked a bit later so that I could cram in the two hours in the day time,” she said. It was worth making the effort, she added. “I was absolutely buzzing after the first couple of sessions.”



Rosie Boullin-Barrett, finance director of Seacat services, said the course demanded a large time commitment but that it had been worth it

There was plenty of homework too and Boullin-Barrett credited her Portsmouth University course tutor Katya Veleva, who is a leadership coach, with making her students think hard about whether they were using their time well. “[She] made you write down three actions that you were going to do and give a timescale to do them. She wouldn’t let you off the hook. She would say, ‘Do you think that’s good enough? Do you think that’s specific enough and do you definitely have that timescale right?’”

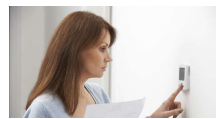
Hayman at the Small Business Charter said: “If you’re a founder of a firm you feel duty bound to have the answers for everything: the answers for your customers, the answers for your people. What good academics do is they pose the right questions to get you to think.”

He said that entrepreneurs sometimes needed convincing that studying at a business school was for people like them and were put off by the stigma of MBAs being for “big company” executives.

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Being forced to make time to think strategically was a huge benefit for Valeria Berrazueta, 36, the co-founder of the Birmingham-based luxury men’s salon Shepherds Grooming, who also studied at Aston Business School. She started the business in 2017 with her husband, David Sturgeon. “Sometimes as an independent business you carry everything on your shoulders [as the founders]. As much as I can talk to David, David is a creative person, an artist, and I am more the operational person, so sometimes we don’t understand where the other is coming from. So talking to someone who understands how to operate a business is a huge help.”

The peer-to-peer support is another unexpected bonus. Susan Maitland, managing director of Pro Lawn, a professional lawn treatment company that employs 15 people across Scotland, admitted that her pet hate had been networking. “I didn’t enjoy doing it. However, I’ve changed my mindset, having been part of a peer group where everyone had the same starting spot. We were all there for the same reason and all of a sudden it made sense: I could speak with these individuals and realise I’m not an idiot and can hold my own,” Maitland, 48, who undertook the programme at Strathclyde University, said.



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Boullin-Barrett, 49, added that she too had gained confidence, as well as technical skills. “I think women tend to undersell themselves so when it comes to work I didn’t have a hugely high opinion of myself and my skills. But the course gave me the ability to show what I knew in business and basically find some more belief in myself.”

Maitland became general manager at Pro Lawn the same day in March 2020 that Boris Johnson announced lockdown. She was promoted again to managing director in January this year. She feels that she has become much more self-aware. “It’s about being able to understand what my strengths are and to apply them for maximum benefit, as well as my weaknesses. I’m still a human being and I make mistakes but if I can understand why I made the mistake I can remedy it much more quickly and learn from it so it doesn’t happen again.”

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Berrazueta is confident that her business is heading in the right direction. Despite the disruption caused by Covid, the additional costs of taking out a lease on a bigger site and the doubling her team to eight stylists, Shepherds Grooming has just turned a profit for the first time, two months ahead of expectations.

She said that she had been put on the right track by the mentor she was paired with, Lawrence Hoare, who runs a company called VC Consulting. “[Lawrence] gave me the right direction and the right structure to get the business to become profitable, which wasn’t something that we were focusing on before.”

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