

The KitchenTable Method extract

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THE KITCHENTABLE METHOD

FROM SOLO CREATIVE TO AGENCY OWNER



MAKE THE SHIFT THE EASY WAY
MORE TIME, MORE MONEY, MORE FUN

JOHN ASHTON

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**Write
Arm.**

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Introduction:

What's the story?

No, not the guy from Beverley Hills Cop

Google 'John Ashton' and the first person to appear on the results page will be the American actor best known for his role in *Beverley Hills Cop*. Next will be the UK's former UN ambassador for climate change.

Keep scrolling down and you'll come to the head of public health in northwest England followed by the guitarist from the eighties band The Psychedelic Furs (you mean you've forgotten *Pretty in Pink*?).

Way down the list lurks a John Ashton whose meagre achievement of note is to have written three – yes, three – books about the Lockerbie disaster. That John Ashton is me.

My albatross

The Lockerbie story became my professional obsession. Having followed the case during my career in TV journalism, I ended up working for the lawyers of the man who was convicted of the bombing. I'd long believed Libyan Abdelbaset al-Megrahi to be innocent and the ongoing work fascinated me: it was my chance to make a difference and maybe, just maybe, to change history in a very modest way.

And yet, like many obsessions, Lockerbie soon became an albatross. As I was writing my biggest book on the case, I asked myself, 'What next?' Up to that point my career had been a series of unplanned happy accidents. I had fallen into my TV career and stumbled blindly into writing and legal research. I had trusted life to take me on a pleasant course and, till then, that trust had been rewarded.

But things had to change. I was no longer young. Employers were certainly not crying out for Lockerbie experts and journalism as a profession had been decimated by the growth of free online content.

So, what next? I needed a good plan to avoid ending up among the ever-growing pile of washed up media monkeys. I needed to earn well and I wanted a job that was flexible enough to allow me to spend time with my increasingly frail mother, who lived 200 miles and four train journeys away.

No more media monkey or frantic freelancer

I knew that I wanted a fresh challenge. But what? I had enjoyed freelancing as a commercial writer a couple of years earlier. The idea of going back to that seemed sensible, but not particularly appealing.

In order to make a good living as a freelancer I'd have to

work the same hours that I put in for staff jobs. Sure, I could take the odd morning off, but only if I put in an extra evening shift. More importantly, I wasn't convinced I could simply keep chasing commission after commission and call it a career.

That's when the idea of setting up a commercial writing agency came to me. As I saw it, it would give me more flexibility, would make life more interesting and might make me more money. Yet the thought of running a business with an office and staff just didn't appeal. To be frank, it seemed like too much responsibility for someone who craved freedom.

Fortunately though, history was on my side.

The digital surf's up – let's ride that wave

If you're over 35, you may just have noticed that the world has changed over the past couple of decades. You've probably noticed it the way that you would if you grew an extra head or relocated to the moon.

The digital revolution has affected almost every area of our lives. The effects are sometimes wonderful, occasionally terrifying and seldom less than dizzying. For me the greatest change that digital technology has enabled is not in how we buy, or how we learn, or even in how we exchange insults with strangers. It's in how we work.

For millions it has enabled a working lifestyle that only a couple of decades ago was an unobtainable fantasy. All that we now need in order to work is a computer and an internet connection. Commuting, wearing a suit, unpleasant colleagues and awkward situations the morning after office parties, can all be consigned to the dustbin marked *Thank God all that's behind me*.

All that we now need in order to work is a computer and an internet connection.

The biggest and most significant item in the dustbin is the office. Now we can connect to colleagues and clients online, be they in the next street, or on the other side of the world. It's the golden age of the creative freelancer and it has spawned a whole new subspecies, the digital nomad. Working for a client in Beijing from a guest house in the Andes is no longer a novelty.

But technology hasn't only liberated freelancers. It has also allowed many new business models – ones similarly unconstrained by geography or bricks and mortar.

Enter the KitchenTable agency

One day while sitting on a train in Glasgow I had my eureka moment. I wouldn't go back to being a freelance writer and I wouldn't set up a bricks and mortar agency. Instead I would take advantage of the digital revolution and set up a virtual agency that would use some of the great freelance writers I knew at its base.

This book is about that very model – a creative agency that utilises remote-working freelancers. I call it the KitchenTable agency, because you can run it from your kitchen table, although you could equally well run it from your back bedroom, your garden shed, or your AA meeting.

It's a model I chose because I wanted the lifestyle benefits of being freelance without all the hard grind. I also wanted to grow a business without being permanently tied to my desk and on the verge of burnout.

By the time I set up my agency, Write Arm, a couple of

years after that train journey, it still seemed like a great idea. The only snag was that I had no idea how to make it work. But I decided to do it anyway.

By then, in the spring of 2012, the pressure was really on. I had a nine-month-old son and my wife had taken redundancy and needed time to be a mother and plan her next career move. I also wanted to spend a lot of time with our son – there’s nothing to beat the warm feeling that you get when your baby pisses on you.

I badly needed to earn and desperately hoped that Write Arm would deliver the goods – or rather the cash. It did. Within a few years, turnover grew from nothing to £500,000. Somehow, I had become a successful small businessman.

That’s my story. What’s yours?

If you’re reading this then it’s likely that you want to make a similar career shift to mine. You might be a copywriter like me, or you might be a designer, a web developer, a video maker, digital marketer, a photographer, an illustrator or one of the multitude of other creative professions.

Whatever your skillset, it’s likely that we have some motivators in common. No doubt, you’ll have some different ones too: perhaps you’ve fallen out of love with your profession, or you want to do a round-the-world trip (yes, you can do it if you run your own agency), or you’re a power-crazed lunatic who likes the idea of bossing around a bunch of freelancers.

Whatever it is that is driving you, you need a roadmap. This book provides it – and I wish I’d had it back in 2012. It isn’t the story of how I did it – not primarily, at least – although it is based on the knowledge that I accumulated on my journey.

Rather, it's a handbook for you to build your own KitchenTable agency and to do it quicker and better than I did. Sometimes my methodology is quite prescriptive and at other times it's fairly loose: this is friendly advice and handholding, rather than a formal coaching programme or a detailed financial blueprint.

Although my experience is of running a writing agency, the advice I offer can be applied to all types of KitchenTable agencies. That said, if you set up your own agency, it is likely to differ significantly from mine, not only in the type of services you offer, but also in the personality that you stamp upon it.

If you have bought this book, the chances are you're hungry for change. I hope it inspires you to take the plunge and set up your own KitchenTable agency. You won't regret it.

WHAT'S A KITCHENTABLE AGENCY

A KITCHENTABLE AGENCY MAINLY – OR EXCLUSIVELY – USES REMOTE-WORKING FREELANCERS TO PRODUCE ITS CREATIVE OUTPUT. YOU MAY PRODUCE SOME OF THE OUTPUT YOURSELF, BUT ONCE YOUR AGENCY IS WELL-ESTABLISHED YOU'LL PROBABLY WANT TO CONCENTRATE ON GROWING THE BUSINESS.

IF ALL OF YOUR AGENCY'S OUTPUT IS PRODUCED BY SALARIED STAFF, THEN IT'S NOT REALLY A KITCHENTABLE AGENCY. NOT THAT YOU SHOULDN'T EMPLOY SALARIED STAFF TO HELP YOU RUN THE COMPANY, THEY JUST SHOULDN'T BE DOING THE BULK OF THE CLIENT WORK.

WHATEVER FORM YOUR AGENCY TAKES AND WHATEVER IT PRODUCES, AT ITS HEART IS THE RECOGNITION THAT REMOTE, FLEXIBLE IS GOOD FOR ALL CONCERNED – FOR YOU, YOUR CLIENTS AND YOUR EMPLOYEES.

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LEG ONE



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CHAPTER

1 | The foundations of company culture

I know what you're thinking: 'Culture? What kind of flaky crap are you about to feed us? We want to know how to run a business, not put on a play for our non-existent staff.' OK, I hear you, but listen: this might be the shortest section of the book, but it's actually the most important.

Your culture is your foundations

If done properly, culture is your biggest single asset. Like Red Bull, it gives you wings* – wings to lift you above your competitors and place you in the laps of clients. And, unlike Red Bull, if you mix it with vodka it doesn't make you dance all night and wake up feeling like you've been hit by a tank.

Culture isn't about the arts, although it is central to the art

*Fact of the day: Red Bull dropped its slogan, *Red Bull gives you wings* after being sued for 'false and deceptive advertising'.

of running a successful business. Culture is what gives you identity – and identity is central to your value. It's one of the main reasons that clients will want to hire you and freelancers will want to work for you.

Culture is your foundations. Get it right and you can build something wonderful. Get it wrong and, to switch metaphors, you could be heading for the cliffs faster than a lemming in a Maserati. Ignore it and the lemming will swap the Maserati for a tortoise – it will still reach the cliffs, only more slowly.

But how can you build a culture when you don't have any staff and everyone you employ works remotely? The answer is simple: you home in on the values and desires that are driving you, and project them into everything you do. Put them on your website and in your pitches, share them at networking events, tattoo them on to your forehead and, most importantly, live them.

Culture is your foundations. Get it right and you can build something wonderful

A brush with mortality

Where do you start with culture? You start inside your own head – and in my case what was going on was an electrical storm.

Let me explain. I was standing in a shop queue when I started to get very dizzy. I thought the feeling would pass, but it got worse. And then it all got a bit weird.

I started hearing voices in my head. Someone was singing a

song I knew well, but try as I might, I couldn't remember its name. Then the voice of the man behind me started coming through the mouth of the shopkeeper and vice versa. Then reality disappeared altogether.

When I woke up about 10 minutes later, I was in an ambulance being taken to hospital. The doctors examining me kept asking if I had bitten my tongue. I was fairly sure that I hadn't. They reckoned that I had probably fainted and let me go home. While I was in the cab back home my tongue began to throb. I had bitten it after all – it had just taken a while for the bruising to manifest.

The next day I visited the shop and asked the staff what had happened. They didn't speak great English, but they didn't need to: "You were really bad" said it all. They described how I had let out a big groan before crashing to the floor and shaking. I knew what it all meant. I hadn't fainted: I'd had a seizure.

Of course, I went straight on to Google to try to work out what it all meant. I soon discovered that the fit could have been caused by a brain tumour or a nasty underlying neurological condition. There were other, less sinister, explanations, but of course I feared the worst.

My doctor arranged for me to have a brain scan, but there was a two-month waiting list. When the day finally came, I was braced for very bad news. But, I'd have to wait - I had assumed that my neurologist would be on hand to interpret the results, but I was told there would be at least another month's wait for that.

The next day in desperation I called the neurologist's secretary and pleaded for the appointment to be brought forward. She said that wouldn't be possible, then capitulated and said she would have a word with the specialist. She returned to the phone a couple of minutes later and casually delivered the most important news I've ever had: 'Dr Nisbet

has just looked at the scans and they are all clear.’

I was elated. I didn’t have a brain tumour or a neuro-degenerative disease, I was merely epileptic.* To many that would have been a major blow, but to me it was a blessing. Sure, I would probably be on medication for life, but at least that life wasn’t destined to end any time soon.

The big question

Why on earth am I telling you all this? It will all make sense shortly.

My life was not destined to end soon, but it did need to change radically. The fact is, you can only build an authentic and durable company culture by recognising and developing your own internal culture. You then wear that culture inside out – meaning that you put your personal priorities and values at the heart of your business.

In order to do all this, you have to start with a simple question, one that you dodge at your peril. If you avoid it, in a couple of years’ time you might find yourself slumped over a bar on your tenth vodka and Red Bull, trying to figure out where it all went wrong.

The question is *Why?* Why am I starting a KitchenTable agency? Or, to put it another way, what is it I really want from life and how will setting up a KitchenTable agency help me to get it? You have to ask the question because the foundations of your company’s culture must be your own needs and desires.

Which takes us back to my epilepsy. From the moment I was diagnosed, my priority was to look after myself. I

*A large proportion of epilepsy cases are, like mine, idiopathic, i.e. they have no known cause.

couldn't do that if I was commuting to someone else's office to work a 9-to-5 job. It would take too much of my day, would be stressful and wouldn't allow me enough time for rest, exercise and all of the other things that I needed to stay well. I needed freedom from demanding bosses and the work-a-day routine, and I needed work that would pay me money to not have to work at all hours.

So, my needs were pretty clear. What about my desires?

The foundations of your company's culture must be your own needs and desires.

What do you want?

What did I really want? The answer was simple: contentment.* I say simple, but the truth is that it was so simple that it eluded me for some time.

I imagine that, if you take time to explore your desires, contentment will probably be your answer too. But, having got this answer you have to really think: 'What makes me content?'

When I stopped to address this question, I was shocked that I had never really considered it before. It's such a basic desire yet it gets so easily drowned out by petty ones. The truth is that many people are more likely to ponder the Higgs Boson theory or how Donald Trump combs his hair than consider what actually makes them content. When I asked

*I say contentment rather than happiness as periodic unhappiness is a fact of life – one that the truly content can accommodate.

myself what made me content, the answers were relatively straightforward:

1. Work that I enjoyed
2. A good family life, including plenty of time with my children
3. The freedom to explore ideas, places and other work options
4. A good income
5. Plenty of human contact
6. But plenty of time to myself too.

The truth is that many people are more likely to ponder the Higgs Boson theory or how Donald Trump combs his hair than consider what actually makes them content.

Your answers might be similar to mine, but maybe you would throw into the mix things like travelling the world or qualifying as a professional wrestler.

The four Fs

Whatever is on your list, it must include the first item in the list above. Having work that you enjoy is not only an end in itself, but it will also enable everything else on your list. The

reason is simple: if you enjoy your work, you'll be good at it – and, if you're good at it, you'll make money. In my case enjoying myself and making money enabled the great family life that I wanted. In yours it might mean that you can go travelling or enroll on that wrestling course.

Having worked out the things that made me content and the centrality of work to that, I had to drill down further and ask myself what I needed from work to make it enjoyable.

I'm a slow learner and it took a while to find the answers again, even though, once more, they were fairly obvious. There were four of them and, conveniently, they all began with F.

Firstly, work had to be Fun.

I don't mean by that that I needed to come into work dressed as a clown (though, I generally do on Mondays and Wednesdays) or that I expected everyone I employed to be standup comedians. What it did mean was doing interesting work and working with interesting, friendly, sparky people. Of course, not every job is interesting and not everyone can be permanently interesting, friendly and sparky, but, as long as most were, work would be fun.

The second and third Fs were Freedom and Flexibility.

These Siamese twins are inextricably linked, both to each other and the second and third items on my original contentment list. The work had to give me the flexibility to spend time with my family when I needed to, including my elderly mother and my in-laws who lived in Germany. Flexibility also meant giving me the freedom to explore ideas, the world and other work projects.

All of this meant that I needed to be free from a desk, so I

could work from wherever I needed to be and not tied down to a 9-to-5 routine.

The final F was less obvious: it was Fairness.

We don't usually consider fairness in our working lives until things go wrong. Things like having a bullying boss, or disloyal colleagues, or being overlooked for promotion, or being chosen for all the crap jobs.

Unfairness is like nasal hair – you can't be rid of it entirely, but you can keep it to a minimum. Keeping it to a minimum is all the easier when you're your own boss. And that's what I intended to do.

So, now I had four personal aims for my work that would form the backbone of my company culture: Fun, Freedom, Flexibility and Fairness. Next I had to wear those values inside out.

*In fact, a few of the freelancers I employ do stand-up comedy.

CHAPTER

2

Building your company culture

Once you've established your own internal culture, building a company culture is fairly simple. As I said in the last chapter, it's about wearing your values inside out.

What do I mean by that? It's simple. It means that what you wish for yourself, you should wish for both your clients and employees. You should give clients and employees equal weight, because if your culture is to be authentic and durable it must face both ways.

The four Fs for clients

Let's consider clients first. How would those four Fs – Fun, Freedom, Flexibility and Fairness – apply to them?

Fun

It's not a word that clients would normally associate with working with a creative agency. Compared to a fortnight in Ibiza or an Eddie Izzard gig, commissioning an agency isn't up there as the most fun way to spend your time. I wasn't about to change that, but I could at least make working with my agency, Write Arm, enjoyable.

First and foremost, of course, that meant delivering great work to deadline, but it required far more. I made it a rule that every exchange I had with them, whether a meeting, call, email or text message, should be warm, friendly and positive.

Do such things really matter? Yes, they do. They really do. Put yourself in the shoes of an account manager or head of marketing who regularly commissions your services. Of course, they want your work to be great, but at a basic personal level they want their working day to be great too. If that day is punctuated by exchanges with people who are cold and negative, then it loses its shine.

If another supplier comes along who does equally good work for the same price, but is friendly and upbeat, then your client could suddenly be an ex-client. If your default setting is to be a miserable git, then paint on a smile. It will do wonders for your business and, who knows, it might even make you feel better.

Freedom

At the core of your client offering is that you free them from the hassle of managing multiple freelancers. What other freedoms can you offer? One of the other reasons that clients liked working with my agency is that we didn't tie them in to retainers.

There's another important freedom that you should offer clients – freedom from pestering. I pitched Write Arm, as a here-when-you-need-us, gone-when-you-don't service. I never got on our clients' backs trying to up-sell and cross-sell, and they respected me for it. Not that you shouldn't contact your clients if you have a new service or technology that might help their business, but before you pick up the phone ask yourself, 'Will they thank me for this?'

Flexibility

Once more the proposition for clients is as simple as it is attractive: they get the talent that they need when they need it. You might think that this is an offer too far for your agency, but you should really try to make it part of your service – your clients will love you for it.

If your default setting is to be a miserable git, then paint on a smile. It will do wonders for your business and, who knows, it might even make you feel better.

Fairness

That's simple: don't overcharge, don't underdeliver and don't try to blame them for mistakes you have made.

The four Fs for freelancers

So that's my clients kitted out with the four Fs – now it's the freelancers' turn.

Fun

How do you make working with your agency fun for those who work for you? You have to pay them properly, of course, and you need to respect their work, but otherwise you do it in much the same way as you do for the client – by being nice to them. The nicer you are, the more likely they are to go the extra mile for you, to help you out of tight corners and to choose to work for your agency above their other offers.

None of this is business theory, it's the basic algebra of human relations – be good to people and they'll be good to you and your business.

Freedom

Giving freedom to your freelancers is equally straightforward. Essentially, it means leaving them alone to get on with their work. People generally perform best when they are happy and the more you trust them to get on with it the happier they will be. Of course, you need to quality-check their output, especially if they haven't worked for you before, but if you're constantly watching over them, they won't be happy and the quality of their work will suffer.

You should also allow your freelancers the freedom to turn down work without fear that you won't use them again. And you should let them work when and where they like.

Whether they are at their desk or in their favourite crack den, it doesn't matter, as long as they deliver to the agreed standard and deadline.

*It's the basic algebra of human relations
– be good to people and they'll be good to
you and your business.*

Flexibility

Primarily, this is all about enabling them to build their working life around their personal priorities – just as you do. Of course, that's what most freelancers do anyway – it's why they're freelance.

You must respect this way of living and working. Allow them to work where and when they like, to pick and choose what work they do and to take time off without fear that they will lose out as a result.

Fairness?

Again, it's easy: pay them the best rates that you can, while leaving yourself a reasonable margin; pay as quickly as you can; don't take sole credit for their work and don't blame them when things go wrong.

For more on how to deal with freelancers, see Leg 3: Collaborators.

Shout the F-words from the rooftops

Research has time and again proved that companies with a strong, positive culture do better than those that don't. As I said earlier, the reasons are simple – clients and employees alike want to work with them.

However, to exploit the benefits of your culture, you need to shout about it. Mention it to all our clients and mention it on your company website. Be bold, be direct and, above all, be truthful.

This is what my agency Write Arm's *Culture and values* page says. As you'll see, it majors on those four Fs and adds a fifth one for good measure – Family.

We like the F-word.

*Correction, we like F-words. Four of them are at the heart of our culture: **Family, Freedom, Flexibility and Fairness.***

*We unashamedly put **Family** first. When John Ashton founded Write Arm his aim was to build a working life around his family. He kept quiet about it until he noticed that most of our writers and clients wanted the same for themselves. So, we now encourage everyone who works for us to follow John's examples. Their work doesn't suffer as a result, it gets better.*

***Freedom and Flexibility** go together. Our clients are free to use our services when they want and how they want. We don't tie them in to contracts and we don't insist on retainers. We're entirely flexible – we provide the writers they need, when they need them and we adapt to any system of working that they wish (any reasonable one at least).*

Our writers enjoy freedom and flexibility too. They can work how and when they like – whether from their desk, a café or a mountain top. We try to avoid micromanaging them because we know that people do their best work when free from critical scrutiny.

*And **Fairness**? Simple: we treat our clients and writers fairly. We don't view clients solely as revenue streams. We want to contribute to their*

success. We are honest, we charge reasonably, not excessively, and we're loyal to our writers and pay them decent rates. We don't chase work at all costs and would rather turn down jobs than make a promise that we can't keep.

Fairness depends on giving value. We're not the most expensive writing service, but we're also not the cheapest. We value what our writers do and pay them accordingly. Our value to clients is based, not only on the quality of our work, but also on the quality of our service.

*Which brings us on to another important word. Happily, it begins with F too. It's **Fun**. We don't wear red noses, we don't have a pool table or a beer fridge and we don't do away days. We're nevertheless on a mission to spread happiness, not to the whole planet, obviously, but at least to our clients and writers.*

We believe that what we do should be enjoyable for all concerned. We work with a smile on our faces and we ask all our writers to do the same, even when they're inwardly grimacing. Remembering that the customer is always right, even when they're wrong, helps everyone to stay happy (and sane).

*There's a final important word that's very dear to us and, believe it or not, it doesn't begin with an F. It's **Giving**. More than most businesses, Write Arm is built upon relationships. Much of our work comes through referrals and we actively seek referrals for our clients and those in our wider network. We gain through giving.*

Are we perfect? Yes, of course we are. OK, we're not, we're human. Occasionally things go wrong. When they do, we don't look for someone to blame, we try to understand and, most importantly, we focus on solutions. It sounds like vacuous business-speak, but it really matters. Dwelling on problems and on who's to blame causes stress and delays solutions. Finding fixes is good for the soul and even better for business.

MY BIGGEST MISTAKE: LEG 1

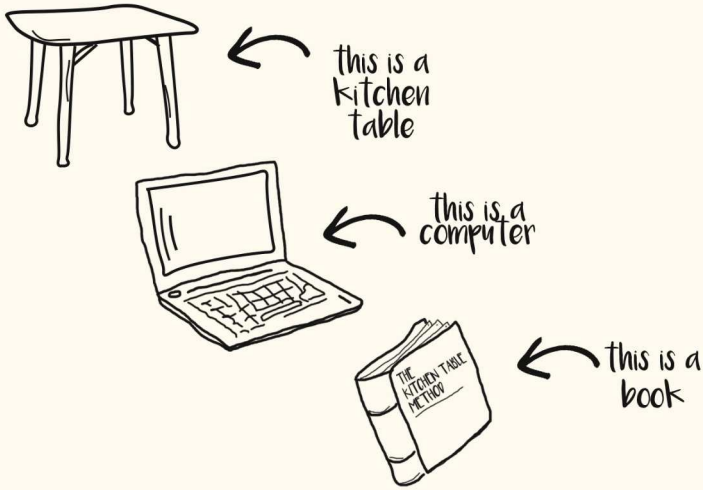
I ADMIT IT. WHEN I SET UP WRITE ARM, I DIDN'T ASK WHY? OR, AT LEAST I DIDN'T ANSWER THE QUESTION THE RIGHT WAY.

AT THE TIME, THE WHY SEEMED OBVIOUS: I NEEDED TO FEED MY FAMILY AND HAVE FLEXIBILITY. I DIDN'T GO BEYOND THIS TO ASK IF IT WOULD MAKE ME CONTENT.

IT WAS ONLY AS THE COMPANY GREW THAT I BEGAN TO LOVE WHAT I DID. I WAS LUCKY. MANY PEOPLE SET UP A BUSINESS FOR THE SAME REASON THAT I DID AND END UP HATING IT.

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kitchentable.com/membership

HACK YOUR WAY TO A LIFESTYLE BUSINESS THAT WORKS



NOW START YOUR OWN CREATIVE AGENCY

This is a book for inbetweeners – creatives like you who'd like to start their own agency, but don't want the hassle of running a big business. You don't need to know about sales, marketing, finance, HR, or all the other things that weigh down business owners. All you need is a bit of ambition.

NO CLIENTS, NO CASH, NO CLUE? NO PROBLEM!

Setting up a creative agency isn't hard when you know how. Whether you're a designer, a web developer, a marketer, a copywriter or an illustrator, The KitchenTable Method shows you all the essential short cuts to owning a business that you'll love – and that doesn't take over your life.