

# Green light for a boom in jobs

Up to 1m people could soon be employed in environmentally friendly technology and services. Karen Bartlett reports

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**S**leek, black and curvaceous — Christopher Pett's top selling Reece chair is the epitome of stripped-down modern design. It is aimed at the café market, and many of the chair's occupants will be unaware that they have encountered the materials before: the black plastic back and seat are made from recycled Sony Playstations.

Pett opened Pli Design in Dulwich, London, in 2003 when he gave up his career in event management to handcraft environmentally friendly furniture with none of the exorbitant costs — or clunky appearance — usually associated with the tag. Now a period of rapid expansion has led to a full order book and a product range that includes bamboo coffee tables and a "grass" series of chairs and units constructed from a special wood-free straw composite that has a consistency similar to chipboard.

Pett said he didn't expect to be at the forefront of a wave of new green jobs. "I just wanted to manufacture my own products and thought there could be a sustainable way of doing that in styles that also looked good. I'm still suspicious of the idea of a green community — our clients include entertainment producers in London, Nottingham housewives and Brighton bankers. There is a seed of



Swapping a well-paid City career for a job promoting sustainable investments for the Forum For The Future has left Alice Chapple worse off financially but feeling happier

'greenness' but it has yet to spread coherently."

Despite this, Pli Design exemplifies the growth of the green-collar sector heralded by Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Barack Obama and the United Nations as the future source of employment for millions in recession-hit western countries that have seen traditional areas of manufacturing stripped to the bone and shipped overseas. President-elect Obama recently promised to create 5m new jobs for Ameri-

cans making solar panels, fuel-efficient cars and wind turbines. Jobs, he stressed, that "cannot be outsourced". This month business secretary Peter Mandelson claimed that 800,000 UK workers were employed in jobs associated with the green sector, a figure he estimated would rise to more than 1m. The Green New Deal will be at the heart of economic rejuvenation.

"The market for green-collar jobs is huge," said Neil Bentley of the CBI employers' organisa-

tion. "The issue is whether the government can provide a clear steer on how to make the transition to a low-carbon economy. Without that policy framework, business will not have the confidence to invest."

Andrew Simms from the New Economics Foundation (NEF) agrees. The NEF is the think-tank that coined the phrase New Green Deal, which was quickly seized on across the political spectrum. "It is about making a transition from a throwaway consumption soci-

ety to longevity, maintenance and repair. We need long-term energy security in this country, we need a transport infrastructure that reflects the fact that in 2020 we will have reached the point where oil production can no longer meet demand. And a green revolution will be employment-intensive. We need lots of people to physically make that transition happen."

Simms believes that reform of the financial system is at the heart of moving ahead. "The financial system should be

there to support a productive economy, not have us dancing to its tune. Because of the recent crisis the government now has the levers to influence banks in terms of investing in areas like renewable energy."

Three years ago Alice Chapple left such a financial career in the City to work on sustainable investments for the Forum for the Future, a group that campaigns for sustainable development. "I had worked on a lot of issues concerning the developing world, so the path was

fairly straightforward for me. Now I work on clean technology, micro finance and how to make carbon markets work. It's an example of how you can be, say, an accountant and move into the environmental sector without losing your skills and expertise."

Leaving business to work for the Forum for the Future presented Chapple with the challenge of how to ensure that her voice was still heard in the corporate world. More personally, she said: "My husband was a bit

disappointed that we no longer had a City salary, and my children would like nicer holidays. But I think they accept that a happy mother is better than a rich mother ... most of the time."

Chapple is confident that her mixture of skills and experience means that new career challenges will be available if she continues to work in the environmental sector. Though some analysts have compared the boom in green jobs with the dotcom bubble of the late 1990s, Chapple said the green-collar job market was likely to continue growing because a large-scale global response to climate change and energy concerns was unavoidable.

The issue for many is not if that global response will come, but whether Britain has an adequately skilled workforce to take advantage of the opportunity. Recent British innovations in renewable energy have been taken up by Scandinavia, Holland and Germany, where government regulation and subsidies are considered more encouraging. Though Britain is well placed in sectors that include marine and wind technology, experts admit that in the medium term British green-collar jobs may be more brawn than brain — loft ladders rather than nuclear engineers.

"Skills and education are crucial. Government should be concentrating on science in schools to make this work," said the CBI's Bentley. "It is also important to understand that not all the jobs created will be new. Many will involve the 'greening' of existing jobs. As companies and the public sector have to conform to new regulations, all jobs, including those in finance and sales, will involve taking green factors into consideration."

At Pli Design, Pett said the reason for his success was often overlooked — it was that he had integrated the green economy into good business practice. "We don't lecture, and we don't ask people to buy our furniture because it is environmentally friendly. We have done well because our products are nice to look at, comfortable to use — and they literally don't cost the Earth."

PAUL VICENTE

# WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

## This is our chance to save manufacturing

Ed Gillespie, writer and co-founder of Futerra Sustainability Communications

WE are at the crossroads. Britain has a poor track record of bringing environmental products to market, but the current crisis is an opportunity for us to step back from being a service-sector economy and return to manufacturing, which is more sustainable and better for the country.

The main areas will be energy, transport and construction. There's no doubt that political courage will be needed — car manufacturers have been resisting efforts to be more sustainable for many years. There will be a lot of lobbying against government initiatives.

Most people know about the environmental crisis we are facing — and also accept that we



need to build a more productive economy. Whole sectors will have to change. Altering our homes to make them more energy efficient and harnessing wind and marine technology, and generating local energy, will keep a lot of the workforce occupied for many years.

## Government needs to offer better support

Kim Stoddart, managing director of Green Rocket, an environmental communications agency

TERMS like Green New Deal and green-collar workforce can be overused. People are almost desensitised to those words now because of what we call "greenwash" — the flood of PR that companies use to inflate their green credentials. People are increasingly savvy to those sort of claims now, and companies should exercise caution. Modesty is sometimes the best option. This is also true for the government. People will listen to Gordon Brown's statement about new green jobs and ask if entirely new jobs are being created.

What the sector needs is strong leadership. The government has to understand



that most green businesses are small, and they are struggling. I am not seeing much creativity from the government in supporting those businesses. Its approach to financing and grants has been stop-start, and this makes life difficult for many small enterprises.

## British executives lack the skills to lead the way

Andrew Molony, founder of Greenjobs.co.uk

GREEN JOBS are the fastest-growing part of the market — it's where everyone wants to work at the moment. The appeal is partly cultural: you can work in this area, have a social conscience and be seen as progressive. More importantly, it is stable. Nobody expects the bubble to burst.

At the executive level, Britain is lagging behind. British executives don't have the skills in this area to take the top jobs and we are seeing a lot of them going to people from Scandinavia and other parts of Europe where they are about 15 years ahead of us. The experience they have in terms of corporate thinking, and at an engineering level in renewable energy, just can't be replicated in Britain.



For executives who want to move over to work in the green sector it's crucial that they demonstrate some kind of commitment to environmental issues. If you go for an interview, you will be asked. Use the skills you have and pair them up with a proven green track record.

## Firms will soon face more competition

Christopher Dunham, director of Carbon Descent, a firm that specialises in low-carbon transport and resources

IN the past two years the sector has been transformed. It has gone from being off the radar in terms of popular concern to a primary issue.

If you take into consideration what needs to be done on housing, transport and manufacturing, there's no lack of work. In historical terms it's less of a New Deal and more like the second world war. Everyone will be called to act — and it could rejuvenate the economy.

To make this happen we need some sustained nurture from the government, not the haphazard regulations and announcements we have had so far.

But as the sector expands, some green enterprises will face



a shock. There will be greater competition. Bad businesses will not survive merely by good intentions. There's no doubt that in the short term the private sector will respond more quickly. So far there doesn't seem to have been much impact on the public sector.