

APPOINTMENTS: Gifted square pegs can expect a revelation

By Richard Donkin
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One of the hardest realities confronting executives who have had a long and successful career is facing up to the possibility that their corporate life has come to an end.

A few years ago this understanding was easy to digest. The opportunity to go a year or two before the official retirement age, at 60, say, was seen as a perk of the job. Today fewer and fewer senior executives are staying with their jobs long enough to reach 60. Some even find themselves out in the cold in their 40s if they have been passed over in a reorganisation.

The pressure to step aside in your mid-50s or even earlier is increasing as companies merge or re-organise and the path to the top becomes narrower and more competitive. Suddenly the succession pool has become populated with younger guns armed with significant advantages: their reward packages are often cheaper and they have too little experience to threaten the incumbent chief executive (unless the young gun has already made the top job).

Many executives in their 40s and early 50s who have previously enjoyed six-figure salaries have lost out in the past two or three years, sometimes opting to take an outplacement package only to find that their prospects of another salaried post are limited.

The alternative for some is interim management but this option has become less open in recent years as more people compete for fewer opportunities. Most interim providers and managers I speak to believe that the market for temporary managers in the corporate sector has contracted markedly in the past two years. Only the public sector has shown any signs of growth.

Andy Austin, managing director of Interim Leaders, a UK provider, believes that the number of temporary appointments at the top end of the market - for jobs attracting an equivalent permanent salary of more than £100,000 a year - has shrunk to a quarter of the level two years ago.

"At the same time the number of people wanting to do interim work has quadrupled," he says. "So the chance of finding work for most people in the market has become eight times more difficult than it was.

"The baby boomers, that big post-second world war population bulge, have become the backbone of industrial and corporate life but they have reached the stage where they are being discarded and this trend is going to escalate in the next five or 10 years."

So what are these people to do, faced with dwindling opportunities for permanent re-entry and the thin market for interim managers? Twiddle their thumbs for the rest of their lives? All across the western world there are thousands, probably millions, of highly qualified, capable men and women still with plenty of productive ideas, work and commitment to offer society who would appreciate some guidance about what to do next.

Instead of banging away fruitlessly, trying to re-enter permanent corporate careers, says Mr Austin, people can explore other avenues - such as going into venture capital enterprises, taking a non-executive appointment, setting up a business, working in the voluntary sector or teaching.

"There are all kinds of areas where you can bring to bear your interests and enthusiasms," he says. "Unfortunately many people simply do not know enough about themselves. A lot of people we meet who have led successful working lives have spent their whole careers as square pegs in round holes.

"They went into a career many years ago that was suggested by their parents or a teacher and never questioned whether they were doing the right thing."

The need to prepare people for career transformation has led Mr Austin and his partner, Anthony Broadhead, to establish a new business that they describe as an alternative to conventional outplacement.

Dobson Lyle*, they say, is concentrating on equipping executives to change the way they work. The first part of their process is a psychometric assessment called the Birkman Method.

Having put myself through nearly all the most widely used personality tests over the years and having undertaken various forms of psychological profiling, I was intrigued to find out how well this process would work. The test here is being used not for recruitment but in personal profiling, so there is every incentive to answer the questions honestly.

The results in my case were just about spot on according to those who know me well. Not only does it record preferences between the arts and the sciences - and most of us ought to know that anyway - but it also reads how we adjust our personality when we are under stress. It registered what it called my "undue sensitivity" and "over-directness", both traits I have been slow to acknowledge over the years.

So while it was prepared to describe me as "sociable, communicative and at ease in groups" for most of the time, it detected that when stressed I can become unsociable.

This is a feature of personality revelations. You read something such as "likes to be flexible", which seems quite complimentary until you realise that this very flexibility *in extremis* can lead to "resistance to routine" and "neglect of system and order".

"You are definitely not corporate," said Mr Austin. Well that was a relief. I have yet to find a journalist who is.

It is as if every positive attribute has its possible negative side. So "thoughtful" and "reflective" - both reasonable traits, you would think - can be manifested as "indecision" in a crisis.

This makes a lot of sense and demonstrates how certain behavioural traits can be either attractive or potentially disastrous depending on the circumstances. In an emergency, the last thing you want of a colleague is for him to tell you he needs time to think.

Roger Birkman, the developer of this test, who is still actively promoting his Birkman Method at the age of 84, appears to have created something genuinely revelatory for those who feel they need to understand what it is that makes them tick. The test report even matches ideal jobs against its findings.

But what is the point of finding a second vocation if there are no jobs out there? Dobson Lyle says it can call on the experience of some 4,000 executives on the Interim Leaders database if a client needs some consultancy on a particular career path.

"We are in touch with people who have done everything under the sun," says Mr Austin. "There may not be many suitable salaried posts for the people we see but there are all kinds of opportunities out there for second careers. What we want to do is help people to take control of their lives."

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