

A long, lonesome road?

Digital image: PHILIP BURGOYN

Who wants to change? **Paul Robinson** finds that, for many people, a career switch can be both a challenge and a revelation.

HUNDREDS of business executives and professionals are plodding along in unfulfilling and stressful employment because they are scared of change. For the middle manager or middle-aged executive, being out of the workforce can be a frightening prospect with mortgages and school fees looming in the background.

Such fears can inhibit a strong need for professional renewal and the challenge of change. Often loyal and productive careers at one institution instil a feeling of insecurity about the outside market. And the thought of presenting for job interviews at the age of 45 or 50 is simply scary for many managers.

The case is similar for the middle-aged manager who has tired of a long career, taken a package and then lost confidence in the paper war of job applications and endless rounds of interviews and corporate interrogations.

But an industry is emerging that seeks to calm the older, corporate job seeker and focus their attention on image, goals and confidence.

"There is a lot of fear. We aim at quelling that fear and instilling a clear sense of direction that will impel the candidate to aim for the sorts of positions that will be deeply satisfying. That is why we teach people the skill of managing the interview," said Russell Johnson.

Mr Johnson is chief executive of EPR – the Executive and Professional Register – a company aimed at humanising the often humiliating experience of job applications/interviews for senior managers.

"Even people who have been headhunted walk into the interview with a sense of uncertainty. The sad thing about the job interview process is that, so often, very talented, high-calibre people have their self-esteem broken down because of the clinical atmosphere. It is common for us to deal with people who have not gone about this part of their career transition in the right way. Their morale is often broken. The initial interview and further

interviews can be confidence-shattering," he said.

Mr Johnson is well qualified to advise people on challenges and change. He began work as a clerk on the Victorian Railways during the 1950s, ran a convenience store with his brother and earned enough to buy his parents a home.

But the accumulation of wealth gradually became a chore. A spiritual side emerged and he travelled to London and then on to South Africa to work as a missionary. After toiling in the field for some years, doubts emerged as to the validity of the work and of the belief system to which he once subscribed.

Mr Johnson took his family to America – his wife was born there – where he joined the massive Fortune 500 International Multifoods Corporation. Rising to regional franchise director, he developed the diversified giant's fast-food and restaurant division. After great success, the corporate headhunters started calling.

In 1981, the Arbys fast-food chain, based in Atlanta, Georgia, won the battle for his talents. But there was a challenge ahead. Arbys was a company whose status in the fast-food industry was declining. Americans loved quality roast beef, but the Arbys franchise system was stifling.

Mr Johnson loosened up the management infrastructure, allowing large-scale expansion. He beefed up support levels to existing franchisees to a standard they had never received before. New investors flocked to the revitalised business and Mr Johnson recalls a life blurred by airline travel, negotiation, supervision of building projects, site selection, financing and training.

He rose to become one of the top



Russell Johnson: aims to quell fear.

executives in the United States but, in 1987, Mr Johnson, as senior vice-president of Arbys, realised he no longer liked his job. He also had no desire to exchange it for another in the executive jungle where the enticement of massive pay cheques no longer held its allure.

"I suppose you could say I felt trapped, but I really didn't know what I wanted to do," he said.

He resigned and, in 1989, brought his family back to Melbourne. For four and a half years Russell Johnson examined his life and his goals with the luxury of past high earnings keeping the wolves from the door. Quiet, unhurried reflection told him he needed to do something that gave a sense of meaning as well as financial rewards.

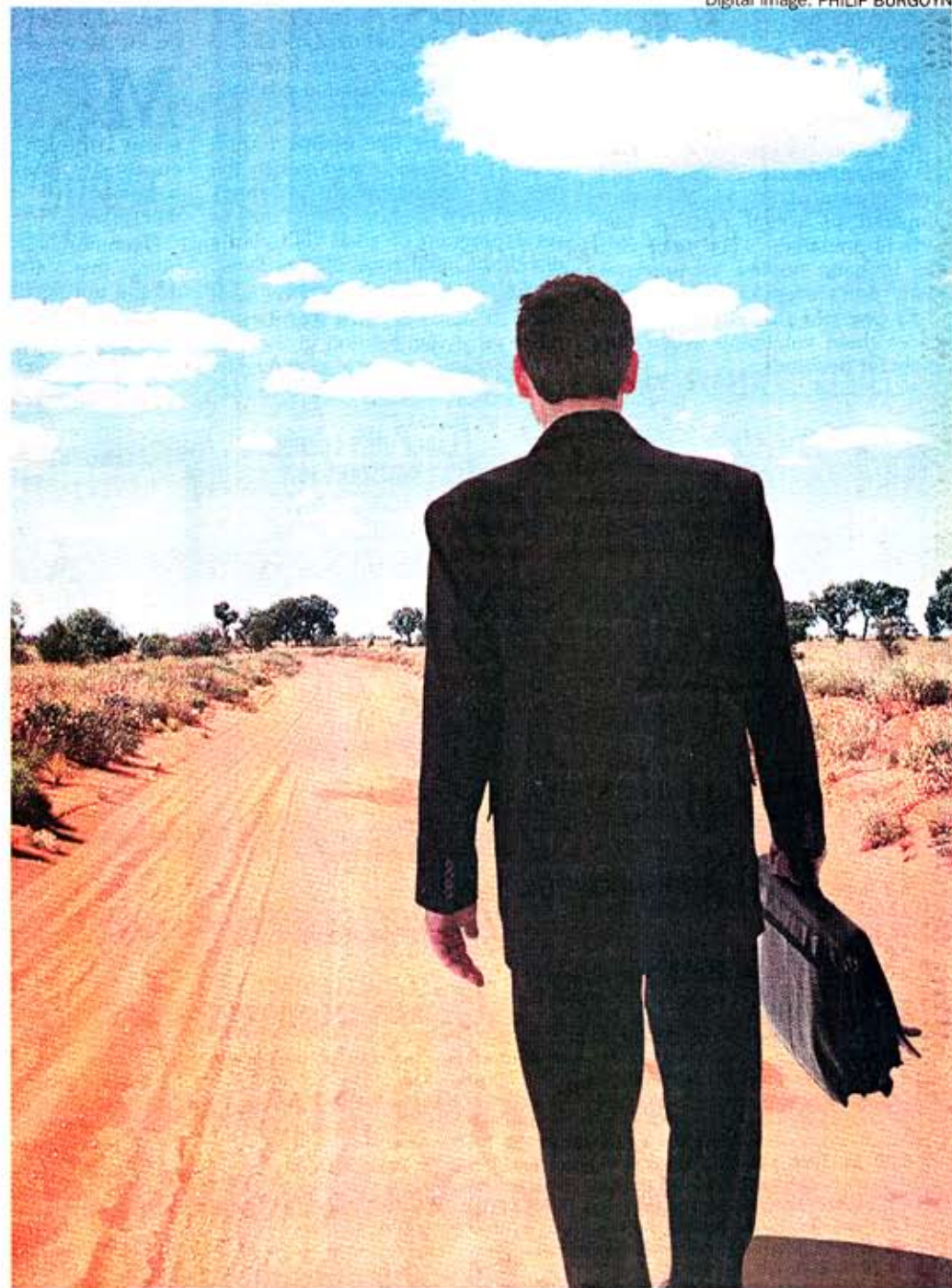
"I knew that life as a minister was wrong for me, but I was also unfulfilled in what I was doing in the corporate world and money, status and climbing the ladder were no longer enough."

Then, in 1992, he found the answer. With a friend from the recruitment industry he started a company that dealt with human resources from the perspective of the executive, rather than the corporation. Together, they founded a system designed to assist in creating a better prepared, more confident, more targeted executive for the businesses that were constantly crying out for new talent.

Mr Johnson had long believed that displaced executives and those who wanted to change their present work felt powerless about controlling their destinies.

"I decided that the time had come to help these people take back their dignity. What was needed was a program that would help them to clarify their goals, that would give them a powerful idea of the direction that they wanted to take in the workforce, so that when they went into an interview they did so as an equal and made their decision based not only on the pay cheque but also on a deep desire to work for the company."

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EMPLOYMENT

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Mr Johnson said most people:

- Handled job interviews badly.
- Were made to feel like supplicants when they applied for a job.
- Had no clear sense of direction.
- Could not negotiate a satisfactory salary package.
- Were unwilling to leave a job interview that was heading in the wrong direction.

He said many interviewees faced the stress of job interviews without a clear picture of the job they were prepared to accept because they were ill-prepared: "They come with cap in hand hoping for approval. Many don't even know what they really want in their lives and that leaves them vulnerable when they apply for positions.

Once people had a clear vision of where their life was going they were much more adept at managing interviews, he said. "They need to question themselves: Things like: 'Is this consistent with my career objective? Do I want to be here or not? Do I want to go on to the next interview?' They need to be so clear on what they really want that they are able to say, 'I'm out of here' if the interview is not going in the direction that suits them.

His company, EPR, claims to train professionals and executives in the process of managing the job interview. It tries to show clients how to set a program of goals that clarify directions in all areas of their lives.

"We are training executives who want to make a move to a better, more satisfying position in the skill of becoming an equal in an interview

and then being able to direct the negotiation process. Everybody benefits when a candidate for an important position has his or her act together."

Mr Johnson said the type of people he could help did not make decisions based on money but on what the job could offer them and "what they can do for the employer".

MEANWHILE, the search is on to find Victoria's brightest young business talent through a program that encourages young budding entrepreneurs to start their own enterprise.

Operation Livewire has helped more than 400 young business people during the past 10 years to establish themselves in the business world.

Entrants, who must be aged

between 18 and 25, must submit a detailed business proposal and the best plans will be awarded a share in a \$10,000 prize donated by one of the sponsors, Shell Australia.

Winners will be allocated a mentor from the co-sponsor, Rotary. The mentor will guide them through the pitfalls of setting up a business and help them develop a through business plan.

Last year 145 prospective entrepreneurs entered the competition, including the winner, 24-year-old Tamara Boyd.

Ms Boyd was working as an engineer for Esso but was also a keen musician. She had an idea about offering in-house music lessons at a corporate level.

She packaged her idea and called in the Company of Music, which won her \$5000 last year.

"I set about looking into the viability of offering music lessons in the workplace," she said. "Around the same time, I heard an advertisement for Operation Livewire on the radio, and haven't looked back since.

"Operation Livewire has been absolutely fantastic. It was a lot of hard work but it has really helped me realise my goals and objectives and brought credence to my idea. By doing a cash-flow analysis I now know what level of business I need to aim for to be profitable."

The managing director of commercial marketing at Shell and chairman of Operation Livewire, Mr Bob Glindemann, believes the competition provides young people with great access to business knowledge: "The observations and insight of an experienced business person have saved many Livewires a lot of time,



Teaching keyboard: Tamara Boyd won an Operation Livewire award for teaching music in offices.

Picture: ANGELA WYLIE

money and heartache. The success of the program is evident from the many young people who are now running their own businesses, an opportunity they never would have

had without the scheme," he said.

More information is available by calling 1800 241 041 or by visiting the Operation Livewire Web site at www.operationlivewire.com.au