

# Know when to move on

Square peg in a round hole, or just unhappy? Recognising when to change jobs can fix all that, writes Jeremy Bass

**H**AVE you come to fear and loathe your job? Do you look for — and inevitably find — fault in your work environment, your boss or your colleagues? And do you take your work frustrations and disappointments from home to your family and friends?

There are people who go through their entire working lives feeling miserable about their jobs. But in the credo of the hyper-corporatised 21st century workplace, every organisation, every department, every individual needs a *raison d'être* with a bunch of performance benchmarks to ensure they're fulfilling it. If you're not doing that because you're in a rut with your job, maybe start doing something about it before you are performance-assessed out of it.

Certainly no one ever lay on their death bed wishing they'd spent more time at the office. But a work ethic of some kind is as old as humankind. The need to be of service to our fellows, to pull our weight and be seen doing so, is part of being a social animal.

That does not mean we all have to be madly in love with our job 100 per cent of our working lives. Superstar philosopher Alain de Botton raised the issue of our bloated expectations of our work in *The New York Times* last year. "The most remarkable feature of the modern workplace has nothing to do with computers, automation or globalisation," he opined. "Rather, it lies in the Western world's widely held belief that our work should make us happy."

Quite right, too. But since we spend so much of our time at work, we might as well either learn to enjoy what we do, or place ourselves in something to which we can at least see a point.

Hence the current buzzword in HR and strategic consulting is "passion". Examples: those job ads with faintly ludicrous headings like "A Passion for Customer Service". Worklife careers consultant Paul Stevens published a book called *A Passion for Work*, and there's even a toolset called *Passion Maps* offered by a Sydney consultancy of the same name.

If this passion-for-work stuff sounds namby pamby, rest assured its feet are planted firmly on the bottom line. There's a reason organisations public and private pay consultant psychologists, counsellors, trainers, coaches and HR development strategists billions of dollars a year to help employees find niches inside their organisation, or out. Simply, someone who's content with their work will more likely spend the day watching the job, not the clock.

Conversely, misery loves company. One malcontent can subvert an entire company or department simply by being unbearable to be around. If frustrated enough they can descend to sabotage. Worse still is where the wrong person is in a position of authority. If any of this means you, you might care to look elsewhere.

The most frustrating thing about a rut is that the deeper you're in, the less you feel able to do anything about it. To keep out of this cycle it helps to know what to look for, says Russell Johnson, Melbourne-based CEO of careers consultancy Executive & Professional Register (EPR). "Ask yourself: do you really want to be there any more? Take note when you're consistently not enjoying what you're there to do — when it feels irrevocably stale or pointless," he says. "Or when you're constantly feeling on the outer, or just persistently unhappy with the direction your organisation's taking —



Lessons: Lanning Bennett tackles effectiveness

Picture: Bob Finlayson

that's been the case for so many people in recent times. It can be hard to admit, but we know in ourselves when we're only staying for the money or security. And that's not enough reason in its own right to stay."

Nor do most of us need to, regardless of what we might feel on the matter. Feelings aren't facts. But doing this does involve putting to bed the notions of job security with which baby boomers and Gen-Xers grew up.

Job security now is about learning to surf current conditions and skill up in whatever way best boosts your employability quotient, says Shane Stewart, principal of strategic consulting agency Bay Consulting.

Stewart has seen people tender their resignation on the completion of seminars he runs for companies of the calibre of Nestle, Network Ten and Goodman Fielder. And not for negative reasons. "People need to feel resourceful, to know they have abilities and choices. We essentially help people out of their limiting beliefs. Particularly the one that says life should come with guarantees. It doesn't, so why should managing your career?"

Stewart says attitudinal changes began with the wave of restructures and retrenchments in the 1980s. "The generation who saw their parents retrenched and bummed out after decades of loyalty and hard work have resolved

## Seeds of discontent sown at top

**E**MPLOYEES disaffected in their jobs almost always direct part of the blame towards their organisation — and sometimes they might be right, says former corporate banker-turned strategic consultant Lanning Bennett. Facing that himself, Bennett left a 20-year career in managerial and CEO jobs in London, Chicago and Hong Kong to start the Centre for Organisational Innovation (COI). The move arose from lessons he learned with a major Australian bank.

Joining it in the early 1990s, he found a company in turmoil. "There were problems with leadership, with direction — there was no certainty, all fear. They restructured over and over for want of anything else to do. The politics were a nightmare."

Bennett saw a common thread with other companies he had worked for: no way of identifying the underlying causes of employee dissatisfaction, let alone any means of redress, beyond tired old opinion survey methods.

"The performance indicators were all about individuals. They weren't measuring the organisation's effectiveness in strategy, culture, training, resource allocation and so on — yet those issues all correlate closely to employee satisfaction and retention."

COI's Organisational Effectiveness Profiling process measures and helps address more than 100 deep-rooted effectiveness issues. An example: managerial decision rights.

"That's a regular source of friction — managers denied the latitude they need by overly controlling authority structures," says Bennett. "Someone in that situation might be perfectly effective if that's adjusted. Why drum an effective person out for being unhappy in an ineffective organisation?"

not to let that happen to them. They're taking control, and there are plenty of supportive employers prepared to partner with them in developing themselves and managing their careers. "An inherent part of that is learning to take risks. You can't afford to do nothing."

What about people trapped by high specialisation levels that make it hard to shift?

For these people, says EPR's Johnson, it's imperative to know how to access the non-advertised market. "They're the people most likely to benefit from outplacement — that's the most useful means of assessing transferable skills. And given the right guidance, they often find they have skills they'd never recognised."