

The wealth of experience



Public eye Julia Middleton

Expectations of feelings of completion and fulfilment are often what drive careers. But many top executives and senior managers at the end of their careers find they are still hungry for fresh challenges beyond sitting on a few corporate boards, lucrative though that may be.

So what should they do when it is time to retire but they are not ready to take a back seat in society? The answer is simple: with so much to offer in terms of knowledge and experience, they should continue using their talents once their full-time career has ended.

Although that solution may seem simple, the transition certainly isn't. Many people who want to use their experience and abilities to benefit society once they have completed their first career often end up feeling adrift. They know that they could make a valuable contribution to a governing body or a charity, but don't know how to make the switch into a new sector, organisation or issue.

A chair I know of a FTSE 100 company, who was about to leave his job and wanted to give something back to society, was sent on a course by his company to help him learn how to do this. I then received a text from him on the last day of his course, saying that it was a bereavement course for his life and that

perhaps golf and a couple of corporate boards were the best thing for him. As I bellowed down the phone at him, I told him that society wanted 10 decent years of active citizenship from him, that although he was a corporate animal he could learn new ways to lead.

He is far from alone in finding this transition hard. There is no rule book setting out how you make the leap from a full-time job to new roles in society. But at a time when there is a growing squeeze on resources, ignoring the vast pool of leadership experience of those who are choosing – in their 40s and 50s – to leave their full-time careers is a critical waste of talent.

The contribution they can make is immense, and can be applied to organisations across the public, not-for-profit and private sectors. Abilities to make productive high-level relationships, to deal with unexpected and large-scale challenges, and to manage big risks are an indispensable resource. They are vital skills that all organisations, whatever sector they are in, need in order to survive, let alone thrive, in an increasingly dynamic and fragmented world.

How can they overcome these obstacles, internal and external, and establish themselves as an effective leader in a new sphere? *© 16/4/08*

People who do this successfully are able to balance their self-belief in what they have to offer with awareness that they are new to this role and probably have a learning curve ahead of them. They are realistic in understanding that experience that was central to their full-time career may not be understood or immediately relevant in this new context. Above all, they resist the instinct to control and mould this new world into the one they have known so well, and are open to new ways of working and thinking.

My despondent friend who had me bellowing at him has gone on to take a board position in education. He has gone

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quietly mad in the process, getting some things right and some wrong. But it has been interesting and testing, and he has achieved some great things. Others can do the same, but it takes courage.

Common Purpose and Oxford Said Business School run a programme, What Next?, to help those in positions of leadership prepare for these roles. They hear from speakers about the reality of a non-executive position, and they learn about pitfalls to avoid and how to influence an organisation when they no longer hold an executive position in it. It provides them with the freedom to explore which roles might best satisfy their passions, values and strengths, and helps them plan ahead to develop the right networks and experiences to pursue a new direction in the future.

For society, we must ensure that this rich pool of talent is not lost but is utilised for the knowledge and experi-



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ence that it can bring, particularly to governance roles. Those willing to make the leap and use their abilities in these roles should be valued for the contribution they can make in leading organisations through an increasingly complex world. The benefits will be felt not just by the individual but by the organisation and society as a whole.

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