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Permanent jobs endure

The last time I met William Bridges he had just written a book called *Jobshift* which said the job as we know it was going to disappear. His book appeared nearly three years ago, shortly after Charles Handy had written about the growth of "portfolio careers" in *The Empty Raincoat*.

Not long after Mr Bridges visited the UK to promote his book, the Royal Society of the Arts launched its *Redefining Work* project to look at the policy implications of such changes.

Mr Bridges was back in the UK last week, lecturing to the RSA about his new book, *Creating You & Co*, which expands on advice he gave previously, explaining how people can assess their own capabilities and use them to seek contract work.*

Mr Bridges is a little older, approaching his mid-60s, but his job doesn't seem to have changed much. He is saying the same things today that he was saying some years back only with greater conviction. Last week he was preaching to the converted. Few, if any, in the RSA audience, questioned the thrust of his argument. This is a pity. While Mr Bridges and Mr Handy are compelling and entertaining speakers - their visions of self-employed itinerant workers have materialised in the expanding information technology sector - their conclusions are rarely subjected to rigorous examination.

In one of the few contemporary statistical studies, David Shonfield at Incomes Data Services found little change in the age and length of job tenure of the average executive between 1973 and 1990. He concluded that predictions of a future of casualised insecure employment were "demonstrably wrong".

Mr Bridges rejects such findings. "Academics are the least willing people to accept what I'm saying," he says. Labour market statistics, like any others, are prone to differing interpretations and it may well be that the biggest changes have occurred in the last two or three years not covered by such studies.

But even he must accept that at least one of his predictions has so far proved wide of the mark. A chapter in *Jobshift* entitled "The end of management" concurred with Michael Hammer, the man who taught businesses how to re-engineer themselves, that "middle management, as we currently know it, will simply disappear".

A 1995 study by the Institute of Employment Research at the University of Warwick, however, showed that instead of declining, in the UK at least, the number of management jobs was increasing. It found that 1m jobs had been created in corporate management and administration between 1981 and 1991 and projected a further 630,000 managerial posts by 2001. Mr Bridges now accepts that managers have proved resilient to downsizing.

So, what about his broader argument? How does it fit with figures published last week by the UK-based Federation of Recruitment and Employment Services? While the federation found a 16 per cent rise in temporary jobs year-on-year, it reported a 40 per cent increase in turnover of recruitment business for permanent jobs.

FRES says: "This growth continues the trend set in 1994, since when permanent recruitment sales have more than doubled. This goes against predictions made by employment commentators that employers would be cutting back on permanent staff, favouring workers on flexible or short-term contracts."

These findings suggest that Mr Bridges' portrait of changing employment patterns needs to be more closely scrutinised if projects such as Redefining Work are to have any influence on the government. It is important to know whether the trend can be considered a revolution, whether it is a slower evolutionary process, or indeed, if it exists at all.

One potentially influential group that has been attracted to Mr Bridges' work is the Chatham House Forum, a London-based think-tank of UK government officials and business executives who meet regularly to look at long-term scenarios for the industrialised world.

In its 1996 report it concurred with many of Mr Bridges' ideas, suggesting that "the competent citizen will need to be prepared to manage his or her life in much the same way as a manager of a small firm would handle an enterprise".**

But it went on to say: "Less than a fifth of society are in fact self-employed and exposed to this environment, but many people feel that they may be and are casting about for comfort with this. Few find it."

This suggests that even if people are in work they have come to believe that their jobs will not last. But what are they to do? Are they to jump ship leaving behind their final salary pensions, wondering how they will meet their next mortgage payment? Few who are not forced out of permanent employment are willing to take such risks. Does this mean they are in some way inadequate? They are told by Mr Bridges how to discover and apply their skills, how to sell themselves. But such approaches are repugnant to many able people.

The world of *You & Co* favours the bold and the ambitious. There may be, as he points out, a growth in agents representing certain types of employees. This has happened, for example, among software producers. There has also been a growth of agencies, particularly those servicing the temporary market. But until there is some concurrence between the futurologists and the concrete evidence of the market there is a danger that the wrong messages could be communicated to those who are entering employment.

**Creating You & Co, Be The Boss of Your Own Career by William Bridges , Nicholas Brealey Publishing, £12.99. ** Unsettled Times is published by The Chatham House Forum, £50.*