

March 1994

## Profile of an interim manager

How hard do you need to work at getting a job? Most people have heard of aspirants firing off scores of applications and of advertisements attracting hundreds of inquiries, even for quite lowly posts.

There is nothing unusual about the committed job seeker, but the trend towards more flexible workforces and slimmer companies is influencing individual approaches to employment.

Richard McKeown has gone one step further than chasing every vacancy, turning his skills as a chartered secretary into an aggressively marketed business service aimed at short-term employment opportunities. McKeown, 46, who lives in Uxbridge, west London, was made redundant in 1987 after the company he worked for moved to south Wales and he decided not to go with it.

He invested £7,000 with an outplacement agency which did not find him a job but which gave him valuable advice about interviews and how to write a CV.

Since 1988 he has had a series of temporary contracts in the company secretarial role and is now completing a short stint as a temporary assistant company secretary at Kingfisher.

McKeown's name is registered with three recruitment agencies but he has gone beyond being merely a hopeful job applicant. He spends £5,000 a year on marketing himself. This includes employing a public relations expert.

He produces a glossy brochure advertising his skills, experience, previous employers, selected references and the work he is capable of doing. He is, in his own words, 'the all singing, all dancing one-man band'.

McKeown may be the manager of the future; the sort of individual whom management philosopher Charles Handy, writes about in his new book, *The Empty Raincoat*.

Handy talks about a portfolio approach to life where you decide how much you want to work, how you want to work and where you want to work. Newly restructured organisations, he has observed, are moving increasingly towards the employment of fee-charging professionals.

A whole new employment industry has sprung up over the past 10-15 years to provide temporary - or 'interim' - managers.

Many do not see themselves as temporary workers in the long term but are prepared to fulfil such roles until a permanent post comes along. McKeown claims to have 'crossed the Rubicon' in this respect and now sees himself as a permanent temp.

He says he does not feel insecure, has never been despairing and is relaxed about his prospects. His experience as an itinerant employee is growing. His former clients include BTR, Lautro and Mercury Communications.

The use of temporary staff started in Silicon Valley in the US among start-up companies. They employed a core of essential staff on a permanent basis and made up the rest of their workforce with temporary contractors.

Now the strategy is spreading to individual managers.

McKeown argues that it can be good for professionals because they can command higher fees than they would get on a salaried basis. It can be good for the company because it is buying a short-term and often essential stop gap at a fixed price. The downside for the employer would seem to be cost and, to some extent, uncertainty about quality, although the temporary nature of the employment lessens the potential damage of recruiting a dud.

Jeff Grout, managing director of Robert Half, which has about 500 temporary accountants on its books, says: 'As companies have come out of the recession they are not rushing to recruit staff back on a permanent basis.'

'The traditional temp has changed dramatically. It used to be in low-level grades but there are now some very senior people doing it.'

Charles Russam, managing director of the GMS consultancy and secretary of the Association of Temporary and Interim Executive Services, says his company database lists 3,500 executives to supply companies that need senior business managers at director level or one level below.

He estimates the executive leasing or interim management sector is worth between £70m and £100m in the UK and that it is growing at about 20 per cent a year as it is increasingly viewed as a serious alternative to long-term employees. He says: 'Interim management is no longer being seen as the recycling of clapped out executives but as a credible option for business.'

'Businesses are saying to themselves why do I need to keep such people on my payroll when I can go into the market and get someone in to do a specific job.'

But how do you avoid getting a useless manager attempting to revive a washed-up career? Russam admits that such people have found their way on to agency books. His own company, he says, will no longer list anyone for whom it does not have three satisfactory references.

As registered employment agencies, such companies take their fees from employers. 'It means that we owe a duty of care to our clients so it is in our interests to ensure that the people we are supplying are of a good calibre,' says Russam.

Interest in temporary managers is growing, he says, among expanding small businesses which need hands-on management help, often on a part-time basis.

Use of the temporary professional has expanded markedly in the field of information technology. About 20,000 to 30,000 freelance employees are working in this area in the UK, with about 20 agencies marketing their services. The biggest operator, CSS-Comac, has about 1,100 people working. Tony Coombes, professional services director of Systems Resources of Coventry, which has about 500 contract staff working for employers such as IBM, says quality control is becoming increasingly important as customer companies are demanding good people and consistency from suppliers.

'Everyone we place is an ambassador of the company. If they don't do well, manufacturers will blame us,' he says.

The company has become rigorous with its contractors. All conversations with freelancers discussing their abilities are recorded afterwards and kept on file. 'It may appear big brotherish but it's not. It is really a way of making a quality selection against the requirement the client gives us,' Coombes says.

Contracts tend to be for three months. Employees do not have the holiday arrangements that their full-time colleagues enjoy but the trade-off in job security tends to be higher salaries. Computer operators in the £15,000 to £20,000 salary range may find themselves earning the equivalent of between £20,000 and £28,000 a week for the duration of the contract. Experienced programmers will be earning the equivalent of £30,000 to £45,000 a year compared with £20,000 to £30,000 in a full-time post.

Richard McKeown agrees that the fees commanded by temporary professionals are higher than full-time salaries. The fee, he says, has to account for personal overheads, self-provision of pensions, holidays and car. He also feels justified in including an additional element to reflect his availability at short notice.

One of the biggest problems for individuals, he argues, is adopting the frame of mind that accepts temporary contract working as the norm. To do this, he believes it is necessary to build up capital that can be used as a buffer for the times when demand is quiet.

He says: 'There is a vast pool of highly qualified people out there. They might have come to it through redundancy, but so what? I think I'm better at my job now than I was 10 years ago. It has been a positive experience.'

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