

## **The New Success**

By Stephanie MacKendrick

It seems to me that the definition of success has changed radically over the past decade or two.

At a recent gathering of colleagues, past and present, from the communications industry, I was struck by how many intelligent, experienced and strategic women and men in the room - successful people - were bemoaning the difficulty in finding full time work. These are former senior executives of significant organizations who find that there's lots of interesting piecemeal consulting work and opportunities with cash-strapped start-ups. However, the full time work doesn't seem to be there and they are having to adapt to a highly insecure existence.

And then there's the other group, the ones that have dropped out; being burnt out and fed up, not willing to play in the high-pressure, do-more-with-less sandbox anymore. This is the group that doesn't even want to look at corporate work and no amount of money would entice them back onto the hamster wheel. Many I spoke to were not even bothering to find contract work for significant periods of time.

Between the two groups it struck me that there was a heck of a lot of cumulative expertise sitting idle and I couldn't help wondering about the negative impact on Canada's productivity.

And that got me thinking about the definition of success.

There's a lot of talk about a new corporate structure, in which there is a "core" group of workers who stay with the company in key positions and then the "non-core" who comprise contract workers, part-timers and other "just in time" employees, essentially guns for hire, taking their knowledge and expertise wherever there is a paying contract. The core opportunities seem to be shrinking, especially for the over-40 crowd and the cobbling-together option seems to be growing. So, perhaps success can no longer be defined as having a full-time "core" job.

Perhaps then, executives are just a new version of the migrant farm worker of the dirty thirties, in a kind of post-modern, upscale Grapes of Wrath scenario. They go from company to company, city to city, country to country looking for work wherever they find it. Sometimes their families go with them, sometimes, they stay behind as the breadwinner goes off to seek better opportunities.

There's anecdotal information to support this theory. I have a friend who lives in Toronto, who is working out west, but who will likely end up working in Europe. Though still Torontonian, there is no appropriate work in the field and the migratory pattern is under way. Another friend lives in Toronto but works mostly in Florida on contracts, becoming a hybrid premature Snowbird/migrant worker. A woman I was speaking to the other night moved to Toronto from a western city to find work, which promptly dried up due to an industry downturn. She has now started applying to contract jobs all over North America in order to try to stay in her field.

These are not hyper-picky people who want the perfect job at a fabulous salary with all the perks. These are people who would like to have one, full-time job that pays reasonably well for their level of experience.

So, success today seems to be a much more relative term. Observations of my peer group would indicate that success is hanging on to a managerial position until your late forties or early fifties (forget retirement age of 65). If you're really lucky, you've used your steady salary and stock options to set yourself up for early retirement and can therefore afford a life of occasional contract work. If not, you will likely continue to work, with your career going in reverse direction – becoming less secure, possibly earning significantly less than you're used to, relocating to get work, working from contract to contract.

So if success is coping, what is the definition of success we aspire to in the future? I like to believe that the pendulum will swing back a bit, that eventually, investors will realize that they are strangling the goose that laid the golden egg by insisting on ludicrous results in ridiculously short time spans that puts untenable pressure on corporations. That will mean the ability to implement long-term plans that will include talent retention and presumably reasonable working conditions.

Oh, and by the way, despite the bloated pay packages of CEOs, it's not all roses. The life of today's CEO would seem, as Hobbes would say, "nasty, brutish and short," with an average tenure these days of a mere 18 months.