

Turning a Career Crisis Into an Opportunity

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By KIMBERLY PETERSON

In this age of long-term unemployment, many people are adjusting to the realities of the work force by starting their own businesses or retraining and changing careers completely.

Nigel Crossman is one such person who has turned unemployment into an opportunity. He spent 30 years working his way up the career ladder in the retail industry and was a manager on a team opening new stores when his company was restructured and he was made redundant.

His first thought wasn't to start his own business. "Immediately, you try to do the same sort of thing," Mr. Crossman says. But after a few weeks of searching, he realized it would be extremely difficult to find a job similar to the one he previously had without taking a significant pay cut.

"Since I didn't have a job, why do the same thing again? Why not take the opportunity to restart?" he says.

So, at the age of 46, using the redundancy payment from his former employer, Mr. Crossman enrolled in an electrical training course at a company called New Career Skills, a company that specializes in helping older workers retraining into new careers.

His company, Blue Lightning Electrical, has now been operating for four years and Mr. Crossman says many of the skills he acquired in the retail industry were highly relevant to his new business. When he made the decision to be an electrician, he says, he sat down and listed all the skills he had acquired in retail and considered how they could be used in his new career.

"It's amazing how many things can be adapted. Sales, marketing, it's exactly the same if you are employed or running your own business," Mr. Crossman says.

Most people spend so much time at work, their identities are often strongly linked with their careers, says Mr. Wines of New Career Skills, and people who have done one thing for a long time can have a hard time seeing themselves in a different field.

However, Mr. Wines says it is perfectly possible for people to move into completely new areas, irrespective of what they did previously. "We get lots of people from all walks of life, people working in finance in the City, airline pilots and bankers...people with military backgrounds," he says.