

Are you ready to go portfolio?

Giving up the rat race for the freedom of a freelance professional life might be a daydream, but does the reality live up to the fantasy? Jessie Hewitson asks three directors

Are you failing to realise your full potential at work? According to a Gallup survey, if you are employed by a large organisation, the answer is most likely to be yes. When Gallup asked big business employees to comment on the statement: "At work I have the opportunity to do what I do best everyday", only 20 per cent strongly agreed with it.

It's a finding quoted by directors and authors Colin McCrudden, Adrian Bourne and Christopher Lyons in their book, *You... Unlimited*, which also offers a potential solution for directors who feel trapped at the top—a portfolio approach to career management.

The "portfolio" approach was a term originally coined by author Charles Handy, who explains it in *The Age of Unreason* as "how different bits of work in our life fit together to form a balanced whole". According to McCrudden, Bourne and Lyons, portfolio professionals are individuals who undertake a range of different projects for different organisations or clients. Essentially they are self-employed, working on one project at a time or several simultaneously.

All three authors are now evangelical portfolio

Portfolio proponents:
Adrian Bourne (left),
Christopher Lyons
(centre) and Colin
McCrudden



How it all began

The term portfolio professional was coined by Charles Handy in the 1980s, and encouraged a generation of employees to rethink their relationship with their employers. After a career as an oil executive at Shell, Handy reached 50, decided it was time for a change, and began a distinguished career as an academic and social philosopher. He writes in *The Age of Unreason*: "I believe that from the age of 50 every man and woman will have to learn to manage their own life." With major changes in the workplace, companies are increasingly turning to PPs in the guise of part-time workers, interim managers, contractors and consultants.



Getting out of the Abbey habit

Yasmin Jetha was, up until the end of last year, an executive director at Abbey, responsible for IT, property, security and procurement, and was the first Asian female to be appointed executive director of a FTSE 100 firm.

Jetha decided to leave Abbey after 20 years (four

professionals (PPs), with broadly similar corporate backgrounds. Bourne worked at Nestlé for 23 years, the last decade at board level; Lyons had been with Abbey (formerly Abbey National) for 27 years, leaving as a senior executive; and McCrudden worked for over 20 years at food distribution company Cerns & Brown, leaving as managing director and chief executive. They took the PP route in the late nineties.

All three have in common a fierce planning instinct. Perhaps a result of working at a strategic level for big companies, they all began plotting for their "retirement" before the time came.

Having abandoned a regular income, McCrudden has not looked back. "As I became older, I became more aware of the passing of time and making the most of it," he says. "I still wanted to be challenged, but not in a controlled way. Working as a director meant I had to put up with not seeing my family, not getting any holidays."

So he left Cerns & Brown aged 52, and his current portfolio includes a non-executive directorship, consultancy work, a variety of strategic jobs for other clients and indulging his love of wine by visiting vineyards around the world.

When asked for whom he wrote the book, he replies: "The easy answer is for anyone who is 45-years-old and over. When mortgages are big and children are small, it is easy to be handcuffed into corporate life, but when the kids get less expensive and the mortgage is gradually paid off, it gives you more freedom to make decisions."

Bourne left Nestlé at 52, and learnt about PPs by reading Handy's book years before. "It was a philosophy of a sort of life I wanted beyond corporate work. I had always thought about a second career after full employment. I am a great believer in planning ahead," he says, with some understatement. "If you have a clear goal, you will get there. Project forwards to where you want to be and work backwards to see what the implications are. Work out where you want to be in 10 years, then where you want to be in three years, then in one year. Calculate where you are going to, not what you are doing now." But he warns: "A lot of

people repeat what they were doing before, just a few days less each week."

Lyons, who worked while at Abbey with employees on the brink of retirement, agrees: "I had seen people struggling with moving from one environment to another. What struck me was none of it seemed to be planned. The danger is people try and replicate what they have done before, but actually I find working in different environments with different people hugely stimulating as opposed to doing the same thing, day in day out." Having done a masters degree in Strategic Finance at Kingston Business School while at Abbey, Lyons planned his portfolio and his exit from the world of banking aged 49 (he is now 53). His portfolio includes two non-executive directorships with a new housing association called London Strategic Housing,

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and Maritime and Underwater Security Consultants; consultancy projects; paid advisory work to an eastern European bank looking to establish itself in London; and working for Beer Mergers Ltd, a company dealing with the mergers and acquisitions of small to medium-sized companies (from £250,000 to £15m in value). His non-paying part includes being on the board of a school. Lyons, who thrives on learning new skills and who comes across as the workaholic among the bunch, admits he has not "tackled the leisure side" and when asked if he plans to work until he drops, he says he hopes to scale things down as he gets older.

Bourne was 51 when he left Nestlé six years ago. His portfolio includes working as an executive coach and director with business coaching company The Success

Group, guest lecturer in sales, marketing and management change at Cranfield University, and charity work with Business Action on Homelessness.

Bourne neatly sums up the highs and lows of a portfolio existence with two words: freedom and paranoia. The freedom part is the chance to work with whoever you like, do what you really enjoy and not worry about time. The paranoia part comes into play on days where the phone isn't ringing, your inbox is empty and no meetings are scheduled. "Working on your own means if things go wrong, you have nobody to blame but yourself," he says. "It is easy to think yourself into despair and financial ruin."

For Lyons, the premium of freedom is being pestered by clients, and then being able to judge when to say no to them. McCrudden points to the first upside of life as a PP being the first cheque that lands on your doormat. "It is a moment that you treasure, and carries you through the more difficult times," he says. He adds that his life does seem more balanced now, although it is hard work.

Of course many people are PPs without realising it, and according to *You... Unlimited* they are the fastest growing group in the UK economy. This is backed up by government statistics reporting that numbers in self-employment have risen by 25 per cent since 2000. Betty Thayer, founder and CEO of executive job site exec-appointments.com, started her site with PPs in mind. "When we set up the business three years ago I met Charles Handy, as I believed many people were going to move into the portfolio movement," she recalls. "Our original strapline was 'portfolio career and business in society'. There are lots of people in their 40s who have decided to take on a variety of challenges, rather than be in a full-time job. Our site offers interim, contract, non-executive, self-employed and part-time roles and we find there is a great demand from companies for these roles."

Fiona Price, founder and managing director of financial advisers Fiona Price & Partners until she sold up last year, also believes companies need more PPs: "The demand comes from the pressure on companies to keep costs as low as possible, and to keep flexibility

of employees high," she says. "This is managed by bringing in workers on a short-term basis, with portfolio professionals having expertise for a variety of jobs. There is also pressure exerted by PPs themselves, with highly qualified consultants preferring to work for a variety of employers—businesses have to fit in with that."

So is portfolio living for everybody? A unanimous 'no' according to Bourne, Lyons and McCrudden. "I would be nervous about advising someone to go for it who needs continual stimulation from people," says Lyons. "If you are uncomfortable being out of the herd, then portfolio life is probably not for you." To be a successful PP, you have to "display some willingness to take a risk, be open to change, and be able to handle variable income". The life of a PP is probably more uncertain, and less routine, which can be a disadvantage—or an advantage, depending on how you look at it.

What if you are a terrible networker, or are incapable of selling yourself? "Anyone can sell," states McCrudden. "People have to overcome their fear of rejection and get over it. Even the best sales people don't wake up thinking 'oh great, another day selling'. The thrill that comes from a success is a great buzz."

When it comes to money, most PPs aim to earn roughly the same amount as when they were in full-time employment, according to the book. The three authors also point out the need to factor in the extra time with the family and other costs that disappear when you hang up your pin-stripe suit.

All three of these ardent supporters of the PP lifestyle appear to want to convey more than just an understanding of portfolio living—they are on a mission to convert. A cynic might say their intentions are simply to sell more books, but their zeal to improve people's working and home lives, by grasping the potential of flexible living, is quite palpable.

Describing his new-found freedom, Bourne says: "Portfolio professionals realise there is weather out there! You are no longer going to work in the dark, spending the day in an artificially lit office and returning home in the dark. Your time is your own." ■

Ten tips for budding portfolio professionals

1 Take good advice—read up on the subject, consider attending coaching lessons

2 Plan ahead—don't jump the gun and think things through

3 Identify your unique talents—not just the ones you currently use

4 Define where you are now, your past successes, your guiding values

5 Assess where you want to be—what really matters in all parts of your life

6 Plan your portfolio roles based on what you want from the rest of your life

7 Be realistic and examine your finances carefully

8 Involve your family and those close to you in your decision

9 Develop your network—it will be crucial to your success

10 Make the jump when it suits you, not your employer