

Could this be you?

Margaret Beaton 20 May 2012

After a lifetime in the firm, Simon's career as a partner was over. He was not yet 60, and the firm didn't need him any more. The inexorable forces of de-equitising had arrived in one short, traumatic meeting with two of his colleagues, the bearers of the decision by the management committee. It wasn't personal. And it certainly wasn't anything to do with his competence and dedication. It was, well... "just the way things are in the firm we can't justify your position or points any more". He should have seen it coming. The signs were all too obvious. But he was not ready to go. He still felt energised, competent and able to add value to clients and the firm. Questions raced through his head. Could he afford not to work? How would he explain it to his wife and family? What would he do with the rest of his life? He had no particular interests or hobbies. His life was the firm—his firm after all. In the days that followed Simon experienced the gamut emotions ranging from of disbelief ('why me?'), resistance ('they can't do this!') and anger ('after all I have contributed').

In the lead-up to departure day and the ceremonial 'farewells' he kept busy, completing work, tidying, handing over. But soon after he'd left his office, his files and clients and friends behind, Simon began to feel disoriented. Sitting at home, having leisurely breakfasts, time for gardening and space for himself held little meaning. He felt isolated, directionless, and helpless. With external demands, routines and implicit rules removed Simon was lost, almost disabled. To make matters worse his wife found his moping and presence in the house irritating. She had a life of her own. Going to a Friday lunch at the office made things worse; he didn't belong there anymore, he wasn't important, he was disconnected from the daily realities of the work and environment. His 'friends' and colleagues had moved on. No one seemed to care. It hurt.

All too frequently I work with 'Simons'—partners in professional service firms and senior company executives—who are anything but prepared for life after the firm. They speak of lonely, empty days, searching for explanations and asking themselves why the transition is so painful and different from others they have negotiated. They wonder what has happened to their sense of identity and self-worth. These are people who have not invested time in themselves and done the work of preparing for the next stage of their lives. Many are in unrecognised denial that the day of the 'knock on the door' would ever come. Others neglect to plan because they have no idea how or where to begin. Some are afraid to be seen to be vulnerable, to ask for help.

What's to be done? First, recognise that it's never too early to start preparing. I know this is more easily said than done. It requires introspection, reflection and prospection—activities that many professional people find hard to do, let alone master. The alternative is too distressing to contemplate. Talk with your closest friends, seek out those who have made it through the depths of this despair, network, and take skilled advice. Do not be passive. Seek help from those who understand the challenges and travails and who have the skill to help you examine yourself, assess your options and choose a direction that will provide meaning and happiness for you. This is a call to action.

The longer you leave it the fewer options you have!

This post was written by Dr [Margaret Beaton](#), a director of [Beaton Executive Coaching](#) and [Beaton Research + Consulting](#). You can also find Margaret on [LinkedIn](#).