

Horses for courses

Jurie Wessels has met all sorts of actuaries. Most of them are of sound mind and have reasonable eating habits.

IT COULD HAPPEN ANY TIME of any day or night. It typically happens just as you wipe the milk from your cereal off your upper lip. Just then, for a moment you freeze as the realisation strikes you: your life, as you live it now, lacks meaning. Of course one is happy and still in love with one's spouse or significant

other or significant others (there is no accounting for some people's luck and/or recklessness). The lack of meaning is a professional crisis.

In the commute to work the first morning of the crisis, you turn the radio off because nowadays all the songs on the chart sound the same and are too noisy. And then you think: oh my god, is that me? Before you know it, you spend an evening paging through an old

high school yearbook and sighing a lot. This might be preceded by a little more single malt than is strictly advisable on health grounds.

And being an analytical type, one asks oneself the profound question at work: is this what I really want to do for the rest of my life? And being an adventurous type, one realises that one should have become a football manager, male strip-dancer, female bull-fighter or at least a professional cross-dresser. In many cases, the best prescription is to buy that electric guitar or Austin Healy Frogeye Sprite that you desired as a teenager. In many other cases, the crisis is best dealt with through a change of career. This, of course, is quite a dramatic decision for somebody who feels that he or she has sacrificed the best years of youth to become an actuary. It is quite a considerable investment to walk away from.

The thing is, you'll never walk away from that background. There are thousands of employers who would

love your skills set and thousands of business opportunities you can exploit. The good news is that there is an increasing receptiveness in the business world for the skills and attributes actuaries bring to a business. In other words, your training has not been inappropriate for a world outside life insurance and pensions.

There is a certain lack of certainty in the profession that actuaries can with ease hold down a whole range of managerial positions in business. There appears to be a belief among actuaries that they are too detail-minded for the wider business world.

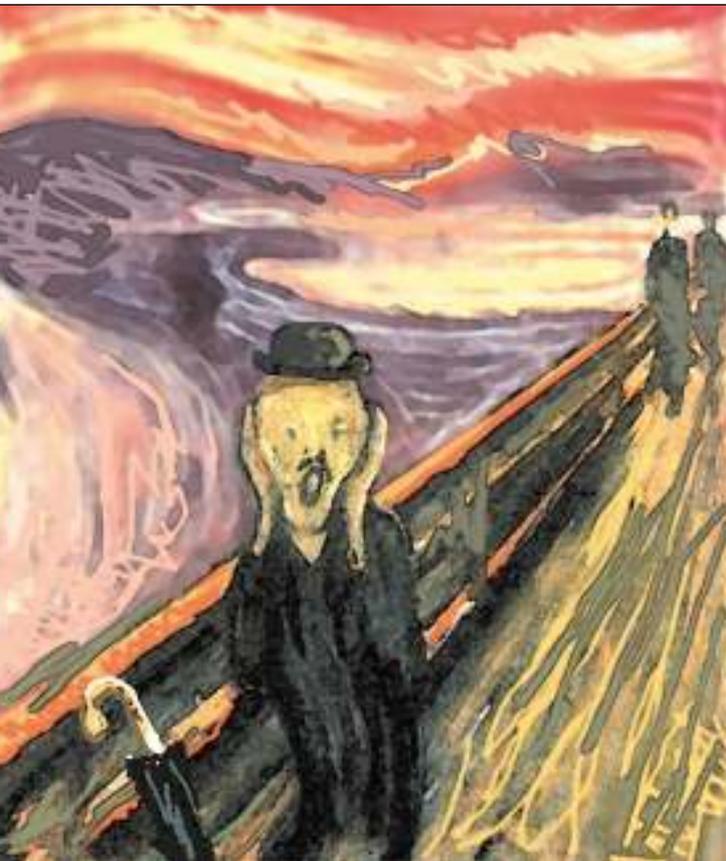
Business leaders typically come from a background of accounting or engineering. Both those professions pride themselves on training people for jobs that require attention to detail and exactness. Yet engineers do not fear that their detail-mindedness will inhibit them when they are promoted into business responsibilities way beyond the calculation of average stress tolerances. The engineer knows that once he's boss, he need not understand the detail of everything, everybody below him does that. In fact, it is often preferable not to have that ability. The manager is thereby forced to delegate and to concentrate on the more strategic business issues he was in the first place employed to do.

What most employers look for in a senior manager is general business experience and much common sense (reliability and honesty, are also good but not always a prerequisite). And if the appointed specialists below the manager are disappointing in the way they look after the finer points, the manager can de-appoint them. Like this: 'You are fired.' Quite easy, really, once you get the hang of it.

It would be wrong to try and list a number of particular positions for which actuaries would be suitable. It would once again be too restricting. It would be another list of things actuaries can do, with the implication that actuaries are not quite suitable for positions outside that list.

Of course, some actuaries are wholly unsuitable for some positions, and others for other positions. But for most senior positions in business it is a question of appropriateness of personality, not appropriateness of qualification. And in my time I have met all sorts of people who are actuaries. Most of them are of sound mind and have reasonable eating habits.

It is simply a matter of finding a position that resolves your particular despair, in that moment of career crisis. And there is a whole industry of people out there who have nothing else to do, but to find you the lead guitar position in a punk band that knows exactly the same three chords you do. □



Jurie Wessels runs the South African office of Acumen Resources; his previous experience includes asset management and managing the Life Offices' Association of South Africa, the life insurance industry's trade association