Executive EDGE

BREAKING OUT OF JOB LETHARGY

The economy's up. Unemployment's down. Times could not be better for managerial and professional employees, who have a jobless rate that is consistently less than half that of the rest of the country, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Although job options abound, many managers remain firmly entrenched in the positions they have held for years, convinced they are stuck with no options. The reasons for this malaise are rooted in two common human frailties: laziness and fear.

Some managers simply don't know how to look for another job. Others know, but fear of rejection paralyzes them. Others believe they can land a job but worry the new position might turn out to be worse than their current post. The last group craves change but isn't sure where else they could fit.

Job seekers need to break down the job search into manageable steps, career coun-selor Michelle Tullier says. Some of the basics include networking with friends, colleagues, and alumni; becoming active in professional organizations; developing working relationships with at least three headhunters; and calling on a friend or career coach to help with deadlines.

"Storylining" can help persons who want to change not only their jobs but also their careers. Described in Richard Bolles's *What Color Is Your Parachute*, the process helps participants develop a motivational profile, revealing their deepest aspirations. People often learn that their current jobs, which they currently dislike, nearly match the profile but lack a key element. By talking to their bosses or human resources representatives, they can make their jobs almost ideal with a few adjustments.

Some managers tend to hold on to awful jobs, reasoning that job security outweighs the uncertainty of a new position, which could end in termination. Baila Zeitz, a psychologist specializing in employment issues, says it is worth the risk because even people who have entered the job market involuntarily "will tell you two years later, more often than not, that it was the best thing that ever happened to them." Even if the second job is a dud, it is likely to lead to a third.
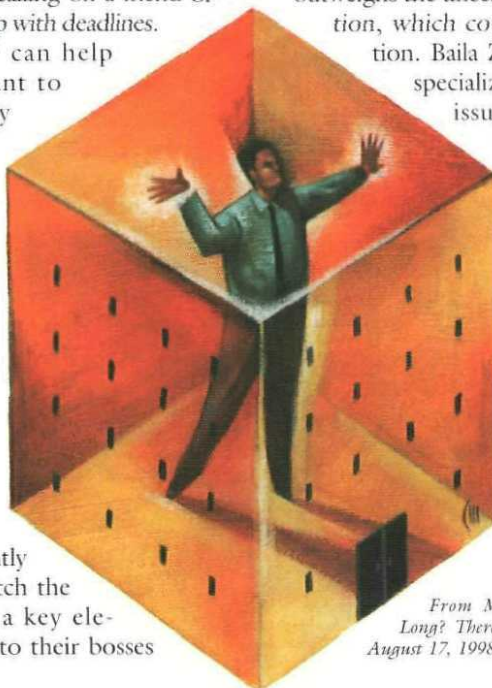
From Matt Siegel, "Stayed Too Long? There's a Way Out," Fortune, August 17, 1998, pp. 217-218.

A "FLIGHT SIMULATOR" FOR MANAGERS?

A cybernetic research team may soon unveil a genuinely revolutionary management tool. The team—employed by PricewaterhouseCoopers, a New York City–based consulting firm—is experimenting with software that, if successful, will enable managers to test their decisions in a virtual world before trying them in the real one.

The software stars "adaptive agents," clumsy, blocklike figures that have been programmed with such human characteristics as age, gender, consumer habits, and even credit records. Released in virtual stores and offices, the agents interact with their environment and with each other. From watching their behavior, managers will be able to predict what people would do in the same situation.

The software is derived from "complexity" science, the idea that complicated behavior is caused by the interaction of multiple forces. Long familiar to statisticians and economists, the notion was too abstract for most business leaders to follow. The research team hopes to get around that problem by bringing the theory to life on a computer screen.

The team is led by K. Winslow Farrell Jr., a former jet propulsion scientist, who describes the software as a "flight simulator" for management. Once work on the new technology is completed, Farrell's bosses expect it to bring in millions of dollars in consulting fees.

Such is the plan, anyway. An entertainment company hired the team to produce software in which 40,000 adaptive agents would, through their interactions, help the company market and distribute a movie. Unfortunately, the team forgot to program the agents to distinguish between work and leisure time—and most of them dropped everything else to rush out and see the film.

The entertainment company was undaunted, however, and it encouraged the team to develop more sophisticated models. According to Farrell, the latest model is already in operation and is forecasting movie box-office receipts with 30 percent more accuracy than traditional methods can provide.

From John A. Byrne, "Virtual Management," Business Week, September 21, 1998, pp. 80-82.