

Up, up and away – or out to pasture?

As the country's media continues to speculate about the future of the outgoing chief executive of UK plc, those leading the country's membership associations may be turning their thoughts to what lies ahead for them. Most of those who work for them have fairly clearly defined career paths, but, when you have reached the top of the tree where can you go next? Alex Blyth reports

Running a trade association or professional institute is a job unlike any other, and it can be difficult for those in the role to see where to go next. Indeed, this can even deter some well-qualified people taking on these roles in the first place. Yet, it need not be the case. There are many examples of chief executives of membership organisations who have gone on from those positions to find interesting and rewarding roles. Those currently wondering what the future holds for them can learn a great deal from their experiences.

Joining the dark side

Like Tony Blair, John D'Arcy acceded to the top job in 1997. He had been at the National Pharmacy Association since 1991, and when the incumbent chief executive passed away tragically and prematurely D'Arcy was catapulted into the top job at the tender age of 39. After a decade of running the organisation, he felt he had achieved a great deal. He enjoyed the job and says that he could happily have stayed for another decade.

The parallels with the Prime Minister end there. D'Arcy wasn't forced out by an ambitious neighbour. He simply decided that it was better to move on before he reached the milestone of 50. Once he had made that decision he was rapidly able to eliminate some options that tend to be popular among outgoing chief executives.

He recalls: "I decided against going into business on my own. I'd thought a lot in my earlier career about setting up my own pharmacy, but it never happened. I decided that if I'd really wanted to do it, I'd have done it by now. So

that option was out.

Equally, the isolation and insecurity of consultancy didn't really appeal to me. I like being able to see things through to a conclusion, and you rarely get to do that as a consultant."

He continues: "The idea of moving to another association

didn't really excite me either. Maybe if I'd been at a smaller association I would have wanted to move to a larger one, but there aren't many bigger than the NPA. Also, I don't really get excited by lobbying, which is what many association chief executives spend their time doing. At the NPA it was all about member services, and I couldn't really see myself making the shift to hobnobbing with ministers."

So, once he had eliminated all of those options, the way forward was obvious to D'Arcy: like many other association chief executives, he was going to work for one of the association's members. In May 2007 he started his new role as retail commercial director at the pharmacy chain, Rowlands.

Alternative routes

There are then plenty of options for outgoing association chief executives. After many years leading the Confederation of British Industry, Digby Jones now operates as a highly successful business consultant. Rebecca Clake, advisor at the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development, outlines some other options: "An increasingly popular route for former association chief executives is coaching those who are new to the role. Others focus on charity work or take up non-executive directorships."

Very often, running a membership association is a prelude to retirement. Depending on the nature of the association's work, the ideal leader can be someone who may not be thrusting and dynamic, but who does have vast experience of the industry and is well-respected within it. After a long career with top management positions at Midland Bank, P&O Asia, and UBS Private Banking, Ian Cullen joined the British Bankers Association as chief executive on 1st April



2001. Six years later, on 1st April 2007, he retired.

His successor, however, came from another trade association. Prior to taking over at the BBA, Angela Knight spent eight years at the helm of the Association of Private Client Investment Managers and Stockbrokers. Similarly, when Sir George Cox moved on from his role as director-general of the Institute of Directors in 2004, he became chairman of the Design Council.

His successor at the IoD, Miles Templeton, believes that where an association chief executive goes next is largely determined by where he or she came from. He says: "If a chief executive came from business, the chances are that they'll go back into it. If they have had a career in membership associations then it's likely they'll move on to a new one. I came into this role from business, so eventually expect to move back into it."

Cicely Brown agrees. She was the deputy chief executive of the British Printing Industries Federation until March 2007 when she became the business development director at print firm Williams Lea. She says: "I've been successful in my career because print is in my veins. I don't think I could have gone on to run another trade association, as I wouldn't have been so passionate about the industry."

Preparing the ground

Whichever route you choose, it is important to prepare for it. To a large extent you will need to do this yourself. Nick Aldridge, director of strategy at the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations, says: "There isn't a lot of support available for outgoing chief executives. This will become more obvious over the next decade as more and more people retire from these roles but still want to remain in work. We plan to develop services to help them do this."

Eugene Tansey, managing director of recruitment consultancy Sintura, offers this advice: "You should start the process of searching for a new opportunity at least six months before you plan to move on. Start thinking about where you want to go next. Consider what motivates you. Assess your skills and think about where they could be most usefully applied. It is so important to get this right that you might even want to bring in some professional career management consultants to help."

He continues: "About two-thirds of new positions are never advertised, and this is especially true for senior positions, so it is absolutely vital that you network. Cultivate relationships with a selected number of search consultants who are close to the industry or sector in which you have expertise. Also, use your own network of contacts."

Richard Alberg, senior vice president of human resources consultancy Kenexa, adds this note of caution:

"Running a trade association can be very political. You make as many enemies as friends. If you want to remain in the same industry you should pay extra attention to the state of your relationships with industry colleagues."

Rise to the challenge

Wherever a chief executive of a membership body goes next, it will be a challenge. Be it retirement, consultancy, commerce, or even another association, it will be different. For D'Arcy, settling in at Rowlands Pharmacy, the most notable difference has been the emphasis on the bottom line. He says: "At the NPA we were about

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generating revenue, but always to further the mission of the organisation. Here, in business, our sole purpose is to make money. This can take some getting used to."

However, he concludes by urging association chief executives to look ahead without fear: "When the time comes to move on don't keep finding reasons to stick around. Instead look around at all your options, be confident in the skills you've acquired, and see this next stage in your career as an exciting challenge."

Case Study: Bev Burgess



The IT Services Marketing Association was set up by leading IT companies in the US as a way to share best practice and marketing insight. In 2003 it hired Bev Burgess as the European managing director. She spent three years working with 40 of the world's largest IT companies, and found it enjoyable and stimulating. However, by 2006, she decided the time had come to move on. "I had done everything I wanted to," she recalls. "The Association needed to change and I needed a new challenge."

During her three years she had built up a considerable network of contacts in the industry. She says: "One of the best aspects of running a trade association is the phenomenal network you can develop. I was engaged in counselling-type conversations with key people in the industry, so was trusted by many of them. I also got to see inside many of those companies, so had a very clear idea of which was the right one for me."

Burgess was soon inundated with offers, including studying for a Doctorate at Cranfield College. Initially she was averse to the idea of working for a corporate, and was seriously considering going freelance. However, when she received an offer for the marketing director position at Fujitsu she knew it was right for her. She says: "I'd always worked well with the team there, so knew I'd fit in well."

Having been in the role now for several months she has become acclimatised to the differences between running a membership association and working in a multinational. She says: "At ITSMA I was more or less my own boss. Here I have two bosses, so my freedom is more restricted. However, I can now see initiatives through to a conclusion, which I really enjoy. I knew I could run a small business; now I know I can succeed in a large one."