

Job serendipity: Give luck a chance (Job Searching) - Globe and Mail

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New opportunities often arise out of happenstance encounters -- but you have to be open to where they can lead, KEVIN MARRON writes

When Tracey Fellowes decided to run a marathon, she had no idea she'd also be running into a chance meeting that would take her career in a whole new direction.

In 1995, Ms. Fellowes was a 37-year-old single mother, earning a modest income as an executive for a cash-strapped, non-profit organization, when she struck up a friendship with another woman in her marathon training group -- a Xerox Canada Inc. executive who urged her to apply for a sales job with her company.

Ms. Fellowes decided to take her friend up on the risky suggestion of changing careers, went to Xerox's sales school and began to work for the company on commission.

That marked the beginning of a new career path that led her to senior sales positions at Oracle, EDS Canada Inc. and the former AT&T Canada.

Now a senior sales manager in Calgary for Allstream, a unit of Manitoba Telecom Services Inc., Ms. Fellowes looks back on the chance encounter that first opened the door to a successful new career and wonders: Was it luck that got her to where she is today? Or was it just an ability to see an opportunity and run with it?

It is a question many successful people ask themselves as they think about the role chance encounters have played in determining the course of their careers.

And that role factors in more frequently than you might think. Countless people have stumbled on new career opportunities from striking up a conversation with a plane seat mate, chatting with a stranger in a movie lineup or turning to the topic of work at a party.

Constance Stevens, a career counsellor in Davis, Calif., has coined a name for such encounters. She calls it "career serendipity" and maintains it involves more than just a happy accident.

People tend to stumble onto new career opportunities, she says, when they do something different that takes them outside their normal routine and comfort zone.

But then they have to be receptive to opportunities that present themselves, she adds.

As Vancouver career coach Marlene Hayley puts it: "People have to make themselves available for luck to show up."

You have to be willing to tell people that you are interested in a career opportunity. You also need to be clear about what you want and able to describe your skills. Otherwise, people will not know how to help you, says Ms. Hayley, the owner of Find Work You Love Inc.

Many people find out about opportunities through chance encounters and casual conversations for the simple reason that many jobs are never posted, says career consultant Tim Cork, president of Toronto-based NexCareer. So it is a way to tap into the huge hidden job market.

Chance encounters lead to career breaks, he says, "when preparation meets opportunity."

Ted Clarke turned a chance encounter into an opportunity to land a new job soon after he was laid off from a senior human resources management position with a manufacturing company in Kingston, Ont., in 1985.

Mr. Clarke recalls how he fell into a conversation with the newspaper vendor from whom he routinely bought a paper.

When the vendor observed that he was picking it up earlier than usual, Mr. Clarke explained that he'd just been laid off.

The vendor then told him that he'd just been talking to another customer who had also been laid off from an HR position but had received two new job offers -- one of which he would reject.

From the news vendor's description, Mr. Clarke was able to identify the other man as a former colleague. He contacted the man, found out about the job he was rejecting and then called the company with that opening.

He got the position -- a human resource manager at a medical supply company -- that his colleague had turned down.

Mr. Clarke, who now runs his own human resources consulting business, J. Edward Clarke & Associates in Peterborough, Ont., advises job seekers to tell everyone and anyone that they are looking for work, since you

never know where you might find that crucial lead.

"Personally, I wouldn't hesitate to tell my barber," he says. "You never know who will be sitting in the barber's chair after you or who was there before you."

Some people seem to be luckier than others in their careers, as in love or other human endeavours, according to Richard Wiseman, a professor of psychology at the University of Hertfordshire in Britain and the author of *The Luck Factor*.

He says people who believe themselves to be lucky make their own luck by having a positive attitude and taking more chances.

Luck is what you make of it, adds David Friendly, a senior oil company executive who got his start in the industry in the early 1970s, while a student working part-time at a Toronto service station.

He offered a ride to a customer whose car was being repaired and got into a conversation about his graduate work in environmental studies.

The customer turned out to be the chairman of Gulf Canada Ltd. A few months later, he offered Mr. Friendly a job with Gulf's fledgling environmental department.

It was the beginning of a long and successful career with Gulf Canada and then Petro-Canada, which acquired parts of Gulf Canada in 1985.

All kinds of career opportunities involve an element of luck, says Mr. Friendly, now senior adviser for total loss management at Calgary-based Petro-Canada.

"Is it any different from sending a bunch of résumés out and getting lucky enough that one of them gets read by the right person?" he asks.

Ms. Fellowes observes that many people in her profession stumbled onto their career path by chance.

"No one went to university and said, 'Gee, I'd like to be in sales,' " she says.

And now that she is in a position to hire sales staff for her team, Ms. Fellowes says she is constantly on the lookout for the right qualities in people she happens to meet -- such as the ability to see an opportunity where others would see a risk, and to listen to other people.

"You cannot assess those qualities from a résumé," she adds.

So if you're open to the possibility of a new career in sales, it wouldn't hurt to bump into Ms. Fellowes running along the trails by Calgary's Bow River.

"I might just try to recruit you," she says.

Make your own luck

Here are tips culled from experts on how to make your own luck out of chance encounters:
Know what you are looking for so you will recognize an opportunity when you see it.

Engage in all kinds of activities -- sports, arts, volunteer work, whatever your interests -- because you don't have chance meetings sitting at home.

Tell everyone you know you are looking for work or interested in a career change. You never know who or what they may know.

Explain clearly your skills and what you're looking for to give other people a chance to make connections for you.

Believe in your own luck and take risks. You can't win the job lottery if you never buy a ticket.

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