

I'm laid off! Paid off! Isn't it grand?

I am busy at something I detest so much the business of performance assessment. This time it's not to do with a coterie of sub-managers, field assistants in the sales area and so on but myself. After 15 years of a solid career filled with excellence I want so much to lay off. Yet, each year I have set my sights higher and higher. I have always expected to do better than my rivals and, more importantly, than my friends. And when I haven't, I have been disappointed with myself.



Why fold up now? Has all the *élan* stoking up the blood of youthful professionals in the corporate corridors lost its impetus, to be replaced by distant visions of lazing around at home, landscaping the garden, listening to the mindless drone of the television on a long lazy Sunday utterly uninterrupted by even one stupid telephone call from the guys at office, getting useful insights into the culinary art or better still getting away on holiday, trout fishing at the World's End or golfing in the salubriously cool climes of Nuwara Eliya? All this is well and good and certainly within reach of devoted, hard-working company executives like me at the top rung of the ladder. But have I reached my goal?

I am ambitious, you know, and the fighting spirit has paid off as anyone without the slightest feeling of envy can see. I think I have improved personal operating performance on a pretty consistent basis and my bosses appreciate this. Still, there is the deep nagging voice within, which tells me that I can go to seed if I try to go beyond where I am now. Wouldn't it be a grand idea to get paid off to go away? It recently happened to my good pal John Arachchi who reached the pinnacle of his achievement in corporate life. After a business career which involved building his company into a tower of power, his career in the City Lights is over. He has been

paid to go away. Even after a career filled with excellence, not many make it to this pitch.

Paid to go away! The mind boggles at the idea. Think of it! You have a few lakhs or millions of rupees in the bank and your future. is nothing but safe, because it belongs to nobody else but you.



When the phone rings you don't have to answer. You don't have to return your calls. No faxes. No aggravation, as long as you don't read the newspapers. You are not in. You are not out. You have gone away and you have been paid to get there.

Before you try this out - remember it's me I am talking about - there are a few things one's got to think pretty hard about. If you're not crucial in some way you won't actually be paid to go away. You'll simply be told to go away, and there's the big difference. To be paid to go away, one must convey the message that in some sense, however you look at it, you deserve to be in and yet deserve to be out too. How does one work that conundrum out, or in?

That's where I am today, trying to create the magic aura. I have to confide in you, it's really daunting. How many of us are truly crucial and essential to the point where anybody and everybody from bosses down to your colleagues and staffers would feel awful if you left? I'm not there yet, I admit that. No matter how well I do

the job, if I were forced to leave at this point, I'm not convinced that there would be pressing requests from the top asking me to reconsider my decision, calls from my coworkers, however hypocritical, imploring me to stay on, telling me that they would be lost without my wizardry. Or find my sentimental secretary simpering with a pretty little handkerchief to dab her tears with. You can, in such circumstances, get to be rather melancholic even to the point of changing your mind.

Just think what a long road I have had to take getting to where I am. At twenty, with a flashy degree in Business Management I was jobless, because at that time in Sri Lanka chaps like me were not needed. I went into being a receptionist at a hotel, where I was put on a salary not worth mentioning. The only extra emolument I ever received during my brief career there was a tip of two rupees from a tourist who expressed his utter gratitude in this way when I returned the umbrella he had mislaid. It did not take me too long to realise that this was just not the upside for me. I went into journalism, launched myself abroad to the Middle East to find my feet in this profession while my country was still finding its feet moving into big business and a booming private sector economy. When I came back on one of my fully paid holidays on free travel, I was amazed to see that everything had changed. I knew that now I was wanted. That was 15 years ago. I was light-years away from being paid to go away, I didn't even recognize the concept then. Ah youth!

I got at long last to where I am now. I landed my job with the corporation for which I now labour. The next important step was a title with business cards attached to it. I was a Senior Editor abroad but got no cards to show for it. Here I was Associate. What's that? It's something. But as you move forward you want to add something more as often as you can. One day when the time was right, when I was able to siphon off enough cash out of my bank to buy some shares in the corporation, I decided to ask to be made Senior Associate. Granted! Okay, nobody knew what I was, but nobody knew what a Senior Executive Vice-President was either, and he was my boss. Titles and gold desk signs that have your name on them may seem a little pompous, I know, but they work at establishing a sense of place and identity, too. So I got some of these.

The point is to get into a position where a very little bit of work - one decision, one brief memo, one order in a booming voice to someone in a lower position can generate terrific value or at least a perception of it. When I realized that I was finally making more decisions than paper, I knew I was getting to the point where someone would be willing to pay me to go away.

Those were leisured times. I sat behind a capacious desk in a row with other ambitious marketing and sub-managers who hoped to carve out career niches for themselves. In time I got my first door – but that was only a cubicle through which anybody could have access. Anybody who doesn't have a door, behind which he can take a nap will never be paid to go away. So I got one in another part of the 3-storeyed building and an office around me to boot. A life of doing nothing for a great deal of something seemed yet a far away goal, as distant as ever from the kind of dream that I was cuddling now.



Indeed, I was moving forward in steady stages. I had entered the great valley of enterprise where one is expected to produce big work and have a reputation for big brains. All those who are eventually paid to go have been there. The drill is to work very hard for a long time and build the feeling that one is absolutely essential. To be paid to go away is an admirable goal and for everyone to get there I figure you have to work ten hours a day, 18 days a week and 600 days a year – that is the equivalent to the work hours of the lesser mortals who drudge into, dotage and an early grave. I have to live, eat and breathe business. Only then will I be eligible to be paid to go away. Is it worth it? I don't know. But that's what I am doing. Sometimes you have to get your head down and charge at the wall, if that's what it takes to get

the job done.

What I am not looking forward to is the finale, the very last step to my admirable or abominable scheme depending on which way you look at it. Right before they'll pay you to go away, you must grow ripe and then rot. This isn't an easy step to take for one who has been a superachiever all his life, but you can't expect to collect the big bucks that will open you to another life without it.

Now, can I let you in on a secret, that is, if you are planning to do what I am on the verge of doing. Your organisation, if it's anything like mine, can do the work for you, especially these days. Many people who have been paid to go away simply remain the same during a period of profound change and redirection. As the company explodes around them with smart machines and faster youthful brains teeming with ideas and suggestions to drive the corporation forward even faster, these old stagers stay calm. "What's he so calm about?", some ask. 'He doesn't get it', the smart alecs respond. Or perhaps your entrepreneurial culture is settling down after it's first decade of growth and becoming a nice, burbly bureaucracy. That's not your fault. You just go on doing your job, same as always, showing only what should seem like some abstruse, distant concern at the manner in which the business operations are moving to higher planes. Now you are out of touch with the new thing but you put on a front that appears like nothing less than philosophic. But people who are out of touch with the new thing must often go away.

The smart ones get paid to go away. And then what? The day comes. I see it now that I am paid to go away. The *shekels* are stashed up in the bank. I have what I have strived for all these years. And... It's weird. On one hand it hurts. And on the other it's just recompense for what I have missed out on for so long-the laughter of our little children, the old school get-togethers, the impromptu eve-ning sessions at homes or in clubs with friends of yesteryear, model airplanes never built, lullabies never sung and anniversary dinners never attended. What is the value of a business life? Do we count it by a few lakhs? A few millions? More or less? Why succumb to fear of success at this late date? I'm away! I have been paid to get there! Isn't life grand?

Imagine me anywhere but at the office in the hub of the city, fretting my life out to smithereens. I am laid off, paid off. Take it from me it's worth it!