

# Broom sweeps executive job market

THE early 1990s were not the best of times to be setting up as an independent recruitment and human resources consultant, Meridian Search and Selection MD John Broom freely admits. The recession was biting hard, and Broom observes ruefully that "companies were 'delaying', to use an awful jargon word".

However, despite the inauspicious timing of the decision, Broom set up Meridian in July 1994 and, five years on, the company is prospering, celebrating its anniversary with the appointment of former Faber personnel manager Fran Ryba to expand the company's reach in the field of human resources consultancy.

Before founding Meridian, Broom had been a senior Human Resources executive with Penguin, spending 14 years on the board. However, he "pretty much walked out of the job" at the age of 47, when he had what he refers to with a chuckle as his "mid-life crisis". "After leaving Penguin, I did some consultancy work within the industry and, for three years, I worked for a company specialising in recruitment, running it for three years" he recalls. "However, after a while, I felt that I ought to put my money where my mouth was.

"On holiday in Egypt with a friend and our wives, I told him that I was setting up on my own. We sat down to think of suitable names, and wrote two columns down on the hotel notepaper. We couldn't decide on one until we saw the name of the hotel, which was Meridian, and I just felt that

by Louis Barfe

the Anglicized version fitted my idea perfectly."

Meridian operates with a staff of six from offices in a mews off Kensington High Street. Broom notes jokingly that the premises are "elegant, but functional — publishers are notoriously mean, and we don't want them to think we're too expensive". It covers three core areas, specifically tailored to the needs of the publishing industry: executive recruitment, human resources consultancy and career management.

"Our main sphere of activity is in middle and senior management recruitment," asserts Broom. "The positions we deal with mainly start at around £35,000 a year," and then go upwards into six figure sums. However, like publishers receiving unsolicited manuscripts, we are inundated with unsolicited CVs, particularly from the more junior end, and we're delighted to see them.

"A company will come to us, saying that they have a job that they want to fill. If it's a publishing job, we're confident that we can find the right person. We have a tremendous network of people in the industry, and we're always making notes. The person that they're looking for is probably not even thinking of moving, and is quite happy getting on with their job. They don't turn straight to the job ads in the *Guardian* each Monday, or to the trade press on Fridays, but if you

show someone a detailed job brief, stressing that there is no pressure, and ask if they are interested, most people will respond favourably.

"We don't give the hard sell to either party. We are introducing companies and individuals to each other, and we will stand with them both at the altar until they get hitched, if that's what they want from us. We offer an unconditional six-month guarantee on each recruitment, and our proud boast is that we have never had to find a replacement in the five years that we've been established."

Recruitment is, Broom concurs, "where we earn most of our fees", but because of his own HR background, the company has sought to provide relevant advice on request wherever time and resources have permitted. "Clients have asked us for this service — particularly smaller publishers which do not have their own HR department — but we haven't always had the time to give it to them. Now, with the changes in legislation that are coming from Brussels, publishers need that advice more than ever, and so we headhunted Fran to allow us to offer a full HR service."

Ryba joins Meridian from Faber and Faber, and her career has included periods at Random House, *Which?* Magazine and Channel 4 Television. She believes that "publishers are starting to realise that the HR function is not just administrative. With all of the changes in legislation, if a



John Broom: 'publishing is expanding'



Fran Ryba: 'joining from Faber'

company gets it wrong, it can be a very costly exercise".

Ryba indicates that the areas of contract management, setting a policy for good working practice and training and development schemes are all vital areas for the modern publisher to address properly. "Personnel departments need to be professionalised in all industries, but it's not just an issue of compliance," she adds. "I think that HR is now seen by many companies and organisations as a major contribution to corporate objectives."

While seemingly an unfamiliar service, 'career management' is, in fact, Broom's preferred term for outplacement. "I thought that it was such a negative phrase, and it occurred to us that what we were doing in this

case was helping people to manage their careers," he notes.

"Outplacement advice is increasingly offered as part of the redundancy package, and cynics may regard it as 'conscience money', but I think it's more than that. The person that the company is letting go of may have been a closely-allied member of the team from some time, and so the decision will have been desperately difficult to make. By offering career management advice, the company is saying that it wants to give that person the best possible opportunity to get up and running again."

Under the guidance of one of Broom's business partners, Peter Bunn, a sister company offers consultancy to the direct selling industry, and with Dorling Kindersley, Usborne and

Collins & Brown all involved in this sector, some overlap occurs inevitably. "Publishing accounts for 60% of our total business, and the direct sales consultancy accounts for 40%," explains Broom. "In each case, we try to keep the two separate, but publishers who are becoming involved in direct selling appreciate the fact that there is a company that understands both sides."

Having seen off one recession and managed a considerable number of careers in the process, Broom is confident for the future of the industry. "People assume the worst when redundancies are announced but in fact, the industry is not getting smaller. It's perpetually changing shape and, if anything, it's expanding, and that's where we come in."