

'Vocation vacation' for career switch

More people are opting to try out their fantasy careers and a US firm is offering a 'test drive'

By BHAGYASHREE GAREKAR
US CORRESPONDENT

WASHINGTON: Life begins at 40, or at least dream careers do.

An increasing number of people, laid-off from their jobs or plodding along in unfulfilling ones, are deciding that the recession is as good a time as any to try out their fantasy careers as Broadway directors, antique dealers or cheesemongers, among other jobs.

But for many mid-career professionals, starting fresh is not so easy.

That's where Mr Brian Kurth comes in. Like so many others, Mr Kurth would spend his long commutes to a comfy but unsatisfactory job day-

dreaming about what it would be like to do something different - work as a tour guide, perhaps, or maybe a dog trainer, or even a winemaker.

But there was no realistic way for someone his age to test the waters - a 20-year-old could be an intern, but people in their forties had few such options.

He decided to change that. Certain there were more people out there like him, Mr Kurth in 2005 launched his own business finding internship opportunities for professionals looking to switch careers. He calls them "vocation vacations".

His selling point is that the "test drive" of a new career would be a risk-free experience, and could be a rewarding part of a vacation.

For the first few years, most of Mr Kurth's clients were people like himself - comfortable but restless.

But since the 2008 recession, many more of his clients are retrenched workers for whom the chance to try out a new career is the silver lining in the cloud of unemployment.

"They are laid off but have some savings in the bank," he said in a phone interview from Portland, Oregon, where his business VocationVacations is

SOMETHING DIFFERENT IN THEIR FORTIES

"They are laid off but have some savings in the bank. Mostly, they are seeking a window into a creative career or wanting to learn how to be entrepreneurs. You can't just knock on a door and get that experience."

Mr Brian Kurth, who launched his own business creating internships for mid-career professionals

based. "Mostly, they are seeking a window into a creative career or wanting to learn how to be entrepreneurs. You can't just knock on a door and get that experience," he said.

Ms Corazon Chacon of New York was one of those seeking a change. After she was laid off from her job as the international marketing director for a music firm, the 42-year-old decided she had had enough.

"We worked hard but people were just not buying

CDs, what could we do?" she said. "I had no desire to stay on in the music industry any more, although I spent 20 years there."

She felt drawn to the hospitality industry, seeing it as a place where her experience of foreign travel and working with people from different cultures would be an asset.

"It seemed a practical business and a growing one. But, naturally, I had no idea what it would be like to be on the other side of the counter."

Ms Chacon contacted Mr Kurth, who set her up with an "internship" at a Chicago hotel. This gave her the courage to take the plunge, she said, and she is now working as a concierge at a hotel in New York.

"It combines all my passions - food, culture, music, architecture and travel. And it was easy to transfer my skills to my new job," she said.

Other services are offering their own take on helping people try out new jobs.

Transitions Abroad provides short-term stints working overseas while Coolworks.com helps people find seasonal jobs in places like national parks, ski resorts and theme parks.

Some professionals may jump at the opportunity to switch careers, but they cannot be guaranteed their old salaries. Ms Chacon admitted she took a significant pay cut along with her new job.

"Yes, I had to make adjustments to my lifestyle. But it's better to move on to a growing industry, doing what you like," she said.

Taking a vocation vacation also does not come cheap.

A three-day stint to shadow one of the 500 mentors in Mr Kurth's network can cost about US\$900 (S1,260) but can range to up to US\$2,000 - and that's not including airfare and lodging.

Still, Mr Kurth says, he has helped "thousands" find their dream careers.

Ms Asma Abu-Taleb - a 48-year-old accountant with a USAid project in Jordan until a few months ago and another of Mr Kurth's clients - found her old job worthwhile and well-paying. But she yearned for something different.

Her internship in January with a small bookseller in San Francisco gave her the insider knowledge she needed to set up her own bookshop in Amman, Jordan.

"Maybe it is risky," she said about turning her back on her 25-year career in finance. "But this is what I want to do for the rest of my life."

bhagya@sph.com.sg

Chile quake death toll 'overestimated'

SANTIAGO: Chilean officials have announced that they had significantly overestimated the death toll from last weekend's earthquake, lowering the figure from about 802 people to about 279.

Ms Carmen Fernandez, director of the emergency management agency known as Onemi, said that in several badly damaged municipalities, officials had erroneously included names of people who were missing on lists of the dead.

An Interior Ministry source said that some people identified as missing had since shown up alive, but he did not say how many.

The ministry has given no revised death toll from last Saturday's quake, one of the world's biggest in a century.

The total number of people who died in the earthquake could still change substantially over time. Many people are still missing, and not all of the dead have been identified.

The recalculation of the death toll was quickly overshadowed on Thursday afternoon by another earthquake in a completely different part of the country, the copper regions in the north.

Ms Fernandez said initial reports indicated that the 6.3-magnitude earthquake struck near the northern inland city of Calama and was felt as far away as Iquique on the coast.

She said it was not an aftershock of last Saturday's 8.8-magnitude temblor.

There were no immediate reports of death or serious damage, she said, but "obviously there is fear among the people".

The quake struck at 7.39pm local time (6.39am Singapore time) and its epicentre was 105km below the Andes mountains north-east of Calama, according to the United States Geological Survey, which monitors earthquake activity.

Calama, a major centre for mining with one of the world's largest open-air copper mines located nearby, is 2,500m above sea level, so there is no danger of a tsunami, Ms Fernandez said.

NEW YORK TIMES, REUTERS, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

BE A MEMBER OF NUSS – THE PREMIER GRADUATE CLUB

\$4,000 NOW OR

\$10,000 LATER

GET A FREE HEWLETT-PACKARD NETBOOK & \$400 F&B CREDITS IF YOU JOIN BEFORE 12 MARCH 2010!

- Transferable Membership • Interest-free Instalment Plan • Open to Graduates of Recognised Universities •
- Pay only \$2,000 if you've graduated within the last 3 years •

Visit www.nuss.org.sg or call **6876 5858** now!

4 GUILD HOUSES: KENT RIDGE • SUNTEC CITY • BUKIT TIMAH • ADAM PARK
 • 5 CAFES & RESTAURANTS • 6 BARS & LOUNGES • 7 FUNCTION ROOMS • BRAND NEW 5,000 SQ FT GYM • BRAND NEW 50M SWIMMING POOL • 4 BADMINTON COURTS • 3 TENNIS COURTS • 2 SQUASH COURTS • 2 TABLE TENNIS ROOMS • CHILDREN'S PLAYROOM & MORE...

NUSS
The Graduate Club

LIANG HOE HUAT
LANDSCAPING CONSTRUCTION PTE LTD

Specialised in designing of Landscaping, Chengal Wood Trellis cover with Polycarbonate, Deck & Fencing Works

FREE DESIGN & QUOTATION

Carpet Grass \$1.50 per sq ft / Pearl Grass \$2.00 per sq ft
 Black Soil, Sand, Compost, Fertilizer. Only \$1 per bag!!
 Showroom: 81 Brighton Crescent (Serangoon Gdn Way)

Tel: 6289 4567 / 6289 9853 (open daily 9am - 6pm)
www.liang-hoe-huat-landscaping.com.sg