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WILLIAM  
COWAN

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# BUILDING

A

*'A healthy dose of wisdom and insight.'*

JANNINE FRASER, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER  
OF DIRECTIONEERING

# WINNING CAREER

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A complete guide to securing and  
thriving in your ideal senior role

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# BUILDING A WINNING CAREER

A complete guide to  
securing and thriving in  
your ideal senior role

WILLIAM COWAN



# About William Cowan

William has a great deal of wisdom. He injects a quiet confidence and sense of fun into the process, while at the same time providing helpful encouragement and motivation to do the work. And, most importantly, his technique works! *Steve Clifford – CEO*

William is the master at building careers. He supports you to build your career ambition, increase your confidence and build a professional network. He's always there for advice, coaching or challenge to spur you on. *Madelyn Ring – CPO*

William provides his clients with insightful advice, disciplined decision-making and an understanding of the need for flexibility and resilience. He artfully combines wisdom and good humour in the support he delivers. *Fiona Reed – NED*

William is one of those rare individuals who has the ability to guide others without taking control or pushing his own agenda. He clearly loves seeing his clients push their personal boundaries to deliver more than they thought they could. *Philippe Etienne – NED*

William is a very thoughtful and capable individual. His background and experience mean that he can give even most senior of executives robust, insightful and supportive counsel. He excels in his field. *Peter Lamell – NED*

William has an incredible ability to unlock insights around your unique superpowers. He is both the stretch and the safety net as you reimagine your career. He brings a balance of sharp intellect and big heart ... and undeniable impact. *Nicole Sparshott – CEO*

William coached me to build a network for life. By building a deep understanding of me, William partnered with me to ensure every career decision was fully informed by optimising values, fit and family. *Tony Dunstan – CEO*

William helps you identify what has made you who you are. He then supports you on a journey of discovery to help you build a path to the future. *Chris Wilesmith – CEO*

# About this book

A must read for senior leaders in finding the right new job or those wanting to take their career to the next level. It's highly engaging, yet practical, with home truths that you won't get from your family, friends or colleagues. *Kalpana Gee – Senior Banking Executive*

This book is outstanding and provides really insightful and valuable information that can be practically applied by any executive who wants to secure their ideal role and build a successful career. *Ian Nankivell – 35 years as a leader in executive search*

In a world of ever-increasing disruption, the navigation of one's own career will continue to be challenged in ways that we can't imagine. This book provides concepts, strategies and tactics that help in a way like no other. *David Nicolson – Senior Career Consultant*

How do you cut through the emotion when you are out of work? To be focused, rational, reflective, and successful, you need a great process based on expert experience. That is why you need this book! *Russell Parker – Global CEO*

This book offers precious pearls of wisdom for all to learn from and apply. It is guaranteed to become your trusted career companion, one you will consult for practical, transferable insights throughout your career. *Aimée Samuels-Meens – Senior Career Consultant*

Getting a great job is about so much more than being the best candidate. There is an art to being the successful candidate and this book provides straightforward and practical advice to help you get your dream job. *Julia Shtepa – Senior Financial Services Executive*

This book fills an important gap in the inadequately served field of career guidance. It provides executives – at all levels – with practical advice on how to re-position and significantly enhance career progression. *Alan Winton – Senior Search Executive*

I am fortunate to have successfully worked with William, embracing the principles, practical methods and purposeful disciplines in this book. The purposeful and practical path laid out in this book make the process less confronting. *Greg White – COO*

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# About the author

William has over 30 years of experience in senior management positions. He has served as an advisor to boards and chief executives worldwide, and been the chief executive officer of a number of listed and unlisted companies.

William has held the position of Director, Key Executive Services, at Directioneering for the past 16 years. Directioneering has grown to be the leading career strategy firm in Australia and New Zealand. It provides individuals and organisations with tailored career transition, career coaching and leadership development services. During his time at Directioneering, William has worked successfully with over 1000 senior executives from every industry, providing them with consulting and advice related to their careers.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, he was a partner of McKinsey & Co, servicing major clients in Europe, North America, Asia and Australia. He led the development of a transformational strategy for the Australian Football League in 1982. In 1983 he led a leveraged buyout of Southern Cross Broadcasting, which grew to become the fourth largest commercial broadcasting network in Australia in the late 1980s.

During the late 1990s, William was the chief executive of Davidson & Associates, the premier career management firm in Australia. Over the next five years, the firm consolidated its position as a leader in South-East Asia, with offices in five countries. During this time, William worked with some of Australia's and Asia's most



senior executives, providing them with career management advice and counsel. In 1998, the firm was voted the best service firm in Australia by readers of *BRW* magazine.

William was the chairman of various boards and committees in a number of not-for-profit organisations. These included Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, and the Australian International Opera Awards. He led the development of a strategy to strengthen Victorian Thoroughbred Racing as a world leader in 1995.

He was educated at the University of Melbourne where he obtained Engineering and Commerce degrees. He was awarded exhibitions in Economics. In 1970, he was awarded a Harkness Fellowship by the Commonwealth Fund in New York for study at Harvard Business School. This fellowship enabled him to obtain a Master of Business Administration with High Distinction in 1972 from the Harvard Business School where he was a Baker Scholar.

On 26 January 2015, he was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia for significant service to the community through educational, medical research and arts organisations, and to business.

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# Introduction

We hear much these days about how many jobs you will likely have during your lifetime. We hear less about how to make good job selections. And we hear very little indeed about how you should manage your transition between jobs to build a successful career and thrive. With so little guidance available, it is easy to assume that, if you are an effective individual, your transition between jobs will be easy. This is unlikely to be true. Whether you are a high performer or you aspire to be one, you need to make considered job selections and plan for successful transitions between them. If you have recently left your job, are unhappy in your current role, considering a portfolio career or entering the professional space for the first time, you need to work through a clear, structured process to identify and secure attractive career growth opportunities. In writing this book, I aim to help you understand this process and then use it to assist you to build a winning career. A career that could change your life. A winning career, by the way, is quite different from living a successful life. Your career is only one part of this much bigger challenge, but an important part for most people.

What is a ‘winning career’? I am not talking about being successful because you are fortunate to be in the right place at the right time. I want you to capitalise, in an active way, on your special strengths. This means you need to stretch yourself, show some grit and take some risks. I want you to have a career where you can look back on your contributions and be proud that you have been

engaged in your work and fulfilled in your relationships. Very few of us can plan our careers or our lives in any detail. But we can manage the process of seeking out work that we will find fulfilling and where we can shine. This book is intended to assist you to do this whenever you are facing a career transition.

The reason I use the word ‘winning’ is because I am suggesting an active process. I want you to apply your energy and brainpower to identify and secure the best outcomes for yourself and for those you care about. As a result, I take you through how to identify your special strengths and how to communicate these strengths in a compelling way. I suggest ways in which you can open up more opportunities for yourself. And I consider how you might maximise your chances of attaining a role where you can thrive – a role where you can add the most value and be the most satisfied. My purpose in writing this book is to set out in detail a practical process that has worked for my clients so as to help you. You do not need to design your own job transition process. You can learn from what has worked for others. I am confident that the process I describe here will have many elements that will work for you.

Many successful people, at all levels of their career, find it more difficult than they expect to seek out and secure exciting, fulfilling new roles – roles that will help them to drive their careers forward and to excel. Why is this the case? One key reason is that finding a new job requires entirely different skills from the ones you are likely to have developed as a successful executive. If you are a leader, you are likely to be comfortable with and used to being in charge. However, when you are looking for a job, your progress is almost entirely at the whim of others. This reversed power dynamic can be extremely disconcerting for you. Even calm, relaxed and highly effective individuals can become extremely anxious as they seek out new positions. If you feel this way, you’re not alone. However, it is not only possible but also likely that you will move from a state of uncertainty to a state of confidence if you follow the process set out here.

In *Outliers*, journalist and best-selling author Malcolm Gladwell argues you need at least 10,000 hours of experience and practice to develop world-class expertise. Over the past 25 years, I have worked with over 1000 high-performing executives, as well as many graduates. As a result, I have spent over 20,000 hours coaching people transitioning in their careers! Fortunately, the outcomes have virtually always been excellent.

You will see that I ask many questions in this book. This is because I do not have specific answers for you; however, by being asked the right questions, you will work out the answers for yourself. Throughout this book, I have included anecdotes using my clients' experiences to illustrate many different situations that you might face. (Note that all names and identifying details have been changed to ensure the anonymity of these individuals.) These examples help to highlight that searching for a new job is more complicated than many people realise, but there is a process that works.

The overarching questions I discuss in this book are:

- What should you do to find a role that will be satisfying and fulfilling, and that will assist you in building a winning career?
- How can you be reasonably certain your jobs and your career will not damage the relationships that matter to you in your life?

This book takes you from the start point of looking for a new (or perhaps even your first) job to being established in a new role and evaluating whether you have selected wisely. Through the chapters in this book, I set out how to manage your job search process and how to address all the challenges that this presents. Some of the activities and ways of working that I suggest may seem counterintuitive to you. For instance, you may think it obvious that you should be clear with your friends, colleagues and everyone you meet that you are looking for a job. But this is almost always counterproductive if you are a senior jobseeker. People often freeze when you ask for their help in finding a senior role (or any role

for that matter). Why? Because most people do not have a clue about how to help you to find a job. More often than not, they will provide naïve suggestions that do not help you. Rather than talking about finding a job, what you need to do is to ask them for *advice*. If you do this, and frame your request properly, you will make much more progress. My mantra is:

*Seek a job, and you will get advice.*

*Seek advice, and you will get a job.*

### **WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS BOOK?**

This book is written to provide guidance for senior jobseekers. If you are a senior executive, my aim is to set out and explain practical guidelines for successfully managing your job search and transitioning into a new role. You will see that senior executives face numerous complex challenges. You have a lot to think about if you wish to take active steps to maximise your success as a senior jobseeker – and, more than this, to position yourself for a successful subsequent career.

Despite my focus on helping senior jobseekers, it is clear that many of the central principles will help *anyone* who wants to take charge of their career. You may only be a few years into your first job. You may be happy in your current role but feel the need to rethink your career. You may want to change what you are doing or start a business. You may have had a busy and demanding role, but are now thinking of moving to a portfolio career or starting retirement. You may not have a job, and this could be for many reasons: You could still be at university or school, you could have decided to take a break, you could have other priorities, you could have resigned, you could have been terminated, you could have been made redundant, or you could have already retired.

Whatever kind of major transition you face, this book provides signposts to help you. All transitions have elements in common, even though the starting and finishing points, and the intensity of

the various steps in the process, may be very different. Depending on where you are in your career, different parts of the book will be more or less important for you. If you are not yet a senior executive, you can take the parts of this book that are relevant to you and use them. If you are just starting out, you may possibly need to focus more on functional skills and less on management and leadership capability. And you will not have the same kind of network to call on as a senior jobseeker does. But whatever your starting point, I provide practical advice and processes that will help you find a new role – with detailed examples of how to handle both successes and setbacks. I describe a process that will help you find a role that maximises not only the value you can deliver but also your satisfaction and happiness. I also provide you with life skills that will enable you to position yourself for a long, successful career – helping you to be ‘future proofed’. In addition, I include tips to help you to minimise the possibility of making career transition mistakes.

Most books on this subject have been written to help prepare relatively junior people, emphasising how to write CVs and cover letters for job applications. They also explain how to best present yourself in interviews, and how to respond to standard behavioural interview questions. At a more senior level, this kind of advice is not of great value. It is only a small part of the story. Whatever your situation, between 70 and 80 per cent of your underlying success in identifying and attaining roles will result from information originating from people in your network. As a result, your main focus needs to be on harnessing your current network and then on expanding your network significantly. You need to do this in a way that leads to success, not only for your next job but also, ideally, for the remainder of your career and for your life.

No matter what level you are working at or aiming for, this book will help you to be better equipped to address challenges as they arise. Unfortunately, these important life skills – the skills you need to ‘future proof’ yourself – are hardly mentioned, either



at school or at university. This book is designed to remedy this situation. My hope is that, if you understand the process set out here and what is required to be successful, you will be forewarned and forearmed – before you find yourself stranded under pressure, without these skills!

### **NO JOB IS SECURE**

These days virtually no-one has a secure job. You might be surprised to learn that, according to Dan Ciampa in the *Harvard Business Review*, more than 30 per cent of new chief executives fail within 18 months. Outstanding people are leaving, or being asked to leave, their jobs every day. Importantly, senior executives rarely lose or leave their jobs because they lack capability.

Your potential reasons for leaving are almost endless. Your values may not match those of your employer. You might be unlucky – in the wrong place at the wrong time. You might have been handed a poisoned chalice. You might be forced to leave for reasons beyond your control – such as a perception that you do not ‘fit’ in the organisation. You may have lost your sponsor. You may have decided to leave to start a family. Perhaps problems developed in New York that led to a downsizing in London or Sydney. Your new boss may be insecure and feel threatened by you. Perhaps you have outgrown your role. You may have identified problems that people above you are covering up and do not want aired. Or perhaps you have been transferred back from overseas, and no suitable role is available for you at home. A new CEO or Chair may want to bring in their own trusted team, not because they think the current management are incompetent but because they themselves are under extreme pressure to deliver results quickly. Therefore, they choose to bring in a team they know and trust. The possibilities are many and varied.

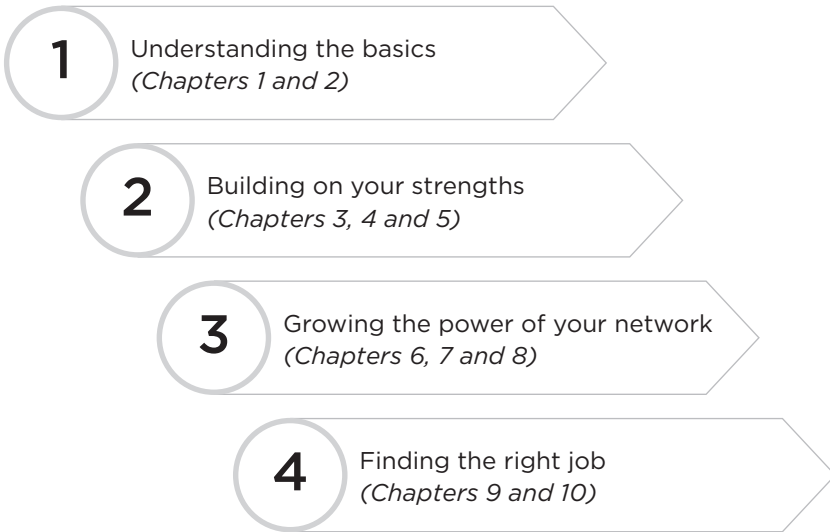
Despite the continuing likelihood that their jobs could be at risk, most senior executives are not well prepared to tackle the

job search process successfully. Perhaps they have been fortunate enough to have had a dream run, being headhunted or promoted throughout their careers. As a result, they have never had to face the challenge of finding a new role. This is a common situation among the individuals I work with. As a result of their success to date, many successful executives assume that finding a new job cannot be too hard, and that they can work out what they need to do as they go along. In fact, this is not a wise strategy. The more senior you are, the less likely it is that an ad hoc process will end in the best result for you. Just because you have been a success in one role does not mean that you will automatically be a success in a new role.

### **HAVING A PROCESS CREATES THE BEST CHANCE OF SUCCESS**

If you believe that all jobs are insecure, gaining a prior appreciation of the best process for finding a new job becomes a wise next step. This makes sense if only because, one day, you might need to put it into practice. If a proven process is available that increases your probability of success, you don't have to invent your own. However, the difficulty you face is that few, if any, sources are available to teach you what you need to know. Most advice I've seen is high level and unhelpful in its generality – for example, 'You need to arrange some coffee meetings' or 'You need to meet some recruiters'. It is all very well to be told that networking or meeting recruiters is desirable, but how do you prepare to do this effectively? How do you get the most out of your meetings? And how do you restart if you hit a serious roadblock? This book is intended to fill these gaps. It describes a process that works if you put in the effort and maintain your focus.

Four distinct steps are involved in my proven job search process. Each part of this book covers one of these four steps. These steps are shown in the following figure, along with the chapters that delve into each of them in much more detail.

*Four steps in the job-search process*

The process of finding a new job is not only complex but also uniquely personal. It involves much more than a routine set of mechanical steps and requires significant investment of your emotional energy. As I explain later in this book, building emotional connections with a series of new people outside your current network is key. Many senior jobseekers do not know how to tackle this challenge or feel very uncomfortable in attempting to do so.

Think of it this way. In Hollywood, you may produce a powerful, widely-praised movie, but you will not necessarily win an Academy Award. To win an Oscar, you need to gain the most votes from the members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Winning these votes involves managing a vote-seeking process that is totally different from managing movie production. For you to obtain a new job, you will require similar skills to those required to generate the votes needed to win an Oscar. If you want to be offered a job, you need to understand how to generate ‘votes’ from all those in the hiring process. The ‘voters’ in your process will include your colleagues, referees, recruiters and HR executives,

along with members of the senior management and, maybe, the members of the board in the hiring organisation. To generate these votes, you will need to build emotional connections. How can you do this most effectively?

In the following chapters, I guide you through the process of winning the votes you need to be awarded the role that you aspire to. I want you to aim high, and to achieve a role where you are happier, more productive and better paid than in the one you left. In my experience, this is quite achievable for most people. But to increase your chances of being a winner, you need to dedicate yourself to this process, through thick and thin.

## **WHY YOU MUST HAVE A STRONG FOUNDATION**

This book is structured around the process I use when working with my clients. Similar to every great building, every effective career transition process must have a strong foundation. As you tackle the job search process, you are no exception. You need to prepare your own strong foundation before you begin to build your network. This is vital to your success. The first seven chapters of this book are designed to help you to build this foundation.

First, in chapter 1, I explain the seven guiding principles that underlie your future success. Keep these principles in mind as you conduct your search. In chapter 2, I show you why seeking and filling a senior job presents such significant challenges for most of us. Understanding these challenges will help you be better prepared as you progress.

Once you understand why these challenges are important, the next step is to critically think about your strengths and key competencies. Everyone is special in their own way and identifying what makes you special deserves deep consideration. You then need to work out how best to communicate your unique skillset – with strength and brevity – both in writing and in conversations with your network. This is not as easy as you might think. Many people struggle to communicate briefly and with impact without first

investing in serious preparation. The good news is that, if you can do this well, you will actually reinforce other people's perception that you are indeed special! These topics are covered in chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Following this, in chapters 6, 7 and 8, I discuss how to explore and evaluate your career options based on your strengths, how to launch your networking, and how to get the most out of your networking efforts. Finally, in chapters 9 and 10, I discuss how to generate attractive job offers and maximise your chance of continuing success when you start your new job.

In an effort to keep this book simple and clear, I have avoided detailed footnotes and complex references. Throughout the book, I touch on a number of individual topics, some of which fill whole books and research papers elsewhere. I often mention this work in just a sentence or two. Think of these specific topics as threads in the larger tapestry of life. Many of them are golden but understanding them in depth is not the purpose of this book. If you want more detail on the thinking in these sources, please refer to the books, articles, blogs, and videos set out in the Further Reading section at the back of this book.

As part of trying to keep things simple, I have included a summary of key points at the start of each chapter to signpost the information included. I have also set out some questions for you to consider at the end of each chapter, to remind you of the key questions you need to address as you go through this process.

Finally, three additional simplifications:

- I have used the term 'family' throughout this book as shorthand for any and all relationships you consider important.
- I have used the term 'CV' throughout this book, rather than differentiate between *curricula vitae* and *résumés*.
- I have used the term 'Chair' to cover Chairman, Chairwoman and Chairperson.

## **LOOKING FOR A JOB IS A JOB**

While each person and each job search situation is different, one thing is clear: the challenges you will face are quite predictable. At least to begin with, you may be angry and upset, and are likely to feel isolated and defeated. The phone rarely rings – and even if it does, the opportunity may be unattractive. When things go wrong, you will be tempted to believe that you are the one who failed in some way. Of course, the setback might have had nothing to do with you, but you do not understand this and you think the worst.

Making progress takes longer and is more difficult than you expect. People who you expect to be most helpful do not seem to have anything useful to contribute. Others promise a lot but do not deliver. You find it impossible to obtain helpful, compelling, personalised advice. You cannot find anyone who provides rigorous help in testing and validating your ideas. You worry that you have run out of good ideas. You are concerned that others do not understand or value your unique background, your strengths or your special skills. People brand you in ways that you think are ill-fitting or inappropriate – too general or too specific. You start to be concerned that you might have reached your use-by date. The list goes on! That is why I've written this book: to reach more people facing the challenges of job seeking with a structured process that will help deliver a positive outcome.

Identifying the final outcome when you are just starting the process is almost impossible – the world is too complex for that. Never forget that your job search is an activity-based process, not an intellectual one. You do not know what you do not know. Opportunities exist out there that you cannot imagine and overthinking where you might end up early on in the process is a mistake. The key is to focus your energy and activity using a structured process to generate attractive opportunities. Once you have developed a strong foundation, you need to work hard to create ideas and new possibilities. You need to be a good explorer – and to be a good explorer, you must leave your base camp and find

out what is over the next ridge. In fact, you may have many ridges to climb before you reach your destination!

Some luck is required too! But remember the words of the great golfer Arnold Palmer (and many others who have been credited with these same words): ‘The more I practise, the luckier I get’. This will be true for you too!

The great thing about my job is that I work with outstanding people. I learn something new every day. Even better, I help to change people’s lives in a positive way. In some ways, I am similar to a personal trainer who wants you to build your physical fitness. When we work together, I try to stretch your thinking to be as creative as possible. I take this same approach in this book, encouraging you to always consider more than your next job. Where will the next job lead? If you live to the age of 80 or more, how will you lead a long, productive life and be part of a happy family? When you reach 80, will you be able to look back on your transition experience and say, ‘Even though the job search process was much tougher than I expected, it turned out to be a worthwhile experience and it helped to change my life for the better’? Helping my clients answer these questions in a positive way is why I have never tired of my work.

## **CLARITY CREATES OPPORTUNITIES**

One key message I want to reinforce is to be brief and clear in your communications with others. I have taken this to heart for myself. Even though I cover many different topics in this book, in each area I have sought to be brief and clear. Perhaps my focus may seem too dogmatic to you – but the advantage of writing in this way is that it permits me to keep things simple. The trade-off is that I do not detail every conceivable job-search context or the full complexity of all the issues you may face. Life is complicated and I have no doubt that you will need to modify my recommendations to reflect the specific situation you face at any time.

For instance, I suggest that you should not accept any not-for-profit board positions while searching for a new job. My reasoning is that I do not want you to be distracted from your networking. Others might take an alternative view, suggesting that such a board position would be a wonderful idea. No doubt they will have their own rationale for taking this view. You will need to make up your own mind, depending on your situation. I also provide ideas that I hope will work in many different cultures, though I recognise my own intercultural understanding is limited. I, therefore, want to be clear that I recognise my advice may not be applicable or appropriate in every cultural context. If necessary, please adapt my recommended approaches to your own specific situation.

### **THIS RECIPE WORKS IN ANY CAREER TRANSITION**

While adjustments may be necessary, I am confident this framework can be applied in any career transition. I sometimes hear comments along the lines of ‘If you are over 55, you have no hope in finding another good job’. This is definitely not true. Anyone who suggests this does not understand how to search for a senior role. As in most things in life, your preparation, commitment, energy and skills are what count. Your age, or any other attribute, may be an element in the mix but it should not stop you making a successful transition. Present yourself as a leader, with a track record of success, with lots of positive energy, and with great commercial judgement.

Whatever your age, you will struggle to find a job if you tackle the job search challenge in the wrong way. Recently, I helped a young refugee find his first professional job. He did not learn English until he was 16 years old, yet he went on to achieve top grades at high school and university. He was a superstar! Alarming, despite applying for 500 jobs, he had received absolutely no offers. I couldn’t understand it. Happily, after using the approach set out in this book, he found a superior job, beyond his wildest dreams, within three months. Whatever the stage of your career, this book



provides strong pointers to the best way to plan and progress your job search.

When I began writing this book, I imagined that it might allow you to manage the job search process by yourself, without a coach. I soon realised this is unlikely to be the case. This book is a bit like the books you read when you are about to learn to ski or to play tennis. These books, no matter how well they are written and illustrated, will not make you a good skier or champion tennis player. To be good at these sports, you also need help from a competent instructor or coach – and a lot of practice. As I wrote this book, I realised nothing can replace an effective career coach. These coaches can be a valuable sounding board, and can provide help and guidance that no book can communicate. Having said this, this book is intended to help you whether you have a coach or not. If you do have a coach, this book will assist you to ask smarter questions and to manage the transition process better. If you do not have a coach, you will be better positioned to tackle the job search process on your own.

Finally, even if you are not involved in a job search right now, you will find some pointers here that will help you to be well prepared, if and when the time arises for you to make a career transition.

The key to your success, whatever your situation, will be to have a strong, well-thought out process to follow. Underpinning this process are the seven guiding principles that I set out in chapter 1. So let's get started.