

My Brilliant Career

Turning his hand to bracelet cause

Neil Robinson is the CEO of Relate Bracelets. He tells **Margaret Harris** that his midlife crisis took the form of trading in a corporate job for one in the nonprofit sector

What does your work involve?

For more than 20 years I was responsible for selling alcohol, tobacco, banking and pharmaceuticals, in that order. But I dropped it all, my big corporate life, for a job in the nonprofit sector.

I am now the CEO of nonprofit social enterprise Relate Bracelets. We make and sell handmade beaded bracelets to make money for social change.

How I came to the nonprofit sector was not an obvious path. I always say it was my version of a midlife crisis, only I didn't pack it all in and travel the world or buy a sports car. I felt like I was missing my purpose — I wanted to be responsible for helping others and not just on a career path that benefited me.

So I took on my current role at Relate, where I am responsible for building the business, and growth has been phenomenal.

This can be attributed to applying corporate knowledge in a sector known for begging-bowl tactics. We don't rely on donations or hand-outs, but we make money for our causes — more than 70 across health, social upliftment and con-

servation, and partnered with global and local charities.

These "causes" are organisations working on the ground daily to make big social change in South Africa.

If every employed South African bought just one bracelet a year, that would mean close to a quarter of a billion rands towards worthy causes each year.

Above and beyond the causes we support, we have also created more than 400 earning opportunities. We have seniors in township communities who thread the beads, and they earn an income to supplement their small pensions. We also have a group of young closers and packers in our offices, who are also put through skills training initiatives to set them on their career paths beyond Relate. One is training to be a paramedic, another wants to be a hotelier and we have a couple of future soccer coaches. We also provide young black businesses with funding through our enterprise development initiatives.

So, what I do is work very hard to make sure this all happens — that we keep growing, keep putting money into social change, that com-

panies get on board and want to make an impact, and that retailers choose our trademark "R" bracelets to sit on their counters.

How does your corporate experience help you?

It's really a continuation of what I used to do, just applying it to a nonprofit social enterprise. So having core business principles at the heart of what we do is vital. Mission statements, clear objectives, sound strategies, good brand building activity, great people, processes that support the business and key measurement criteria, including the impacts we make in people's lives, are critical. The only thing that is different is that the harder you work and the more you attain your goals, the more people's lives you uplift.

What did you want to be when you were a child?

The usual football star, et cetera, until reality dawned and I realised I was not good enough. I am quite a visual person so architecture was a consideration. I try to be righteous, no matter what, so law was a possibility. But I settled on a commercial career in marketing as my



WRIST ACTION: Relate Bracelets head Neil Robinson has helped the enterprise boost sales of multicoloured bead sets Picture: WILLEM LAW

father was a big influence on my life. He worked for Royal Dutch Shell for more than 35 years, and the work that he got to do in commerce quite excited me when I got into my late teens. Based on that, I pursued the commercial route in my tertiary studies.

What was your first paying job, and what was the most important lesson you learnt from it?

At Reader's Digest in the marketing department as an assistant brand manager. I learnt attention to detail, attention to detail, attention to detail. Don't take anything for

granted and re-check everything. You think you know everything in your first job, but you know nothing. I learnt more in my first six months of my first corporate job than I did in my entire three years of tertiary education.

What would readers find surprising about your job?

That the more well-known personalities that we are privileged to engage with and who support us are so down to earth and eager to help to build our brand. They don't have egos and are not self-centred, but rather keen to help change our country for the better.

What do you most enjoy about the work you do?

The variety of it. One day I'm pitching to a corporate client on a long-term partnership, the next day I'm writing a skills policy helping our young adults reach their dreams through our skills-training initiatives. The next week I might be handing over a new vehicle to a fledgling business owner to really catapult his business, and sometimes I'll give input into design elements within the business or assist in packing bracelets for a retail order.

It's so diverse. The bottom line, though, is that everything that I do helps uplift people who really need it. That makes the job satisfaction tick-box unparalleled, in my opinion.

What part of your job would you prefer not to do?

The politics. There is loads of it in the nonprofit world. I sometimes think if we all had the same ambition, but without the egos, a lot more would get done.

You changed direction in your career once already. If you were to do that again, what would you do?

I think I would always try do work that really improves people's lives. We all claim that's what most of us do, but I don't really believe it. I was guilty many times of convincing people to buy something that they did not need. I'm sure the investment bankers whose greed helped bring the world to its knees in 2008 were similarly focused and very self-centred. Now it's about the triple bottom line — people, planet and then profit for good.

What qualities do you need to do the work you do?

Sound business acumen, morality, ethics and a will to succeed against many challenges. It's good work if you can get it, though.

How to . . .

Reap rewards of performance appraisals

FOR many companies, performance appraisals have become things that have to get done, as quickly as possible, but with little thought about how they can be used to develop employees.

This attitude has led to many employees losing interest and faith in the system, too.

Neville de Lucia, new business development director at Dale Carnegie Training, has the following advice:

- For someone to do their job brilliantly, they need to know exactly what is required of them, not a vague approximation. Managers need to provide a clear picture of what the job done well looks like, so employees can measure up. Often the problem lies with a manager who is unable to articulate what she or he requires;

- Make sure that each employee understands how their particular job fits in to the bigger picture of the organisation's vision, mission and goals. This fosters greater responsibility;

- The review meeting should be used to encourage employees rather than as an excuse to point out their shortcomings;

- Follow-up meetings to ensure that the employee is on track to meet their targets will increase the chance of success and help to develop a relationship of trust;

- Build in a recognition system that identifies specific tasks (those listed in the performance appraisal) as well as the spontaneous recognition of other work. These can take the form of a simple but heartfelt "thank you" or e-mail; lunch for the whole team or tickets to an event; or even spot bonuses; and

- The best way to encourage a positive attitude is to model it as a manager. Show employees you take your job seriously and want to improve yourself, and they are likely to follow suit. — *Margaret Harris*