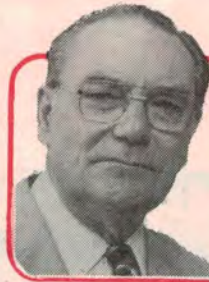


From a young reader: What do you do

A young Queensland reader invites us to open up a debate on a subject which is of major concern to many in his age group: How can a young person build a career in electronics when no one appears willing or able to help them get started? To give them that vital first job?



FORUM

Conducted by Neville Williams

Well, we are perfectly willing to talk about job opportunities in the electronics industry but, in so doing, we have to be realistic. We can highlight the problems but we can't hope to come up with instant answers. The article will have served a useful purpose, however, if it induces some prospective employers and some prospective job applicants to re-think their attitudes — and their aptitudes!

But, first, let's look at the reader's letter. As you will see, he is keen to obtain a sales position with an electronic component or computer supplier but it may be more helpful to discuss job opportunities generally in the electronics industry. The letter is reproduced exactly as written, omitting only the name and address.

Dear Sir,
prompted by the Editorial in the November issue, I would like, on behalf of other unemployed people with a hobby background to propose a new topic of debate for your excellent column.

'Should the Electronics component and Hobby computer retailers hire hobbyists and others with an understanding of the field, or professional sales-people, trained in all the tricks of selling 'optional extras'!

My own experience, seeking both assistance and employment, has not boded well for 'consumer' retailers. Perhaps it is only Brisbane, but applying for a position produces the opening question, 'How much sales experience have you had?' A typical telephone interview runs:—

"J. Jones Electronics"

"Hello, I'm calling about the position you advertised this morning."

"Have you had any sales experience?"

"No, but I've..."

"Thank-you but we require sales experience, Thank-you, call us for all your hobby needs' Good-bye"

The above little fiction sums up the average interview, though some, omitting the advertisement, are shorter.

Sad, from my point of view as a job hunter, but sadder still is the plight of

someone seeking information, of a technical nature from a well-meaning ex-used-car-salesman.

In closing, I am 18 years old, and am seeking employment, presently in electronics or micro-computing. I find the attitude of the industry in this regard most disappointing.

(From Eagleby, Qld)

It may come as a surprise to our correspondent to know that the situation which he describes has a familiar ring for members of my particular generation. We went through school during what became known as "the great depression" and did so, in many cases, with parents unemployed and fortified by dole-queue food. When we left school, it was a case of joining more queues in the hope of picking up a job.

On the strength of an intense hobby interest, a leaving certificate pass and a

“ The survivors were those who maintained an interest in what they were doing and displayed initiative ”

good school report, I did ultimately manage to find work in a wireless factory but it was a hand-to-mouth existence. In those days, assemblers and wiremen were paid about £1 (\$2.00) per week, plus occasional overtime — during the winter months. In the warmer weather, when sales of wireless sets declined, production lines often worked part time and factory hands were paid part wages!

I can say with some conviction that it was no fun trying to live on that kind of money, with no further help from what passed at the time for social services. But, still, I must concede that even a tenuous job in a wireless factory was a better start to a career in electronics than no job at all — which is what our correspondent says he is up against.

Looking back over those years, however, one lesson stands out very

clearly: the last people to be stood down, the first to be re-engaged, the survivors, those who made it through the ranks to responsible positions, were people who maintained an interest in what they were doing, learned as they went along and displayed initiative of one kind or another.

That lesson remains as valid today as ever it was. When jobs are scarce, they tend to go selectively to those who exhibit the right training and attitude, plus a degree of sincerity, interest, involvement and initiative. They are old-fashioned values but I don't apologise for naming them. What's more, they are attributes which cannot be donned like a set of new clothes; they have to be cultivated, encouraged and worked at over a period of time.

Have in mind that I am talking primarily about the electronics industry, in which the work force is broken up into relatively small units, where individual initiative stands a better chance of being noticed. Unfortunately, there are many industries in which initiative and performance tend to be obliterated by industrial codes and attitudes.

In writing the letter reproduced above, our correspondent from Eagleby in Queensland has shown a certain degree of initiative. It may not produce direct results but it is indicative of a young person who is not content simply to grumble and give up. He wants to initiate debate about his problem in the hope that good may ultimately flow from it. It's a healthy reaction.

But, having said that, I must also observe that the impact of the letter is lessened, to a significant degree, by unfortunate errors in its composition. (I am hoping that the magazine typesetters will not correct the spelling and punctuation, thereby negating the point I am trying to make).

It would appear that our correspondent, like many in his age group today, has paid less attention than perhaps he should to spelling, punctuation and the use of capital letters. It is true that these matters have been emphasised less in recent years than once they were but,

when you can't find a job?

even so, an element of carelessness is suggested by phrases like "a knew topic", "my piont of view" and "prefrently in electronics".

In a job application, as distinct from an ordinary letter, such phrases could be a liability. If an employer has to make a final choice from a "short list" of two applicants, that choice may well hang on a hunch and a hint of carelessness — or a lack of attention to detail. It could easily influence the decision in favour of the other person.

At this point, it may be helpful to run through the procedure (as I remember it) for filling a position on the technical staff of "Electronics Australia". It should be typical enough of the procedure generally.

The first step would be to identify the position to be filled, nominate the range of duties and prospects for advancement, specify experience and/or qualifications required, the starting salary range, &c. A suitable advertisement would then be compiled requesting initial application by letter, giving details of training, experience, &c.

Why by letter?

Because it affords the prospective employer the opportunity to observe the number of applicants, their possible suitability for the position and their overall expectations. Those who, for any reason, are plainly unsuitable can be advised accordingly, obviating pointless expenditure of time and money for all concerned.

The remainder are requested to phone for an appointment at a mutually convenient time.

But a letter of application is significant for another reason, particularly if a successful applicant would be required to write articles (as for a magazine) or, in other situations, to originate laboratory reports or initiate correspondence. An employer would be diffident indeed about a native-born Australian who has yet to learn how to spell and to write reasonable English!

At the actual interview, first impressions are important. Allowance can be made for circumstances but some applicants virtually disqualify themselves by appearing to be chronically slovenly. That is scarcely a desirable quality where a person may have to meet the public on occasions, talk to sales/technical representatives of other companies, or be identified with their own company at exhibitions, lectures, &c.

I am not talking about collars and ties; simply about tidiness and personal hygiene! There's no getting away from it

— some interviewees stink!

At a technical level, the interviewer (or interview group) has to assess the range and depth of the applicant's knowledge and whether it matches the claims in the letter of application. Is that knowledge purely a recital of what they have read or do they give evidence of thinking things through independently?

Practical and hobby-level experience would also be considered, partly as a back-up for theoretical study and partly as tangible evidence of the applicant's involvement in the subject. As a hobbyist from way back, I must confess to reservations about the commitment of anyone who can spend years studying a subject like electronics, without ever generating an unstoppable urge to follow up some of those ideas at a practical level!

“Some applicants disqualify themselves by appearing to be chronically slovenly”

School-leavers may wonder what it's like to be on the other side of the interview table, asking the questions and having ultimately to make a decision. In over 40 years in an executive role with "Electronics Australia" I was in that situation on many, many occasions.

I can't say that it's been one that I've particularly enjoyed. In some interviews, for sure, the result has scarcely been in doubt; the applicant has either been so obviously suitable, or so obviously unsuitable for the position, that a "yes" or "no" answer has been almost automatic. Interviews like that are the easy ones.

More commonly, however, the interviewer ends up having to make a value judgment between a number of applicants, each with good points and not-so-good points, and each with the potential to succeed or to fail. The interviewer's prime responsibility is to identify the applicant most likely to succeed but, in so doing, he has no option but to reject the rest — and that is always an unpleasant task, no matter how elaborately one tries to embroider the word "no".

The most helpful advice I can offer to an unsuccessful applicant is not to regard the interviewer as some kind of an ogre but to work out, if you can, why he (or she) gave the nod to someone else. Do that successfully and you may be able,

next time, to present yourself to better advantage.

The nature of the job opportunities in electronics has changed radically over the years and, in some respects, "Electronics Australia" might be seen as a microcosm of the Australian electronics industry as a whole.

During the '40s, the design and construction of consumer type equipment was fairly static — kept that way by preoccupation with the war effort and limitations on the production and sale of non-essential components. Manpower was short and the emphasis was on practical skills, with old-time hobbyists much in demand — for the magazine and for industry.

The '50s provided more of the same, with the ranks of old-time hobbyists swollen by forces-trained technicians and licensed amateur operators. Radio stores were awash with new components and ex-disposals equipment. Radio factories were busy and gearing up for television. For the magazine, the most likely candidate for a job was a person with a wide range of electronic interests and skills, a reasonable grasp of supporting theory, an amateur licence if possible but no rigid requirement for formal qualifications.

New technology

Then came the '60s, with transistors, new concepts, new theory and new constructional methods. Generations of servicemen, hobbyists and amateurs found that their acquired expertise was rapidly becoming obsolete. They either had to start again or be left behind by a new generation of technicians and engineers trained from the outset in solid state technology.

That situation has been accentuated by the emergence of many other components based on solid state technology, by enormously complicated integrated circuits, by "little black box" design methods, by the adoption of digital circuitry for a whole range of complex functions and, of course, by microprocessors, computers and all their assorted paraphernalia.

Nowadays, for the industry as a whole, and certainly for this magazine, a certificate or degree, or formal training towards that end is almost a prerequisite for a career in electronics. A parallel hobby interest is valuable in imparting practical depth to the theory but a hobby interest alone is a very tenuous basis for technical advancement.

When young people ask me, these days, about getting into the electronics industry, there can be no equivocation: do your best to emerge from secondary

school with a good pass, in the hope of being accepted for a position in the industry. Make up your mind that you will take up a course in a technical college, institute or university, keeping your options open for further studies. By all means pursue the subject at a hobby level but don't rely on hobby learning, no matter how rewarding it might seem in the short term.

And that brings us, in a full circle, back to our correspondent from Eagleby. He refers quite vaguely to "hobbyists and others with an understanding of the field" and implies that they should be given preference for sales positions over people whose only qualification is that they have had sales experience (eg in selling used cars).

I agree that a used car salesman would be completely out of his depth in an electronics component store, trying to identify funny little things with difficult names and confusing type numbers. But, in reality, I do wonder how many sales persons for used cars or other unrelated products ever do find themselves selected to sell ICs, LEDs and electronic whatnots! Has the notion any basis in fact?

If a retailer had to choose between such a person and a technically informed hobbyist, they would probably choose the latter, providing they were satisfied that he/she would also prove to be honest, reliable, tidy, courteous and not likely to spend half their time (or more) magging to talkative customers.

Perhaps the real objective of the aforesaid advertisements would be to lure not used-car-salesmen but partly trained people from other retailers, thus bypassing the "breaking-in" phase. Let

someone else have that dubious pleasure!

Whether it's valid for our correspondent to lump together electronic component retailers and computer/peripheral retailers is open to question. While there is an obvious overlap, computers and peripherals are "big ticket" items, where the wrong approach could lose sales and have a serious effect on profitability. Selling computers, printers and disc drives isn't quite the same as selling ICs.

But, while a computer/peripheral retailer might not be willing to employ a complete sales novice, they might be favourably disposed to someone who could say: I've had two years experience with Dick Carr or Jaysmith!

The next step

But something else concerns me about all this, which isn't hinted at in the letter:

A hobbyist gets a job at Dick Carrs, Jaysmiths of Microwotnots but where is it supposed to lead to? A technical career? Marketing? Management?

We've already said that, these days, a technical career in electronics has to be based on formal training, not simply on hobby interest.

Perhaps the same remark should apply to these other areas, leading hopefully from the sales counter to an executive position. But what incentive or what opportunity is there for sales staff to pursue a course in advertising, marketing or management?

What "next step" would be open to our young reader if he did manage to get the kind of job which he seeks?

Consider the subject open for discussion!

