

# Guiding workers towards realising their dreams

Cape Town couple's initiative gets past the usual 'punctual' and 'reliable' characteristics to find out what makes a job seeker exceptional, writes Penny Haw

**V**ETERAN interviewers will tell you that, regardless of the extent of their experience and capabilities, every so often they come across an interviewee who is more difficult to communicate with than a root canal patient with a mouthful of dentistry devices. We have all been there.

It was during such a meeting that employment facilitator Ronald Bownes happened upon the tag, "DreamWorker".

"I was interviewing a man desperate to find work, whose unflinching and expressionless response to every one of my questions was little more than "yes" or "no", he explains.

"My initial efforts to engage him failed miserably and, after just a few minutes of meeting, we sat in wretched silence while I frantically searched my brain for a way to draw him out. Then it came to me: 'What is the dream you have for your life?' I asked him. It was as if I had flicked a switch. His face lit up and, from then on, the conversation flowed and the interview was a success."

In fact, the query inspired both interviewee and interviewer. Encouraged by the fresh sense of hope and enthusiasm that the "dream question" generated in the applicant, Bownes and his wife Tania not only included it in their standard set of interview questions for work seekers, but also named their nonprofit, section 21 company — which seeks to help unemployed people primarily, at present, in the Klipfontein Corridor region of the Cape Flats — DreamWorker.

The company, with its head office in Athlone and a branch in Hermanus, was established when Ronald and Tania — both born and bred Capetonians with combined experience in finance, management, advertising and marketing and who, together, previously ran an advertising agency — were encouraged to take what they had learned from two years' work as project managers for a similar employment-creation programme, WorkNow, which operates in the Imizamo Yethu and Hangberg regions of Hout Bay, further afield.

"What started off in Hout Bay as a part-time project, which was primarily marketing related, ended up as a round-the-clock love affair," says Tania. "It is the kind of work that becomes — and has to be, I believe — more passion than a job."

The initial experience, she continues, was a "roller coaster ride of ups and downs" involving heart-wrenching interaction with, and mostly happy endings for, extraordinary people from a range of backgrounds.

"It was, and still is, about sitting across a desk and, in a single day, interviewing people like an impoverished single mother with three hungry mouths to feed, an expectant young school leaver with amazing dreams but no financial backing, and a despondent middle-aged man with years of experience, but loss of self-worth from years of unemployment — and helping them find hope."

After innumerable hours of networking to spread the word in the community, and to persuade business owners and domestic employers to consider WorkNow applicants for employment, the success of the Hout Bay operation encouraged the



Ronald and Tania Bownes of the section 21 company DreamWorker say that one of the toughest things they encounter when interviewing job seekers is getting them to say what they believe sets them apart from others.

government to agree to fund a large-scale unemployment intervention for the Cape metropole. So the Bownes headed over Constantia Nek for the Cape Flats.

DreamWorker opened its doors in Athlone in October last year. Since then, Ronald, Tania and their team of three have been interviewing work seekers, checking their references, mentoring them and, wherever possible, introducing employee to employer.

"We are not," stresses Tania, "an employment agency. We make that very clear on introduction to work seekers. On the other hand, part of our objective is to encourage prospective employers — be they individuals or big business — to look at our database of applicants before they look anywhere else when they have positions to fill."

The service, funded by the social development department, is supplied free of charge to both employer and employee. The idea, says Ronald, is to operate as a community service in every sense, serving both those who are seeking employment and those seeking to employ. The couple's vision is to establish as many offices across Western Cape and beyond as possible and to contribute to the social development department's goal of halving unemployment by 2014.

"We are currently investigating franchising the business model — which is designed to be easy-to-operate and lean-and-mean — to offices in Paarl, Caledon, Grabouw and Greyton," says Ronald. "The targeted beneficiaries are school leavers through to skilled workers with a

weighted emphasis of 60% on females. Each office will seek to recruit a minimum of 1 000 people per annum, with the goal of finding work for at least 65% of suitable applicants in the first year. Once established, we estimate that each office will project wage creation of about R3,5m a year."

He repeats that DreamWorker's one-to-one interviewing and mentoring method helps the balance of the work seekers — in other words, that 35% that is not placed by the office — find employment for themselves. This is due to the assistance provided by the organisation by way of work readiness training, which includes career counselling, curriculum vitae preparation and guidance on interview techniques.

From an employer's perspective, the benefits of accessing DreamWorker's database are multiple: prospective employees' credentials and background have been checked; there are numerous potential candidates to choose from; the organisation's offices provide a convenient and safe place for interviews; there is no cost for the recruitment service; and it is an opportunity to participate in a community organisation.

DreamWorker's key focus is to assist semiskilled workers including gardeners, labourers, domestic workers, factory workers, kitchen assistants, cleaners and shelf packers to find work. On a secondary level, unemployed artisans — from painters to plasterers, welders, bricklayers, and electrical and

plumbing assistants, and other workers including basic administrative staff, grillers, cashiers, shop assistants and drivers — are registered on the DreamWorker database.

The key objective however, is not to build as large a database of work seekers as possible. Rather, it is to provide as many people as possible with the best chance of finding

employment by mentoring them and helping them market themselves.

"One of the toughest things we encounter when interviewing job seekers is getting them to tell us what they believe sets them apart from others," continues Tania.

"Part of our quest to help unemployed people find work is to teach them how to market themselves.

Many do not go beyond the predictable "hard working", "trustworthy" and "punctual" characteristics when asked to describe themselves.

"But when we ask them the "dream question" and get them to open up to us about their dreams, they are immediately encouraged to reveal what drives them.

"As a result, we are able to mentor

them to stand out in job interviews."

If you ask Tania about the dream she has for her life, she replies that it is "to go home every day knowing that I have found at least one job for one person that day ... that one less person will be facing the helpless and hopeless despair that emanates from unemployment ... that is my dream work".

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## BUSINESS DAY INSIGHT

### MARCH 25, 2009

South Africa is experiencing an ever-increasing skills shortage and employers are now strongly compelled to use their array of employee benefits effectively and innovatively as a tool to attract and retain staff.

Increasingly tougher economic times are seeing some companies posting significant declines in profits, and the employee benefits offering is becoming a fine balance of attracting staff in terms of an offering of salaries, bonuses, medical aid, annual increases, leave, cell phone allowances and group life benefits, with due consideration being paid to the skills shortage, what the company can afford and more recently, wage inflation.

With regard to retirement, employees are now given more latitude as to choosing the appropriate investment option for their risk profile. The incorrect investment choice can be a costly one as more of the risk burden is now borne by the employee. Another vital component of employee benefits has always tended to be health cover and the options available are varied and sometimes complex.

Impending changes by government to social security will also have a huge impact on post-retirement benefits.

Most large companies consider employee benefits to be a critical element in their packages, but many smaller companies have yet to incorporate such benefits and do not have the in-house capacity to effectively deal with such programmes. The outsourcing and temping industries are also looking at ways in which they can provide benefits to workers who are not formally on the payroll. HIV/AIDS continues to impact on employee benefits as the pool of dependents grows due to employee death, ill-health disability and early retirement.

Business Day's Employees Benefits Insight, publishing on March 25, 2009, will look at the trends in employee benefits and how companies are using traditional and non-traditional ways of providing benefits to staff, both during their working life and on retirement, and how government policy is set to affect employee retirement benefits.

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### 'Part of our quest to help unemployed people find work is to teach them how to market themselves'



**TO:** mvume@copeparty.org.za  
**FROM:** Trevor@Walkerand.co.za  
**SUBJECT:** congrats!  
**DATE:** Monday, February 23

Dear Your Grace — or can I just call you Mvume? My heartiest congratulations on your appointment. Smart move. I guess if the ANC is going to rule until Jesus returns, as JZ promised, then you guys want to go higher up the food chain, if you get my gist. It's good that you've got a channel to the top! Trevor

**TO:** terror@copeparty.org.za  
**FROM:** Trevor@Walkerand.co.za  
**SUBJECT:** quite a statesman  
**DATE:** Monday, February 23

Dear Terror, I think you did the right thing by making Dandala your president. I personally don't think you're tainted (it's not like you're an AIDS denier or anything that whack!) but I think it sends the right message to the people that you guys are above the petty politics of the ANC. No petty barrow-pushing here — no way! Trevor

**TO:** terror@copeparty.org.za  
**FROM:** Trevor@Walkerand.co.za  
**SUBJECT:** quite a statesman  
**DATE:** Monday, February 23

And look, I only say these things because I know that you can handle it. And criticism from close friends

builds us up to withstand the criticism from enemies, right? And on that topic, I've taken it upon myself to start spinning some of my magic on your behalf to colleagues out there in the media. It's just one of the many services Walker & Co strategic and PR consultants offers. The invisible hand of spin, as it were. Don't you worry about a thing. T

**TO: 'National Media list'**  
**FROM:** Trevor@Walkerand.co.za  
**SUBJECT:** To The Editor  
**DATE:** Tuesday, February 24

Dear Editor, I can think of very few leaders in this country or anywhere who are less selfish than Cope's Lekota — the for stepping aside and making Dandala the party's presidential candidate. I think the rude smears that he feels stabbed in the back by Shilowa are not fair. Sam is much bigger than Terror. He wouldn't need to stab him. He'd just trip him up. A Citizen

**TO:** busday@bdfm.co.za  
**FROM:** Trevor@Walkerand.co.za  
**SUBJECT:** face-off  
**DATE:** Wednesday, February 25

Dear Editor, I have a suggestion you may wish to hear. Can I give you a call?

**TO:** catherine.donovan@smithmos.co.za  
**FROM:** Trevor@Walkerand.co.za

**SUBJECT:** re: hello  
**DATE:** Wednesday, February 25

Hello C, Sorry to hear Wally is turning out to be a pig of a boss. If I weren't such a generous soul, I'd say 'I told you so', but that's not the sort of message you need from your closest supporters right now. I think that sort of behaviour is awful. Just because he's your boss, he has no right to act like that. Tell him to collect his own dry-cleaning. T

**TO:** catherine.donovan@smithmos.co.za  
**FROM:** Trevor@Walkerand.co.za  
**SUBJECT:** PS  
**DATE:** Wednesday, February 25

Has he asked you to bring my rolodex over yet, by the way?

**TO:** mvume@copeparty.org.za,  
**terror@copeparty.org.za**  
**FROM:** Trevor@Walkerand.co.za  
**SUBJECT:** sorted!  
**DATE:** Thursday, February 26

Dear Mvume & Terror, Don't worry about these rumours as to whose nomination as presidential candidate was genuine and who is silently fuming. I've organised the perfect opportunity for you both — a Face Off debate in Business Day. You can have a civilised discussion together on the pages of a national daily. It is just the thing to prove to the public at large that you are both on the same page!