

Set course for better career

Vocational education can help you keep your job or find a much better one

VERITY EDWARDS

Workforce skills expert Nicholas Wyman stresses the importance of continuing education, particularly for people who want to move onwards and upwards or who are considering a career change.

Wyman, chief executive of the Institute for Workplace Skills and Innovation, has released a book offering advice on finding the right job and taking the right path, whether it be through vocational education, an apprenticeship or university.

His book, *Job U*, offers advice on how to find a job while unemployment is high and industries including manufacturing and mining are declining.

While his book focuses on vocational education and upskilling through short courses, Wyman does not discount university or white-collar careers, and says the world is moving away from one-size-fits-all education and towards customised learning.

“What’s not going well is that our systems are very traditional,” Wyman says.

“We have a classroom with a talking head ... but people like to learn in different ways and the system doesn’t cater for that. If you try to get someone to do that and they don’t enjoy it, they’re not going to move forward.”

Wyman says there is too much of a push for high school students to attend university and less encouragement to take up a trade or

vocational education, which can also lead to rewarding careers.

If Australia follows a model often used in Britain, where students can move through a customised high school system to vocational and tertiary studies in one location, Wyman says it also may help young people.

One new example in Australia is the P-Tech model, based on the partnership between IBM, the New York City Department of Education and the City University of New York.

The system develops students’ skills in science, technology, engineering and maths disciplines and works closely with industry partners including IBM to provide pathways to traineeships or further education.

Two P-Tech schools are being planned in Victoria.

Wyman also questions why some fields of study, such as nursing, are concentrated around universities when they were once hospital-based. He firmly supports the apprenticeship model, whether it be for surgeons in a hospital setting, nursing or even law — as the legal system trains its students in some states of the US.

But pushing students towards formal education is not helping youth unemployment, Wyman says, given there is a need for all types of jobs to be filled where there are shortages.

“I think it’s a tragedy that in a



Institute for Workplace Skills and Innovation chief executive Nicholas Wyman

country like Australia there are so many people that haven’t found their way — you can whack them on the head and say they’re lazy, or you can say, ‘What can we do about it?’” he says. “You’ve got to be happy in what you do. People drag themselves to these courses believing it’s what they want to do, but the jobs don’t always exist.”

Not that Wyman is discouraging university degrees. He just believes people need to create a strategy to achieve their goals, whether it means taking online courses, finding a mentor or changing careers. Part of that is also parallel skilling, undertaking courses that may be complementary to what they already do, to ensure they stay abreast of industry and technological changes.

“We constantly need to develop skills in parallel through your working life. You need to learn the skills you need at your company, and you need to constantly brush up and develop your own skills as people and careers change,” he says.

Wyman says getting a dream job also means networking, listening to advice, becoming an expert by reading industry blogs or magazines and knowing what is happening in the field, and preparing for interviews by researching the company and the skills and knowledge required.

In information technology that may mean learning more about cyber health, or legal graduates gaining work experience at non-government organisations.

Weekend Professional asked the workforce skills expert what advice he would give to people in four professions if they wanted to

change jobs or upskill. For a law graduate who has struggled to find a job and may not have family connections, he suggests gaining experience in a not-for-profit or non-government organisation. He says graduates of courses where thousands of people finish without enough job placements need to broaden their idea of what their vocation is.

“It’s a matter of broadening the types of roles you’re looking for,

and underpinning that is real-world practical experience that people don’t often have during their course,” Wyman says.

“It will help you build up confidence in relation to people.”

He also suggests auditing your online presence because employers are likely to vet job applicants.

For an accountant in the field for 20 years itching to move on or move higher, he suggests finding an online or short course that can fit around work hours.

“It helps re-spark the conversation in your mind about the possibilities about what you may be able to do,” he says.

“Also get involved in the conversation; it’s always important, whether it’s online or in person, to network outside of your circle.”

For a long-time personal assistant, he suggests undertaking a certificate program to stack credentials, which may then lead to a higher qualification. “Have that conversation with your employer and map out a pathway in what learning you’re interested in. You’d like to think that organisation would be prepared to invest in that person’s education.”

And for an IT specialist made redundant mid-career, Wyman says the time is ripe for studying emerging technologies and positioning for change.

“Think globally,” he says. “Unlike the PA who is stuck in an office, an IT person can work any time, any place. You need to seek the unlikely places, you can’t just say technology is happening in Silicon Valley.”

He says cyber security is going through the roof, as is medical technology. “Look beyond technology, beyond IT. Where is the next boom going to be?”