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Leveraging Skills in a Second Career

Licensed condominium managers and RCMs bring a variety of skill sets to the boardroom table. While many are choosing condominium management as their first career after secondary school, others have already achieved post-secondary degrees and certificates. Still other managers have valuable work-life experiences as new Canadians that they can share. Here is one manager's story of making a successful career leap of faith when others may have given up.

Like many other Canadians, I found myself unexpectedly faced with the end of employment. I was 55 years old and had been doing IT work with the same company for 33 years. I consider myself fortunate as I was eligible for early retirement and was offered placement services as part of my package.

In addition to assisting in resume preparation and polishing my very rusty interview skills, my career coach had me do a lot of self-reflection. Did I want to continue my IT career or take the opportunity to try something completely different?

I had owned and lived in condos over the years and even been on the board of a couple of investment properties. One property manager, learning of my sudden “free time,” suggested that I might be good at being a property manager. He offered to talk to his buddy who owned a firm in the GTA about giving me an interview.

My career coach and I assessed my skills and I decided this might be a great time to give this a try. I now had to work on my “elevator pitch.” This is a brief, persuasive speech that you use to market yourself to someone else. A good one should last no

longer than 30 seconds, about the same time as a short elevator ride. It became my personal value proposition.

For me, I felt that my years of experience managing budgets, leading projects, making presentations, problem solving and supervising teams in many countries around the world would be valuable skills for a novice property manager.

During the job interview, it became evident that someone of my age, business background and prior salary range may not be taken seriously. I made it clear that I was committed for a minimum of two years if they were open to providing me an opportunity. I was fortunate to have someone who believed in taking a chance on me.

Next, I had to interview with the board of a condominium corporation that the



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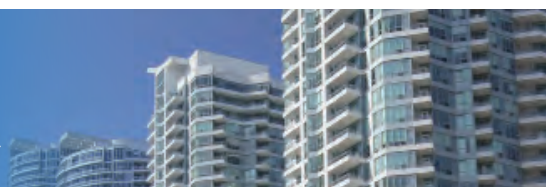


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company was taking over. It was really unique because the members of the board were all about my age and the interview was more of a discussion. Knowing from my resume that I was on condo boards they even asked me what I would be looking for in a property manager if I was them. I told them that I would want a property manager that cared about the people and building as if he/she was an owner. Before I knew it, I was participating in a turnover. My company provided amazing mentorship, training and support. The firm was being audited for ACMO 2000 certification, and it became my mantra for tailoring the site.

As I got comfortable in the position of site manager for this 226-unit building, I found that there were in fact a number of skills that carried over from my prior company.

I had come from a culture that encouraged empowerment. The building's security staff became my concierge staff, providing front office services to the residents that they already knew individually by name. They now greeted and assisted residents, provided forms, shared information, and helped maintain records. They became inspectors as

they dutifully did their security rounds, documenting cleaning and maintenance items. The residents who at first would apologize to me for making a "complaint" were told that if it was the first notice it was a report, not a complaint. Suddenly the building had 500 inspectors who would politely bring issues to our attention.

Safety was another hallmark of my prior work culture. We immediately started having regular safety meetings and ensured that everyone wore proper safety equipment and participated in quarterly fire drills. Our superintendent became our safety and health representative who took pride in vetting all our contractors performing work onsite.

Return on investment and controlling operating budget was key to triaging projects at my former employer. Our condo's board of directors were very progressive and quickly adopted any new ideas that promised a reasonable return. We successfully eliminated over \$100,000 in operating costs through initiatives such as reducing energy consumption and insurance premiums.

I think one of the strongest skills that prior experience can bring is in the area

of communication. My office door was always open, we kept our bulletin board updated, sent out quarterly newsletters and conducted quarterly information sessions for the owners. Residents were so engaged, I even had a few residents anxiously asking for the next update on our year-over-year consumption graph as we awaited our next utility bill following our LED retrofit.

However, this new opportunity was not without its challenges. I found the time commitment and responsibilities of the role to be enormous. Long hours, night school and on-call coverage were very demanding. And the problems encountered often had direct impact on people's lives and their homes. This wasn't just a work place. Then there were all the legal and regulatory requirements. I developed a whole new respect for what a property manager was required to do.

There were many enablers that helped keep me sane. Foremost I had a supportive company who provided me with ongoing training and mentorship. We had a progressive board and a great staff. We had some wonderful residents/owners and we relied on a valued group of trusted suppliers.



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Epilogue

Now, almost six years after my journey began, I am still enjoying property management. I stayed on for three years as the site property manager, completed my RCM and am now licensed. After moving to Collingwood in 2017, I co-founded Waters Edge Property Management Inc. servicing resort condominiums in the Georgian Bay and Muskoka areas.

I believe that there is a strong benefit to the individual, the property management company and the condominium corporation to take the risk of embracing this opportunity.

No regrets! ■

Harry Nielsen is a founding partner with Waters Edge Property Management Inc., specializing in resort condominium management in the Georgian Bay and Muskoka area. In 2013, after retiring from a successful 33 year career as an IT manager with Imperial Oil and ExxonMobil, Harry began a second career as a property manager with Wilson Blanchard Management. While working as a site manager, he honed his skills and obtained his RCM designation.