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Revelation: I'm not an organization man. Are you?

After taking several career detours, MARK SCHACTER finally realized that he was among the organizationally averse. And he couldn't be happier, he writes

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'Dad, how many jobs have you had?" my kids have asked.

Oh, I don't know. Seven or eight.

"How come you have a law degree? You're not a lawyer."

Uh-huh. Don't you have homework?

Some people can't hang on to a job. Others won't. I'm in the second category.

Don't even try to understand my career path. You might as well watch an ant wander around your driveway. Left, right, pause. Backward, forward, pause. What is that creature thinking?

My first major career detour was in 1980, when, after two weeks of law school, I decided it wasn't for me. But I completed the degree, then pursued what I thought was my real dream. I had been an undergraduate reporter for my campus newspaper. While at law school, I had sold freelance pieces to The Globe and Mail. The life of a journalist was what I wanted.

I landed a job at a small-town newspaper in South Africa. Then I worked for United Press International in Johannesburg and London. A year later, I took a job in The Wall Street Journal's Toronto newsroom. In the newspaper world, it doesn't get better than that.

But after just two years at the Journal, I grew disillusioned, and moved with my wife-to-be to Ottawa, where I joined the federal government. Eighteen months later, I was back in school, doing an MBA. Then followed seven years at the World Bank in Washington and three jobs in Ottawa -- as a management consultant at Ernst & Young, a director at the Institute On Governance, and director of governance and corporate social responsibility at the Conference Board of Canada.

In another age, it might have been me that Robert Service was writing about in *The Men Who Don't Fit In*.

The odd thing was that I was a solid performer. My contribution was appreciated. I always departed on good terms. And it wasn't as if the organizations that employed me were trying to make my life miserable. I had the pleasure of working with good, talented people.

And yet there I was, Mr. Vagabond, with a lengthening trail of bumps in the road to explain away at the next job interview. A big part of me felt that I was at fault. There must be something I'm not doing right, I thought. Maybe I have a bad attitude. Maybe nobody really loves their job, so I should just suck it up and bank the paycheque.

But deep down, I couldn't accept this. I saw myself as talented, creative, hardworking. I was the type who ought to find professional life fulfilling -- for more than six months at a time.

And then my perspective changed. No, I didn't have an epiphany one morning. It was more about self-knowledge building gradually with age and experience -- taking me, finally, at 46, to a place where I could see things clearly.

Of course no organization could make me happy. I was not an organization man. It's hard-wired. It's in my DNA.

Management guru Tom Davenport wrote in his latest book, *Thinking for a Living*, about a breed of worker who, within a bureaucracy, can never find the freedom needed to function at a high level and be happy. It's not their fault -- it's just who they are.

Could you be an organizationophobe, too? Based on my experience, here are some telltale signals:

- When you walk into the office every morning, do you feel you're leaving your real self at the door, and becoming someone else for the next eight to 10 hours?
- Do you have a problem with the word "boss." Is it hard for you to even utter the term?
- Does your skin crawl at the thought of following procedures and being told how to do your job?
- Do you detest having to seek approval before acting?
- Do you rebel at the idea of someone telling you how much vacation you can take?
- Do you find it hard to identify with your organization's successes, or failures?

- Does the sight of office furniture, cubicles and nameplates send a chill down your spine?
- Are you unable to even pretend to enjoy the enforced camaraderie of corporate retreats and picnics?
- Do you find it painful to wear a company baseball cap or t-shirt?
- Have you realized the prospect of a promotion doesn't excite you?

If you're a high performer, and more than a couple of these apply to you, well, you just might be among the organizationally averse.

Just recognizing this is an important step. You can stop feeling that you have failed and focus on the more productive exercise of figuring out what to do.

The options are limited. I've found that organizations won't go far to accommodate your need for autonomy. There are, after all, plenty of talented people who thrive in organizations. So it boils down to two choices -- stay or leave organizational life.

You give up a lot when you leave an organization, and so, even for an organizationophobe, there are definite attractions. Salary and benefits are not to be sniffed at, nor is support from administrative assistants, office technology and so forth. And if you enjoy the substance of your work, then that may counter the bureaucratic drag on your psyche.

As for me, I decided to leave. I incorporated my own consulting company in 2003. I'm making enough money, enjoying my independence and doing interesting work. I've escaped the tyranny of the office. I'm a master of my own tiny corporate empire.

There's no IT guy a few floors away to help when something breaks, no accounts receivable department to chase invoices, no marketing staff to rustle up business, no salary arriving like clockwork and no pension.

But I can live with that.

And my kids can, too. How many dads have a corporate seal and their own executive bathroom? My older daughter has already had me talk about self-employment to her high-school careers class. In view of how many careers I've had, I told her, it was an inspired choice of guest speaker.

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