

When his ship comes in ...

Creator of online job board for high flyers lives on boat to save money

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His Web site may be the only online job board for Canada's richest positions, but his bid to revolutionize the country's six-figure careers has left the site's Vancouver founder living on a boat to save money.

Higherbracket.ca lists thousands of the positions many people dream of: \$200,000 sales managers, \$150,000 corporate tax managers, an occasional \$400,000 CEO posting.

But traditional job Web sites such as monster.com and workopolis.com, which allow users to browse listings for free, don't work for jobs in that part of the stratosphere, said Higherbracket founder Tony Kaul, who left his own high-paid sales job to launch the site.

"You put a \$180,000-a-year marketing job in Toronto on Workopolis, you get 3,000 applications and 2,980 are complete crap. It's drinking from a firehose. You can't handle it," he said.

So Mr. Kaul turned the business model on its head. Instead of charging per job posting, he allows companies and recruiting agencies to post for free, while charging job-browsers \$25 a month to access the listings. That obstacle helps screen out most opportunists, and his own surveys have found that 60% of users are what he calls "passive candidates" -- people with existing jobs who tend to make the best hires.

"We give [a company] 23 applications and they want to look at 19 of them," he said. "They love it."

Still, some recruiters doubt the site will last, given that an estimated 80% of high-paying jobs go through recruitment agencies whose value lies in their ability to headhunt from huge internal databases of competent people.

"I'll tell your right now, this is going to crash and burn," said Lance Osborne, the president of Lannick Associates, the country's largest executive search firm for accounting professionals.

His experience has shown that internet boards often draw from the ranks of the unemployed and desperate -- a pool that does not generally include the best people, he said.

"In my experience, nine times out of 10 the best candidate is gainfully employed. Maybe not perfectly happily employed, but the guy isn't sending his resumes to web postings," he said.

"Where the Web really works is if you're looking for a more junior person, where you're very much a doer as opposed to a manager. If you need something where you're part of the executive team or management team, or you have a strong people, cultural or personality component, you don't get those guys from the Internet."

Mr. Kaul has spent the past year trying to persuade people like Mr. Osborne

otherwise, and says his efforts have paid off, with the Web site beating his growth targets and adding 1,500 subscribers -- about 15% of them paid -- a month.

He and his staff of six have established relationships with 4,300 recruiters in Canada, who have in turn stocked the site with more than 3,000 jobs -- many of them at the director level or higher.

Those firms see an opportunity to find people they may not otherwise know.

"It's very difficult to track people down if they have changed an industry," said Ian MacArthur, the director and chief operating officer of Madison MacArthur, Inc., a mid-sized executive search company in Toronto. "So this Higherbracket is one of those opportunities that you have to identify people that have the kind of background you're looking for, but you wouldn't normally find."

That kind of feedback is welcome for Mr. Kaul, who sank his life's savings into the online endeavour, keeping his own life afloat by moving his family to the marina.

Since founding the site he has lived off a government grant with his wife and two young children in the wood-panelled belly of the 44-foot Silkie C moored in Vancouver's False Creek. Inside, space is so tight the family's tiny Christmas tree blocks out their small television and the kids play above-decks to avoid the cramped quarters below.

"You have to get used to it and you have to get along," says the 36-year-old sailing buff. He figures trading condo life for the dock will save him \$35,000 in mortgage payments.

"That buys a programmer."

Mr. Kaul's introduction to business came on the frostbitten streets of northern Alberta, where he took a job selling Kirby vacuum cleaners as an 18-year-old looking to pay his way through the University of Alberta.

He made enough to buy a house within his first year, and was soon rewriting the company's sales manuals. After six years with Kirby, he managed sales teams with several skin and hair product companies before settling into a job as director of eastern North American marketing for hcareers.com, an online hotel and restaurant job posting site.

That experience sold him on the Internet.

"The light went on about an online business model. The marginal cost structure is just fantastic because there is none," he said.

Armed with knowledge of the jobs industry, he surveyed the market and discovered U.S. sites such as 6figurejobs.com and theladders.com - but no Canadian equivalent.

In deciding to follow a life-long dream of starting his own business, he found it matched his other life passion: sailing.

"Entrepreneurialism to me in business is like offshore sailing is in the rest of life," he said. "I get the same thrill when I'm 200 miles offshore. There's nobody to call. There's no backup. It's your wits and preparation, and have you done things correctly? Do you know enough about it? I mean, it's a rush."

The rush has paid dividends, said Mr. Kaul, who this fall for the first time reached his operational break-even point -- though he has yet to draw a cheque from the Web site.

"In my opinion we've been wildly successful," he said.

He plans to add a resume database and French-language capabilities to Higherbracket early next year. Still, he can't help but thinking of selling the

site -- though he's not actively peddling it -- and sailing around the world.

"I'm sure that eventually somebody's going to offer me enough money that it's going to be, '56-foot catamaran, a couple years off? OK'," he said.

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