

Business

Far from the pasture

Prime 50 fills need for older workers seeking jobs

By SUZANNE ROBICHEAU

In the space of a year, Paul Roy went from being unemployed to running his own employment agency in Halifax.

Last November he was downsized from his job. At 50, he should have been consolidating his career; instead he was starting fresh – and it wasn't easy.

"I was at the age where I was getting ignored," he says, because of a human resources mindset that the best employees are under 30.

The hardest part is self-esteem, he says. You get up in the morning and make every effort to be positive, but at the end of the week there's no paycheque.

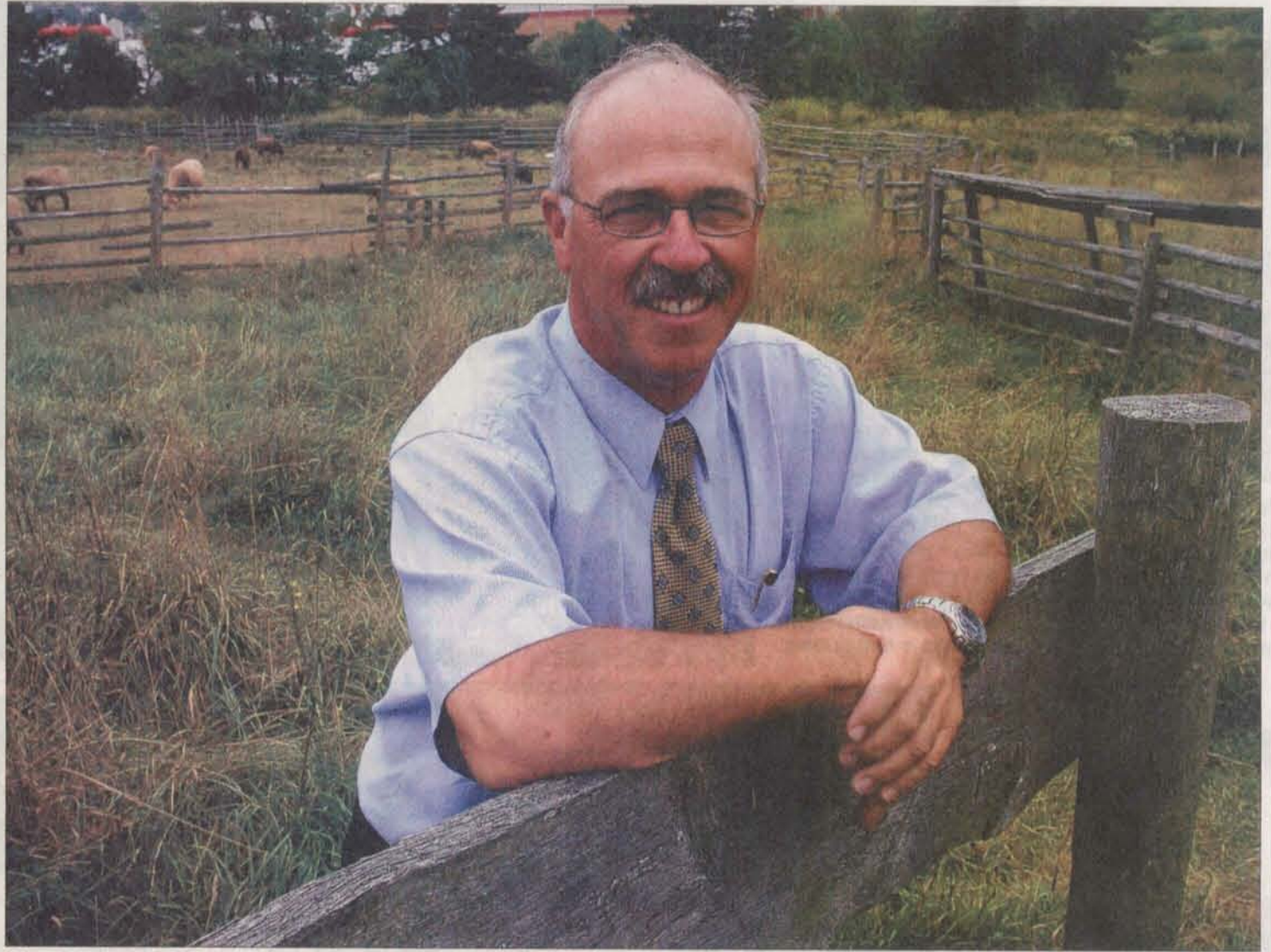
Last spring he met Barry Witkin, founder and CEO of Prime 50 Employment Services, a new company dedicated to finding employment for the over-50 worker.

Witkin had already hired general managers for five offices across Canada. He was looking for someone for the Atlantic region. Roy was looking for a new career. He was the sixth general manager to come on board. Roy was at the right place at the right time. But more important, he was at the right age.

Unlike many companies, Prime 50 wasn't looking for young blood. In fact, Roy's blood was just the right age for an employment service dedicated to older workers. Another company might not have hired him.

There's a myth that older workers are less productive, that they're inflexible, expensive and technologically challenged. But Witkin wasn't buying it. In 2003 the Ontario chartered accountant got the idea for his company after watching a 60 Minutes program about demographic shifts in the workforce.

The decline in the baby boom promised a looming shortage of skilled workers. Witkin thought



Prime 50's Paul Roy leans on a fence at a farm in Cole Harbour on Friday. Prime 50 is an employment service for people over age 50.

(PETER PARSONS / Staff)

that older workers could fill the void. He didn't believe people are content to do nothing, and envisioned a business that would help them find work.

Witkin refutes the myths about older workers. They're just as productive as their younger colleagues, he maintains. And they're more flexible because they've learned to adjust to new environments. Rather than being more expensive, they're sometimes less expensive, because they're more receptive to contract work. And as for technology, Witkin says colleges and night schools are full of adult learners who recognize the importance of technological fluency.

Years ago, 50 seemed old. Now it's at the young end of middle

adulthood, a period stretching from 45 to 65. Middle adults comprise a highly talented, highly employable group. It's also a very diverse group. Some people want a change. Others have retired and want another challenge. Still others have been downsized. They're looking for opportunities and offering an excellent source of experience and loyalty.

Prime 50 facilitates their job search by offering a free online employment service, www.prime50.com. There are already several thousand registrants across Canada. Thousands more have hit the website.

Roy is gearing up for a workshop in Halifax. For \$80 participants get what he describes as the quick on cover letters, re-

sume writing and job search strategies.

"Often their confidence has been eroded," says Witkin. "One of our jobs is to shore it up."

Business at Prime 50 Maritimes had been slower than Roy anticipated, but it's starting to pick up.

In Atlantic Canada, there's still a stigma attached to losing one's job, although in large urban centres like Toronto, downsizing is fairly common for those from middle management to directors.

Being fired is almost a badge of honour. It means you've pushed the system, says Roy, that you're not simply a toady.

Roy is optimistic about the future, boasting that Prime 50 is

the only employment service of its kind in North America. However, it isn't the first to recognize the value of older workers. Home Depot has an in-house program to recruit and hire from the middle-age group.

Financial centres and call centres prefer mature workers at the supervisory level and above. Investment companies and insurance agencies also prefer older workers.

The older worker offers unique strengths and attitudes. "They actually make eye contact," laughs Roy.

They also have a quiet confidence and an edge when it comes to contract work, treating it as the audition for a job. It

See ROY / A15

SHI
REG

MONDAY
Ceres: MV
MV Ossian
Pier 30: MV

TUESDAY
Halterm: M
Ceres: MV

WEDNESD
Halterm: M
Ceres: MV

THURSDAY
Halterm: M
la Pilar

FRIDAY
Ceres: MV
Ossian
Halterm: M
Melfi Hava
Autoport: M

SATURDAY
Ceres: MV
Halterm: M
Sanderling
Pier 26: MV

SUNDAY
Ceres: MV
Pier 28: MV

SMALL



KAREN

Ca
be
ser

CANA
Unit
bec
ing
producing
leased from
and the U.S.
Administra
real impact
small-busin
Anita Car
Small Busin