

Recruiter

Hugh Andrée

29 June 2011 | By [Colin Cottell](#)

Colin Cottell interviews the founder of **ForceSelect**

Those life-changing 'where were you when JFK was shot?' moments are few and far between when recruiters dissect and analyse their careers. When looking back at defining moments, Hugh Andrée, founder of **ForceSelect**, is an exception.

"I was cycling to Paris for [the charity] Help for Heroes in May 2009," he recalls. "It was while cycling through the sunflower fields in Versailles that I cycled into a swarm of bumblebees, narrowly missing a lorry, when I realised there has got to be more that we can do to help service personnel."

Emboldened by his new purpose, and drawing on his 14 years' experience in recruitment, Andrée returned to the UK and began work on founding **ForceSelect**, a recruitment business for service leavers from Britain's armed forces.

From the very beginning, Andrée says the intention was to create a recruitment business with a difference. "Fundamentally, it's a recruitment business, and it does exactly what it says on the tin, but it does a bit more," he explains.

Andrée draws on an anecdote about the founder of McDonald's, Ray Kroc. Addressing a group of Harvard alumni, Kroc asked what business they thought McDonald's was in. Burgers, came back the predictable reply. "I have no interest in burgers," Kroc responded, pointing out that McDonald's is the largest owner of private property outside the Catholic Church. "**ForceSelect** is a bit like that," says Andrée.

A major plank of **ForceSelect**'s work is to help service leavers make the transition from military to civilian life. As Andrée explains, after the military's well-established structures the journey into 'Civvy Street' can be a worrying and traumatic experience. "It's not just as simple as leaving one bank and joining another," he says.

Challenges range from what might appear the relatively mundane opening a bank account to finding housing and schools for children.

"It's about continuity of care. We want to create good citizens who pay their taxes, and to contribute to keeping them off the welfare state." The process generally begins six months before service personnel are due to leave, when the firm's consultants contact them. One question is to check they are making the most of the help from the services themselves, such as support with training, housing and schools.

It's the sort of support and advice that Andrée himself could have done with. After he left the Army in 1997, having served as an officer, including in Bosnia and Northern Ireland, he recalls driving out of the barracks on the main street of Omagh. "I arrived in London two days later with £500 in my pocket and slept on a mate's floor. I was an officer, deemed to be reasonably bright and I didn't really know what to do, and there wasn't anyone around to help. It was an extremely difficult period in my life and I didn't want anyone else to have to go through that."

Fast forward to today and **ForceSelect** has placed 200 service leavers into jobs and has 5,000 candidates on its books. In its short history it has already won a number of household name clients, including UPS and British Gas, and is on the verge of doubling its turnover to more than £1m and its staff to 28. In May, it won the Best Newcomer Agency Award at the Recruiter Awards for Excellence, supported by Innovate CV.

ForceSelect's niche approach extends to only employing consultants who have served in the armed forces. Having successfully recruited accountants at Martin Ward Anderson without having worked as an accountant, Andrée says he thought "long and hard about it".

He believes the policy builds credibility among candidates and sees it as one of the firm's unique selling points. "All my consultants can look them in the eye and say 'yep, I know how you feel I've been there' and they immediately get the trust of the person in front of them."

Those that are placed into work continue to receive support through a team of 80/90 mentors. These are individuals that have made a successful transition from military to civilian life and can offer impartial advice on how to adjust, Andrée explains.

Andrée is proud to support what he describes as “effectively a cradle-to-grave approach”. However, there are hard-headed business reasons at work too. “There is a lot more to an individual’s performance at work than just turning up. If the candidates are happy and happy at home, they will do a good job, and I will have happy clients.”

And Andržė insists that while ForceSelect has a clear social purpose, to be successful, and to raise as much money as possible for its Foundation, which contributes to several services charities, it must operate on hard-headed business lines. “Absolutely, it’s a business,” insists Andrée, who says he can’t afford to run it at a loss. And while he admits the mentoring and support are a cost, they are worth absorbing, he says, “because the company is doing the right thing, and providing a service that service leavers can’t get from anywhere else”.

As with so many in recruitment, after his rather traumatic exit from the army, Andrée drifted into recruitment, first at Martin Ward Anderson. He then worked with Brian Hamill helping to set up and list Imprint. He still runs Stamford Executive Search, a City search firm, as well as a wealth management business.

A self-confessed ‘talking head’ on issues related to the armed forces, in conjunction with The Sun newspaper, Andrée also launched Jobs for Heroes in March 2010.

One of ForceSelect’s directors is ex-SAS man and best-selling author, Andy McNab. “I know Andy of old,” says Andrée, somewhat mysteriously.

Secret of my success People say I am a fighter. I never take a backward step. I don’t quit and I treat people fairly. You need tenacity in this game

Andrée says there are plenty of jobs out there for those who want to work. For him, the biggest challenge is educating employers about the value of service leavers and how to make best use of them. He bemoans that many employers still hold “a very stereotypical view” that service leavers either go into security, the defence industry or possibly for ex-officers into stock broking.

Andrée says his “winning argument” is that ex-forces personnel are “trained, and motivated, and that they work well under pressure, but most of all they want to work”. He adds: “They don’t they want to be seen by their peers as failures outside the armed forces.”

Many service leavers themselves don’t realise what they have to offer, so ForceSelect runs career seminars both abroad and in the UK to help individuals to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to assess their suitability for specific employers and roles. The approach is clearly finding favour with service leavers, with 40 registering with the company every day.

ForceSelect also helps injured service personnel. Andrée says the key is to understand that they don’t want to be seen as special cases or as victims. “The most important thing is to find challenging roles that will be rewarding, where they feel they can add value.” In one example, ForceSelect placed a young marine, who had lost an arm and a leg, into a job as a motivational speaker for young people. Rather than seeking sympathy, his approach was “to get back up and to get mobile as quickly as possible”, says Andrée, who admits he found working with this individual “humbling”.

Employers too are coming on board. UPS, ForceSelect’s first client began with a request for 15 drivers a month. This has now developed to include not only an entry-level programme, but a fast-track management programme too. Andrée says there are similarities between UPS and the armed forces that make the two organisations natural partners. “It’s a very structured business for example, [apparently] UPS has 360 different ways to deliver a parcel, and they have their drills in the same way as the armed forces have theirs. The type of person who performs well in a controlled and structured environment finds that transition relatively seamless,” he adds.

Hugh Andrée’s philosophy To find real opportunities that are right for the individual and that they can do, and to help them work with people they like and respect

UPS’s hierarchical structure is also similar, allowing staff to pursue a defined career path. ForceSelect was also able to save UPS the cost of hiring in forklift truck driver instructors for its London Olympics contract because so many services forklift truck drivers are also qualified instructors.

British Gas, another client, is now recruiting service leavers to work as solar panel fitters.

A national retailer that approached Andrée because it was unable to find individuals with leadership and management experience, who can also manage stores, has also found a rich source of talent. As Andrée points out every corporal, sergeant and colour sergeant has experience of running stores even if the contents ammunition, guns, and oil are unlikely to be found on the premises of the average high street retailer.

As its client base expands, Andrée says the company is set to move out of its cramped offices in Soho in July to the third floor of Centre Point. Andrée says he expects to increase the number of staff from its current 12 to 28. Beyond this, Andrée plans to open offices in Leeds and Birmingham within the next 12 months and eventually to expand to seven offices.

Andrée is determined to build a legacy that will continue to benefit service leavers after he has gone. "This isn't a job for me," he says. "People ask me 'why do I work seven days a week, 24/7, make huge sacrifices and take big hits in my personal life?' It's a vocation, it's a way of life, it's a hobby."

Andrée may have left the army more than a decade ago, but the bonds that bind him to his old life, and now drive him relentlessly on in his current career, are clearly as strong and as powerful as ever.

Company Profile

Began trading – December 2009
 Turnover – December 2009 to January 2011: £500,000
 Year one accounts being finalised – anticipates break-even
 Turnover forecast for next calendar year – £1,208,000
 Number of staff – 12
 Number of placements – 200
 Number of service leavers on books – 5,000

Curriculum Vitae

Education

Kings School Canterbury

1987-88 Royal Military Academy Sandhurst

1988-1997 British Army

1997-2001 manager, Martin Ward Anderson

2001-06 managing director Imprint

2006- Chief executive, Stamford Executive Search

2009- Founder, ForceSelect

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