

Israelis log out of high-tech jobs for a life offline

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Former technology executive Dotan Goshen carefully arranges some melons at the bottom of a crate, followed by courgettes, tomatoes and lettuce.

With a smile of satisfaction, he contemplates his "organic basket" ready to be delivered to a customer.

Goshen, a graduate of Israel's prestigious Technion technological institute, made a dramatic change of course after his boss called him at home one evening and berated him for not devoting himself sufficiently to his work—even though he was putting in at least 50 hours a week.

The following day, the 37-year-old father of three handed in his resignation and set out to realise his dream of producing organic fruit and vegetables.

He is one of a growing number of Israelis who entered the flourishing high-tech industry at a young age before abandoning high-flying jobs and good salaries for a lifestyle more suited to their ideals.

The phenomenon is not uniquely Israeli.

In many technologically advanced countries, executives are being tempted by adventure, the chance to embrace a simpler, healthier lifestyle and by the "search for self".

But, in Israel where job mobility is the norm and recruitment tends to be more informal than elsewhere, the desire for change is heightened, said Daniel Barkat, himself a former tech executive who switched to producing vegan chocolate.

The army hothouse

"In Israel, when you leave the (army's) 8200 unit without a university education, you can find yourself launched into a position of responsibility in high-tech, then wanting to do something different after a few years," he explained.

Israelis are drafted into the army aged 18 and generally begin higher education only after completion of their service.

The elite 8200 military unit collates and analyses intelligence using sophisticated information technology.

In a country where most youngsters perform mandatory military service—32 months for men and two years for women—8200 is considered the superhighway to a job in the lucrative tech field.

Many of its veterans have gone on to found internet technology startups.

Recruited to a management job in a financial information company directly after his military service, Barkat, now 29, abandoned that world to create his chocolate business.

"At the age of 24 I had achieved what adults spend their entire lives to achieve: steady, prestigious, well-paid work," he said.

"But my work was very technical, boring, meaningless. I asked myself, 'where do I go now?'"

A vegan, like a growing number of Israelis, he and his girlfriend launched a line of chocolate substituting coconut and soya for milk.

Tough transition

His company now employs 12 people and its products are distributed to about 100 points of sale around the country.

The high proportion of the Israeli labour force employed in technology—an estimated 10 percent—increases the likelihood of early migration to other sectors, said Daniel Haber, consultant and author of "Surprises of the Economy of Israel".

The transition can be tough, said Eli Cohen, who left a job at one of Israel's largest mobile phone operators to teach a holistic wellbeing method combining tai chi and qi gong exercise and meditation techniques.

"It wasn't easy at first, it didn't work," he said. "I had to keep working a bit in my field and learn at the same time the secrets of my new vocation."

Goshen said he has changed his priorities since the career shift.

"Before, I had a company car, a very good salary and today I do not know exactly how much I earn, but to spend more time with my family and to have this contact with the soil is priceless."

In Israel, the desire to return to spirituality and to the soil seen in other countries has an added connotation of nostalgia for the early, pioneering days of the Jewish state, said Haber.

"In this country under pressure—exacerbated pressure, in the case of

high-tech—there is nostalgia for the old days of the kibbutz, sharing, the foundational and spiritual myths of the state."

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