

# Seeking out success

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## THE INTERVIEW

**W**E are waiting for the hairdresser or, more correctly, for the hairdresser's client who has kept the hairdresser waiting and who is now keeping us waiting.

A few minutes later the phone rings. It's her. She is in the car. "It's a two-minute drive from the penthouse but it can take half an hour if she gets on her mobile," says a staff member.

Several more minutes pass and then with the sound of her voice preceding her appearance by at least 60 seconds, she and her newly coiffed hair sweep into the room and the day proper begins.

Her staff had been there for hours but I sense that the day at The Russo Centre does not truly start until the Empress is at her desk.

"This year I've had the biggest challenges of my 30 years in business," says Sarina Russo, launching into one of her trademark monologues.

"I bottomed when we lost that government work, when after 30 years in Queensland they didn't think I had the capacity. It was like being in a tsunami without a life jacket. I had to decide what I wanted for this company."

It was in April that the "tsunami" hit when the Federal Government restructured Job Network and slashed the amount of work it gave to organisations such as Russo's Job Access as well as Wesley Mission, the Salvation Army and Mission Australia.

"I could have gone two ways. I could have closed all those offices down and made 150 staff redundant in Queensland because I didn't have a viable business in the job network. It was really a very fragile time for the business," she says.

"But I knew our brand was strong and that I had no debt and more than anything I wanted to ensure the security of my staff so I rang all the managers and said, 'What can we do?'"

"It was like going back to the past. I had a breakfast for all the staff and said we weren't closing anything down and that every job was secure. I said we would just

get going and let the job-seekers and employers decide."

The decision, she said, was not without risk but meant that she was well placed to take advantage of the upturn that followed.

"The next thing I got work from other providers and we picked up all the work that we'd lost. In revenue we lost tens and tens of millions but we've got it all back and more."

Russo says that despite 30 years business experience, she didn't see the crisis coming. "We were a high-performing office," she says with an incredulous shrug. "We were No. 1 in Australia and suddenly, based on that tender outcome – and I accepted the outcome – we were no longer relevant in Queensland."

"Everyone else made people redundant. They were putting off 150, 200, 350 people and closing offices but we didn't do any of that and all the job-seekers all came swarming back to us."

Russo's business is her life. She built it, made a lot of money in the process and after 30 years, her pride in her achievements is palpable. "I have no debt so we can leverage against our properties. We're a low-gear operation and I think I've got to thank my father, who always used to say, 'Pay your bills and pay off your debt.'"

She draws a comparison between herself and failed childcare provider Eddy Groves.

"You look at people like Eddy Groves who had a very different philosophy and he was caught out whereas with us, the banks just want to keep lending us money."

She says she will continue building her company's property portfolio, and I ask if given that she already has a Russo Square, Russo Centre, Russo Place and Russo Circle, she might have exhausted the possibilities for eponymous buildings.

"You're right. Maybe I should ring Donald Trump and ask what he's now calling his buildings?" she says, smiling.

Having spent three decades consolidating her business in Australia, she says she is now poised to expand into the UK.

"I've invested many, many dollars over the past 12 months in the UK. We co-partnered and didn't win anything but we didn't give up and now we're tendering in our own right. I think we'll be bigger in the UK than we are in Australia. I've been spending a lot of time in the UK," she says.

Born in 1951, she says she is fitter now

that when she started her business in 1979.

"You're as old as you feel. I run 5½km in 24 minutes and I've bought a bike," she says.

I asked if, as I had heard, she rode a Gucci bike. She smiles and says that it's true she has a Gucci bike and that she has no idea how much it cost.

Retirement, she says, is not part of her plan. "I know I could be on the beach enjoying the sun every day. Why keep working? But I say that if you've got the capacity to do more, you're cheating yourself if you don't do it."

A confessed consumer of self-motivational books and seminars, she extols the virtues of mental discipline.

"It's not what happens but what you do about it," she says. "I've been into motivational seminars for 30 years. I breathe it, eat it and exercise it. My job is my lifestyle."

Russo enjoys being in control and has no regrets at not listing her company on the stock exchange.

"I'm glad we never made this company public or had an equity partner who may have told me I would have had to make staff redundant. I'm my own boss. It's pretty cool," she says.

Russo has never married but says that she accepts this as the way things have turned out.

"It doesn't bother me. Marriage is not for everybody. I love who I am and don't think about it. I guess I'm different," she says shrugging. "My family's expectation was for me to be married and maybe it was because my father kept on saying this that I wanted to defy him."

She concedes that when she started the business, her ambition then did not envision a company of the size she has built.

"Thirty years ago all I wanted was to get out of being a legal secretary and gain financial independence.

"I've worked two jobs, a day job and a night job and I've hit the lows and I know what it's like and I never want to be there again.

"And I'll tell you one thing," she says, "I'm never going back to being a legal secretary."

Even given future tsunamis, that seems unlikely to happen.

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**WINNING  
BRAND:**  
Russo's Job  
Access boss  
Sarina  
Russo says  
'My job is  
my lifestyle'.  
**Picture:**  
Mark Calleja