

Career clinic

Once you've completed your MBA, you'll find a host of new obstacles to negotiate. Our experts – Steve Carter, managing director of Robert Half International; Sally Glover, manager of Cranfield School of Management's Career Development Service; and Jane Barrett, director of Workmaze – give their advice on how best to take your next steps.

THE PANEL

Jane Barrett is director of career coaching consultancy, Workmaze. She began her career as a chartered surveyor before changing direction to become a career consultant. Jane was employed as a recruitment manager for PricewaterhouseCoopers and as a head-hunter for an international search and selection company before founding Workmaze, whose clients include top business schools in the UK, Europe and the US.

Steve Carter is managing director, UK and Ireland, of Robert Half International. Born in Sydney, he started his career as a trainee accountant. But after majoring in accounting at the University of New South Wales, he joined a finance recruitment company and stayed there for eight years. He then launched a specialist finance recruitment division for the Australian arm of a major high-street recruiter. Later, back in the UK, Steve moved to an operational role at Robert Half International and was promoted to UK managing director in 2000.

Sally Glover became manager of the Cranfield School of Management Career Development Service in April 2002. She has spent over 20 years in education and training both as teacher and manager including 18 years with the British Army. Sally holds a BA in Russian from Sheffield University and a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. She is also a member of the Cranfield MBA admissions board.

How realistic is it to make a career change immediately after the MBA, given general recruitment slow-down of the last three years?

Barrett: If you're still doing your MBA, you should align your project/internship and coursework towards your objectives to gain experience and contacts. I recommend clients have contingency plans they can work towards in tandem with their main career-change goal. Then they can consider ways to make a partial career change if the total career change doesn't happen immediately. They might consider an industry change or return to a similar function they want to work in, therefore gaining experience before making the switch.

Glover: For MBA graduates with two to four years' career experience, it is easier to make a switch as they may be suitable for the rotational training programmes offered by some large corporations. For older career-changers, however, things get tough. Convincing risk-averse hiring managers that your skills and qualities will bridge any experience gap requires real self-awareness – a thorough understanding of your key transferable skills. Good interview technique and communications skills will help you to demonstrate that you have high levels of commitment and enthusiasm for the job, and the willingness and ability to pick up what you don't already know, sharpish.

Carter: In a competitive market, employers look for directly relevant work or sector experience. Unless you are entering an induction programme that welcomes broad experience, such as those still found in banking or consultancy, you'll face a challenge if you want to make a radical change of direction. But if you are committed, try to draw parallels between your previous and target role and between the sectors you have worked in and

hope to enter. Above all show how you have contributed to a past employers success. The bottom line counts every time!

It's taking longer than I hoped to find my next job. I don't want to rush into something less than ideal just to pay the bills, but need to be doing some constructive work between career moves. What type of stop-gap roles will look acceptable on my CV?

Barrett: Try to find work that's related to the job you are targeting. Short-term project work or consultancy work is ideal. If you have chosen your internship or project well, additional consultancy work can lead on from this. If you are struggling to find paid, related work and need to pay the bills then take the less-than-ideal work (you have to eat!) and don't put it in your CV. In the meantime, do related work, even if it's part-time or voluntary, and add this related experience to your CV.

Glover: Keeping your industry knowledge up-to-date with short-term projects demonstrates proactivity and a keen interest in your profession. CV-wise, the best short-term roles will add well-respected organisations, cutting-edge knowledge, or new responsibilities for people, projects or budgets to your existing resumé. Ideally, each assignment will provide you with an achievement in the form of a problem that you solved or a challenging business issue that you managed. Career-wise, the best short-term roles are those that expand your network of contacts and provide high-profile exposure.

Carter: Even if you can't find the ideal permanent role, you can start building up very valuable experience by taking on a project or interim management position. The key is to target a sector or discipline that is directly relevant to your target job. Short-term roles can also turn into "working interviews", which give a potential employer the chance to evaluate



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Steve Carter

your skills over an extended period and can lead to an offer of full-time employment.

What's the best way to make use of head-hunters or recruitment agencies?

Barrett: Minimise your frustration by understanding how they work and where their interests lie. Contrary to popular belief, their client isn't you but the company that is recruiting and paying their fees. Be clear on what you have to offer, I recommend using bullet points on your covering letter to emphasise how your experience meets the job criteria. This makes it easier for the busy head-hunter to market you to their clients or single you out for interview.

Glover: Be very clear about what you want and check that they can realistically provide it. Like most services, a recommendation from a satisfied customer is valuable. I would not recommend dealing with any firm that doesn't feel the need to meet you and get to know you first. Check out their code of conduct and ethics, and that they belong to the Recruitment & Employment Confederation. If you feel confident with the company, you could offer a period of exclusivity to encourage a good relationship.

Carter: Pick a recruitment consultant that specialises in your target sector or job type and set about developing a relationship with them. Start by providing them with a clear and succinct picture of what you are looking for, your skills and experience and, if possible, try to meet them. Listen to their advice and act upon it. Remember that these are people who operate in the employment market every day of their working lives.

How do I answer the question "What salary are you looking for?" at interviews? I don't want to sell myself short or go in too high.

Barrett: Don't bring it up unless they do. It's best not to get pinned down with this question, so negotiate the job content before talking about salary. I recommend clients say "the market rate" to deflect a question about salary before the job content has been decided and you are the preferred candidate. You may get pressed to name a figure if the interviewer thinks it may be an issue, so do your research by looking at comparable jobs and give a ball-park range.

Glover: Pre-interview research is essential if you don't want to be short-changed. Find the appropriate pay scale and benchmark yourself against it. You can then determine a range of, say, £10,000, in which you would be happy to negotiate. Before you do, consider two things, firstly, what is so good about you that makes you worth the salary? Secondly, why do you want the job? Being confident about your abilities will help you bid for a better deal, while remembering all the good things about the role and package will help you weigh up the offer if they are reluctant to meet your target figure.

Carter: Ideally you will have been briefed in advance either by the company or your recruitment consultant about the salary and the benefits on offer. If not, ask! If a salary range is on offer then pitch yourself somewhere in the middle, unless you honestly feel that your background and experience merits more. Also, do some benchmarking. Use the salary surveys produced by the major recruitment firms to see what other employers are offering for similar roles. If you're offered a low-

reward package, quote your research and ask why.

What is competency interviewing? How do I prepare for it and why do employers use it?

Glover: Competency-based interviewing requires the candidate to demonstrate key skills and qualities by describing, from experience, examples of the desired behaviour in the workplace or another relevant situation. A well-structured competency-based interview has been shown by psychologists to improve the likelihood of selecting a good candidate by up to 14 per cent. To prepare, you'll need to ascertain the main competencies of the role in question (consult the job specification or advert, or even the relevant professional association) and then think of occasions you best demonstrated each one.

Barrett: This is a fairly common interview technique in larger firms where they have a competency framework. You can prepare by identifying competencies from the job ad or job specification. They tend to be softer skills that are difficult to evaluate from reading a CV such as "the ability to motivate others" and "strong communication skills".

Carter: The traditional job description has been superseded in many organisations by this competency-based model which breaks a role down into the key skills and attributes required to perform it effectively. Preparing fully for this type of interview is difficult, but you can research the company to try to anticipate what its priority concerns are likely to be and, if possible, talk to current employees who have already gone through the process.