

Career clinic

Behind the big promises of business success on completion of an MBA lurk some difficult questions. An expert panel composed of Margaret Stead, chief executive of Careers International; Jane Barrett, director of Workmaze; and Keith Folkes, director of Proteus Consultancy give the answers.

THE PANEL

Margaret Stead is CEO of Careers International. Careers International has been offering international MBA graduates career development programmes in workshops and personal programmes since 1994.

Jane Barrett is director of career coaching consultancy, Workmaze. After an early career as a chartered surveyor she changed direction to become a recruitment consultant. A former recruitment manager for PricewaterhouseCoopers and a headhunter for an international search and selection company, Barrett founded Workmaze in 1999 and works with many top business schools in the UK, Europe and the US.

Keith Folkes is a director of Proteus Consultancy, one of the leading career management organisations in the UK. Proteus is a market leader in facilitating career change for professionals and provides a number of specialist career planning programmes specifically designed for MBA graduates.

My MBA hasn't clarified my career thinking as much as I thought it would. Should I be worried?

Stead: Over 80 per cent of MBAs do it to change their lives. My career workshops suggest half of recent MBA graduates still have no idea how they're going to progress their careers. Many hold reservations that by picturing what their future might involve, they are limiting their options at a time when they believe the sky should be the limit. Not true. Defining what your offering is and what that could entail really helps you focus on your potential. Suspend your left-brain activity. You can plan a strategy. Look at what you've achieved so far and dig deep into the underlying themes of your work. You'll probably find that that's what you enjoy and what you're good at. Then I'd suggest you look to make yourself into a centre of excellence in whatever that theme is.

Barrett: You need to take steps to rectify this situation. Having clear career objectives is crucial to successful job search, as without this you can appear unfocussed and muddled. Use assessment exercises to help you gain clarity.

Folkes: Worried – no, but you should have thought through your career strategy before you embarked on the MBA. In other words, the MBA should be part of the implementation of an understood strategy with the achievement of the MBA providing a planned step change in your career advancement. It might be an idea to now stand back and review your career plan as a whole, using professional career planning help if necessary.

After 18 years' experience working in one sector, is it really possible to change sectors?

Stead: The qualification will give you a lot of the skills you need, but you've got to work on looking at yourself in order to see your own relevance. Detail is the key. Talk to people in the industry. You need to get close to it to see whether the skills you have fit the industry you have in mind.

Barrett: It is possible and easier than changing function but it requires commitment. Recently, I worked with a client changing industry and we had to remove industry jargon from his CV and make sure his achievements applied to the industry he had targeted.

Folkes: It depends on a number of factors. Some functions like Finance and HR, for example, are relatively portable between sectors. The more your knowledge becomes product related, as for example with engineers and to a lesser extent marketing and business management people, the more a potential employer will seek out specialised product knowledge. Even so, career management experience teaches us that sector change can be achieved for all organisational functions with careful presentation and self marketing. Changing function and sector simultaneously is more difficult, but can be achieved, sometimes utilising two or three moves as part of a medium-term strategy.

Is the CV still the important tool it was 10 years ago?

Stead: No. Not in any way. If you can pick the people you want to work with and talk to them using their language, you can sell your services. A CV only gets in the way. People are reluctant to take responsibility for your life. CV equals life. You have to switch from thinking about yourself to thinking about what other people need and how you can gift your services to them. How can you assess potential from a chronological document?



"A weblog is more likely to get you bombarded by headhunters than a CV"
Margaret Stead



"Remove jargon from your CV to make sure your achievements apply to the industry you have targeted"
Jane Barrett



"Sector change can be achieved for all functions with careful presentation and self marketing"
Keith Folkes

CVs were never easy tools to use. They carry a lot of prejudice: what should be on it, how long should it be... CVs are screened in eight seconds on five to seven competencies. If you're not a match for the role, you'll hit the maybe or no pile and never get seen again. You need to leave behind traditional methods of finding work – CV and applying to job adverts. Be proactive. Starting a weblog that focuses on your offering and tells the universe that you're available is more likely to get you bombarded by headhunters.

Barrett: Yes. This is the way most recruiters assess your suitability for a role. However, if you want to change career and you are networking and contacting companies direct, a well-written letter without including a CV can go a long way to setting up a meeting.

Folkes: We believe so. This is your brochure that gets you through the door. After that you have to sell yourself face to face, but if you don't get through the door, you don't even get an opportunity to sell yourself. Sometimes of course, you have no alternative than to complete a form and a CV is not acceptable. Even here, there are skills to be developed to give the best impression within the limitations of the information required.

My long-term goal is to be appointed to the board of a FTSE-250 company. How can I give myself the best chance of success?

Stead: There's so much MBA graduates can do to groom themselves. On a grand strategic level, you need a plan. You need to create yourself as a centre of excellence now and develop that

over the years. Then you need to address the skills sets that international companies are looking for. Soft skills such as international experience and languages are tremendously important (Mandarin and Spanish have got to be the most important for the future). Hard skills like accountancy and reading balance sheets are the easiest ones to pick up. The ability to lead, influence and persuade, the ability to negotiate, the ability to persuade suppliers to deliver on service level agreements: those are the ones you need to gather and put in your tool kit.

Barrett: First, you need to understand where your experience is lacking and then think of ways to fill the gaps. Research is key. You can befriend a high level headhunter to ascertain their views. Study the career profiles of board members, which are sometimes profiled on company websites. Finally you could contact alumni in these positions and ask their advice.

Folkes: If you are asking yourself this question, you are probably already highly competent and regarded in your chosen function. However only a small number of people break out from this level and achieve a plc director position. Just because you aspire to such a position, it does not necessarily mean that you are suited to or have the particular personal strengths to succeed at this level. Ask yourself some searching questions. Can I cope with the stress? Can I manage the politics to advantage? Am I comfortable in a predominantly outward-facing role? Can I reconcile the demands of my new job with my personal life? Am I good at networking and contact development? Etc., etc. If you are not sure, seek some help to get answers to these critical questions.