



Career clinic

Our expert panel provides the answers to the questions troubling you when embarking on the career ladder. This month, we call on John Lees, career strategist and best-selling author; Linda Clark, managing director of the Human Choice; and Susan Firth, managing director of Insight-PIA give the answers.

THE PANEL

John Lees is a career strategist and author of best-selling book *How To Get A Job You'll Love* (2005/06 edition, McGraw-Hill £12.99). www.johnleescareers.com. He will be leading an Association of MBAs event at the University of Western England – Making Your MBA Work For You – on January 27, 2005. For details visit the events pages of www.mbaworld.com

Linda Clark is managing director of The Human Choice, an executive search firm which specialises in placing directors and senior managers in the retail and leisure sectors. (www.thehumanchoice.com). She completed her own MBA in 1988 and, in addition to holding senior management roles in retailing, has since set up and run two businesses.

Susan Firth is a business psychologist, occupational stress expert and behaviour analyst. She is managing director of Insight – PIA, based in Surrey, the psychology consultancy practice she founded in 1989. (www.insight-psychology.co.uk). Susan has both a Bachelor of Science and a Masters Degree and is a member of the British Psychological Society.

My MBA has left me restless in the corporate world. I want to launch my own business and I have a good idea in a sector that's related to my experience. But despite my skills and experience, I'm finding the potential downsides (i.e. that I could lose a lot of money) an unsettling thought. What approach should I take?

Clark: Congratulations and how exciting! The MBA did the same for me. My advice to you is research, research and research. However well you know your sector, there's no substitute for talking to others – especially potential customers – before you set up. Make sure your product or service is clearly differentiated from any competition and that this feature is something that your customers want and will pay for. Try, if you can, to minimise your fixed costs at the outset until you see your revenue line growing.

Lees: Never throw money at an idea like this without researching it thoroughly. The most important research you will ever do will be to speak to those who have trodden a path before you. Learn from their mistakes. Discover the short cuts. Having a good idea is great, but the difference between success and failure is often getting an income stream rapidly – who will be your first five paying customers?

Firth: Doing your MBA was a great achievement and one that's bound to make you consider your skills set now and where best to offer that experience. Launching your own business could be a good solution as it would give you independence and autonomy. If you're uncertain though, why not try talking to several people in different sectors related to self-employment in order to get a sense of the upsides and the downsides. I'm thinking of experts in organisations like Business Link and your local Chamber of Commerce or even your own Bank, who could advise you

on what you need including any possible funding or support available. Ask friends and relatives too if anyone you know has started on their own and how they've found it. Being as informed as possible will help offset the negative thoughts you're having. Having a contingency plan in place in case it doesn't go well is a practical step. Also consider how you would market, sell and publicise your product or service. There is a lot to self-employment and it is an exciting opportunity for you.

First impressions are extremely important. In interview, what are the most important things to do to ensure people keep a positive, lasting impression of you?

Clark: You're right – statistics from the US show that over 90 per cent of a first impression is based on how you look and how you speak; what you say (in the first few seconds) accounts for less than ten per cent. So, personal grooming is important – clean hands, well cut hair, smart dress appropriate for the role etc. Good eye contact with the interviewer and signs that show you are genuinely interested eg. nodding of the head, smiling etc are all positive. Firm (but not too firm!) handshakes are crucial. Have some questions prepared – it shows you have thought about the role/company – and ask them. At the end of an interview, if a candidate asks me how they have done, I am always happy to give some immediate feedback. It tells me you are interested in the role and you learn something from the experience.

Lees: An interviewer comes to some kind of a decision in the first 60 seconds of an interview, based on what you wear, how you sound, and how you answer the first question. Plan carefully around all three. Dress as if you work there already. Practice using your voice before the interview, and respond clearly and



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positively, even if the question is 'has the rain stopped?' And answer the first question confidently without speaking for too long.

I've always been good at academic work. However, since completing my MBA, a few people have told me that I'm 'too nice'. The trouble is I've never been very competitive. Is it possible to turn this into a strength rather than a weakness?

Clark: Completing an MBA does not mean you have to throw yourself into the business world if you don't feel it's for you. One of my MBA colleagues who could be described as 'too nice' and certainly 'not competitive' went into lecturing, has recently completed a PhD and now holds a senior post at one of the leading business schools in the UK. A combination of teaching and research is where he has found he is happiest.

Lees: Both "nice" and "competitive" are relative terms. Yes, certainly, find a field of work that plays to your strengths. Find a job where being open and honest wins and keeps customers. But remember that the key is to find an employer who actively encourages what you have to offer, rather than just tolerates it.

Firth: Completing an MBA is a great step forward in life, and one that given your academic prowess, must have been a positive experience for you. What I'm therefore thinking is why has this issue appeared since completing your qualification? If you are a nice person then that is a positive strength as long as it manifests itself in support of others or being courteous in life. If in fact you're hiding your light under a bushel and could sell yourself better or be more assertive, then there are books and courses that can help. The psychology or self-help section of any large bookstore has plenty of helpful tips for improving your ability to deal with confrontation or difficult

people depending on how your 'being too nice' manifests itself. It also has sections on self-esteem if that is more at the root cause. Maybe it's time to sit down and think about the context in which this behaviour appears. If there's something you can improve, think about learning the skill to do that. Being nice in itself is a great virtue and not a weakness unless you work in a culture that demands an aggressive stance on things. Target the context of your behaviour if there is a need to rectify anything, but don't change the way you are – it sounds good to me!

Aside from a fundamental grounding in business, what can an MBA bring to an entrepreneurial business?

Clark: The MBA gives a structured approach to thinking, which can be useful in any business situation. But, for me, running my own business, the most valuable take-out is the people I met on the course. Ten years on, a handful of them have proved to be some of my greatest contacts and business friends.

Lees: Most of all, the ability to think differently about a business and its products, to ask demanding and creative questions, and to draw on a multi-disciplinary training to find resources, ideas and strategies that can take a business forward.

How could a career or recruitment coach help me?

Clark: A subject dear to my heart as I have had a coach for the past year and she has been immensely helpful! A coach will help you establish your own goals and then work with you to achieve them. The important point is they teach you how to do it for yourself rather than make the decisions for you. This means that a new, more effective behaviour becomes your way of life. Any good coach will suggest

that you 'interview' at least three different coaches before deciding who to work with as each will have their own style. You can then choose the one you are most comfortable with. I suggest you ask for personal recommendations from friends and colleagues.

Lees: To ask the right questions, to compose a clear and convincing 'message' about who you are and what you can offer, and to show you how to undertake an effective multi-strategy job search. Most important, a good career coach will remind you that your MBA isn't enough in itself; you have to know how to sell it.

There is much emphasis on soft skills in management at the moment. I have a background in accountancy, and have always been more comfortable with processes than people. How can I improve my soft skills?

Clark: Soft skills centre around managing and developing people and communication. Try to identify what specifically it is you would like to improve – learning presentation skills, managing teams, chairing meetings, delegating etc. – and then find a training course that will help you. There are many such courses today. Alternatively, find yourself a coach who can help you through some of these issues (see above) who will work in a practical way with you to address them.

Lees: The first question is: do you really need to? Think about what you want to do most of the time in any job. If you want to move higher up the management structure, you probably need to undertake some training in things like communication, mentoring, and team management. Often, the key is to understand the kind of people who see the world very differently to you, and discover ways of handling them.