

'We're going on a bear hunt'

PAUL REDMOND explains how to take control of your career in a world of 'thin air' – where the big money lies in ideas, transactions and brands

Managing your career these days means learning to live with perpetual motion. Just like film stars, organisations must continually search for new ways of reshaping, re-marketing and redefining themselves. Distinct or extinct – the new golden rule.

Increasingly, as Charles Leadbeater has argued (*Living on Thin Air: The New Economy*), this means learning to operate in the "thin air" economy of services rather than products. Things that exist in your mind, not things you can drop on your foot. The value of Microsoft is six and a half times that of General Motors, even though GM employs more people, makes more products, and owns more factories. In fact, the biggest employer in the world today, Wal Mart, does not actually make anything at all – it sells things. In a world of technology, global communications and services, if you can touch something it's probably not worth that much. The big money lies in ideas, transactions, emotions, and brands. It's all about being unique.

Delia not Adam Smith

Graduates new to this world can expect highly flexible ways of working. These will include short-term contracts, "organic" job descriptions which evolve over time, and working in ever-changing teams of co-workers who come together then disband according to the needs of the market. Jobs are becoming like restaurant menus: full of different options, permutations and choices. Constant training, retraining, job-hopping, even career-hopping, is becoming the norm – as are self-employment, short-term contracts, and portfolio work (working with several



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"employers" at a time). For some, this is how they want to work. For others, it's all that is available. Either way, whether you plan to work with an employer, or whether you intend to work for yourself, in today's job market we all have one thing in common. We are all in business for ourselves.

'Distinct or extinct is the new golden rule'

Dancing with gorillas

Not that we have many alternatives. Robert Kennedy once said, "Those who change fastest and best are those who have no choice". For many of us, being at work today is like dancing with a gorilla – you don't stop dancing when the music stops, you stop dancing when the gorilla stops. One of my children's favourite reads at the moment is a book by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury called *We're*

going on a bear hunt. The story revolves around a family going on an expedition. At every obstacle they encounter – swamps, forests, raging rivers – they repeat the following chant:

"We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh No! We've got to go through it!"

The same applies to graduates. What matters is learning how to adapt to the new world of work and, ultimately, using this knowledge to your own personal advantage.

Below, are five steps which, if applied, will help you begin the process of taking control of your career.

Step 1: Know the competition.

Currently, there are 1.8 million students at UK universities. Being a student is the most popular occupation in the world. In Britain, one in three 18-year olds now opt to study for a degree (the target, eventually, is one in two). The expansion of higher education over the past decade



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has been nothing short of revolutionary. However, when it comes to employment, things are not so straightforward.

According to a recent study by Brown & Hesketh, 'The Mismanagement of Talent', this year's graduates are competing for approximately 15,000 'fast track' jobs - i.e. jobs with traditional graduate recruiters. In some sectors, the ratio of graduates to vacancies will be as high as 50:1. In other words, supply will exceed demand.

These findings require careful interpretation. Professors Peter Elias and Kate Purcell have argued that because graduates now work in such a diversity of occupations and sectors, such definitions of 'graduate' and 'non-graduate' employment need redefining. In turn, they point to research undertaken annually by careers services, which suggests that graduate prospects are still buoyant, with around 70% of 2004 leavers entering work, with a further 19% securing places on postgraduate courses

(*What do graduates do? 2005* www.prospects.ac.uk).

Nevertheless, as more people emerge from universities, it is clear that no one can be complacent. Like it or not, when you graduate you are going to be in direct competition with more graduates,

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from more universities, possessing more qualifications, than ever before!

Step 2: Never make a permanent career decision

'What do you want to do when you graduate?' How often are you asked that question? Choosing a career - and then sticking to that choice - was once sound

advice. Not any more. Work is evolving so rapidly that many of today's students will eventually work in jobs that have not yet been invented. A strange thought perhaps, but who, twenty-years ago, would have predicted how many jobs would be created by the Internet? Or lost to inventions such as the ATM (cash-point) machine, which alone has led to the disappearance of up to 300,000 banking jobs? Unfortunately, one unavoidable by-product of living in fast moving times is that exact planning - particularly career planning - becomes all but impossible. Flexibility, contingency plans, alternative strategies are the order of the day. Next time someone asks you what do you want to do? Tell them your job hasn't been invented yet.

Step 3: Blame nobody, expect nothing, do something!

There are essentially two kinds of job hunters: purists and players. Purists



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believe that job markets are inherently fair and meritocratic; that one day, all their hard work, qualifications and quiet dedication will be recognised and rewarded; that keeping their head down is the best way to get ahead.

Players, on the other hand, approach job-hunting like playing a game: there are rules, tactics, and opponents. They accept that job markets are unfair; that ultimately, the odds are stacked in certain people's favour.

The object of the player's game is to overturn these odds by using all their skills, contacts, personality, motivation and sheer guts. Purists wait for opportunities to emerge. Players go out and create them. Guess which one is best placed to take advantage of today's job market? Which one are you?

Step 4: Expect fantastic opportunities to arise

We all have dreams and ambitions. Some want to be highly successful in business; others harbour secret desires to be film stars, models, footballers, politicians. For many, these dreams remain just that - dreams. Yet for some people, such dreams do actually become a reality.

Psychologist Richard Wiseman, in a

recent book, "The Luck Factor", argued that people who achieve their career objectives often apply, consciously or sub-consciously, four principles. First, they actively maximise their exposure to "chance" opportunities. In other words, they search out and take small steps which lead them out of their comfort zone.

Often this entails joining new clubs or societies, travelling to new places, learning new skills. From such experiences, they come into contact with people beyond their immediate circle, people from whom they can gather new leads and ideas.

Second, rather than over-rationalising things, successful people tend to listen to their gut hunches, and are quite prepped to follow their initiative. Doing what feels right, rather than following tried and tested routines, is their attitude to life.

Third, such people expect good things to happen to them. This allows them to approach new situations, such as joining a new class, positively and with enthusiasm.

Finally, Wiseman found that successful people are adept at turning bad luck into good. In other words, they accept setbacks as inevitable, try to learn from

them, and then move on. What makes them successful, Wiseman argues, is their capacity to make their own dreams come true. Wiseman's approach offers many useful and easily applied techniques for managing your career.

Furthermore, you can start using them now. Remember, Thomas Edison took out 99 patents on the light bulb before finally settling on a winning design. Rather than conceding defeat, Edison argued that the light bulb was an invention in one hundred steps!

Step 5: Claim your vision now!

Most people devote more time to planning their holidays than they do to planning their careers. But not you! Your career is too important to be left to the forces of chance. All in all, you have just 1,000 days at university, and, if you use them wisely, in career terms these can be the most important 1,000 days of your life.

As Paul Arden writes, "your vision of where or who you want to be is the greatest asset you have". But unless you have a goal, it's impossible to score!

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