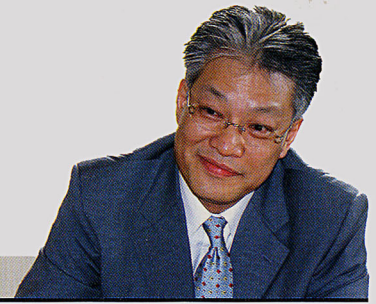


# insider

ON THE FRONTLINE MEET CIPFA'S NEW PRESIDENT LIES, DAMN LIES SATISFYING COMMUTERS PROFILE NEW FACES AT THE TOP



## ARE YOU PARTNER MATERIAL?

After we revealed last month that fewer than one in 10 partners is female, we decided to look at what it takes to be a partner. Shoba Tharumaganam reveals the five key traits prospective partners need to demonstrate. Intelligence is not one of them

In today's meritocratic business environment, the route to partnership in professional firms is no longer simply a case of 'Buggin's turn': serving your time isn't good enough. Aside from demonstrating the highest technical ability, partners are expected to be far more business aware. In short, they are being required to think and act like their commercial clients; to be focused at all times on revenue growth and business development.

But if that's the 'output' expected of the modern partner, what are the characteristics needed by an individual if they are to succeed in this role?

Surprisingly, little research has been conducted into the personality traits that, collectively, enable someone to make it to the top in professional advisory firms. As business psychologists involved in the selection and development of partners, we were intrigued. A study of 231 accountants and lawyers and various statistical analyses later, the results may surprise some of you.

In order to look more closely at the psychological make-up of a partner, we looked at elements of their make-up and compared these with non-partners in the same firms. These elements included personality, thinking skills, business insight and their capability as perceived by colleagues and clients.

To get a thorough and fully rounded picture of the individual, a range of measures were used in understanding the dimensions of their personality, ranging from ingrained personality traits, personal preferences or styles, through to interpersonal needs.

Personality traits were assessed in relation to five key domains of personality: emotional stability, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Individuals' personal preferences were also assessed to understand their preferred working and decision-making styles. Wanted and expressed levels of interpersonal needs were also assessed to understand their interpersonal relationship behaviour.

Similarly, we used various ability tests to

assess different thinking skills, including their conceptual thinking, analytical thinking and creativity. A business thinking exercise was used to assess their business understanding. This exercise assessed the breadth and depth of understanding in seven areas: client awareness (identifying and responding to client needs), commercial astuteness (understanding how products and services make profit), strategic insight (defining the future direction for the firm), management know-how (knowing how to get things done through others), influencing skills (understanding how to influence people), political understanding (knowing how to use the internal political system to achieve objectives) and risk awareness (recognising when the organisation is exposed to risk).

Individuals also completed a '360°' feedback survey. This provided insight into how individuals saw themselves and how they were perceived by colleagues and clients in 10 areas: commitment (concern to do things better or more efficiently), openness (flexibility and openness to change), independence (willingness to assert views and publicly express unpopular opinions), self direction (self-belief), resilience (ability to cope with stress and pressure), interpersonal sensitivity (interest in and openness to others), business development (desire and ability to market the firm, sell its services and seek new business opportunities), client delivery (ability to take care of clients, understand their needs and build long-term relationships), internal management (ability to work in a team and develop people) and technical knowledge (technical ability, breadth of knowledge and quality of advice).

When we compared data in these areas between partners and non-partners, the results were quite surprising. As you might expect, partners demonstrated a higher level of technical 'know-how' and conscientiousness, and are found to be more logical and task-focused in the way they work. However, it would appear that there are no significant

differences when it comes to thinking skills.

Stereotypically, one might expect intelligence to be a key distinguishing factor, yet, the findings suggest otherwise. Aside from technical knowledge, the study revealed that partners appear to be more able than non-partners in thinking commercially, marketing and selling the firm, building relationships with clients, understanding customer needs and managing people. At the same time, they are also more extroverted, self-confident, energetic and resilient.

So what do these findings mean? Well, they suggest that what distinguishes partners from non-partners has as much to do with personal qualities, 'emotional intelligence' factors and 'soft' people skills as it has to do with technical ability.

Personal qualities such as drive to achieve, determination to fulfil work obligations, commercial astuteness and client orientation all distinguished partners from non-partners.

Equally, the findings reveal partners need to be sensitive to clients' feelings and emotional needs, to forge long-term relationships with them, to 'tune in' to what motivates people as individuals, and to lead their team.

They also tell us that the role of the partner is moving away from traditional associations. Over recent years, the professional advisory services market has become increasingly competitive; new firms have begun to emerge while existing ones continue to grow.

Consequently, the need to maintain competitive advantage has placed different demands on partners. Where they once worked independently, today they are required to manage, build and motivate their teams.

These new demands warrant a different set of characteristics. To climb the ladder, you must be able to demonstrate that you are able to evolve to meet these changing demands. So ask yourself this, do you have what it takes to become a partner in today's economy? ●  
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