



Career clinic

How do you highlight soft skills on your CV, create the right distance between you and your team and manage creative people? Our experts explain all.

THE PANEL

Clare Gaffney is director of the MBA career development service at HEC Business School. With 16 years of experience in adult education, firstly in curriculum planning and later in corporate relations, she works with the human resource faculty to design and facilitate workshops for students and managers. She is particularly interested in the impact of the group on the individual and how groups operate or malfunction in the workplace.



Robert Myatt is a director of business psychologists Kaisen Consulting. Following a career in IT, he moved into the field of business psychology ten years ago. Since joining Kaisen in 1999, he has specialised in leadership development and selection method design for a wide range of multinational businesses, including Thames Water, Sky and Royal & SunAlliance. He is also a regular commentator in publications including the *Financial Times* and *Sunday Times*.



Gary Watson is a regional managing director for Michael Page International, a specialist recruitment consultancy covering disciplines from finance and accounting, banking and marketing and sales to legal, technology and retail. He joined Michael Page as a consultant in 1984 and was promoted to his current position at the start of this year.



I think I've got good soft skills – but how can I bring them out on my CV?

Gaffney: Be specific in the vocabulary you use in each of your achievement statements to bring out these types of skills and prove they obtain results. Qualify each skill with a result either in qualitative or quantitative terms. For example: "Persuaded management committee to reconsider its reporting policy, saving three hours' work time a week each for seven people". This conveys a proactive approach to applying soft skills.

Myatt: I'd avoid listing your skills or taking a personal profile approach – "a dynamic marketing manager with assertive and engaging interpersonal skills". There's nothing to support these claims and it can appear you're trying too hard. A more effective method is to describe your experience and achievements where you used strong soft skills. If you were responsible for selling a key client project, put this as one of your key achievements and list what was involved – presentations and negotiations, for example. Describe the scope and scale of your management responsibilities. Ideally, include business results which demonstrate your effectiveness.

I've built some close personal relationships with my team – but now I'm finding it hard to enforce my authority. What can I do?

Gaffney: Firstly, learn from your mistake and never get into this situation again. Your value system in your personal sphere can't be the same as the one you apply at work – the French humanist Montaigne warned not to confuse the person with their clothes. To re-establish authority, you need to focus on the objectives and deadlines you set for each

team member and evaluate them on these criteria only, irrespective of whether you are on friendly terms or not.

Myatt: One way to have a stronger personal impact and influence is to "own and disclose" your views. This involves labelling views as your own ("I think..." or "I believe...") and openly disclosing what you feel deep down but don't say. This will get people to take you seriously. Avoid justifying yourself ("I wouldn't normally say this, but...") or apologising for your views or requests ("Sorry to be a pain, but could you...").

Watson: If you have to choose between being liked and being respected, respect wins every time. While most managers aspire to both, this isn't always possible. This problem occurs most often when an individual is promoted from within the ranks and their peers become their subordinates – leading such a group can be a real challenge. Manage each team member on an individual basis, explaining your role and vision, where they fit in and what you expect of them. Then ensure you review their performance regularly, praising and criticising where appropriate.

What's the best way of dealing with questions about salary at interviews?

Gaffney: Put them off for as long as possible and try to avoid revealing your exact current salary. Establish the relationship with the recruiters first and underline your interest for the job. When the salary issue comes up, you must be an "informed candidate" who has researched what the market generally pays for that type of position and where your potential employer is positioned in that market. Ensure you understand exactly what is contained in the salary package.

Myatt: Be open about your expectations, basing them on a clear knowledge of the market. Remember that there are both practical and psychological outcomes. The practical outcome is the salary you want. The psychological outcomes include: "I want this person to feel that I'm ambitious" and "I want this person to think that I'm self-assured and confident about my ability to deliver". Keeping these objectives in mind will enable you to handle the discussions with greater purpose, poise and confidence.

Watson: Be open and honest. Salary should never be the primary motivation for changing jobs. Employers are generally realistic and understand the salary expectations of new employees. Look at the whole compensation package – items such as pensions, life cover, health insurance, bonus, car allowance and flexibility should all play a part in your decision.

How do you manage creative people? Are there any particular principles to bear in mind?

Myatt: There are three principles: make them feel valued, give them freedom and ensure they meet deadlines. Highly creative people are often driven by feeling their talents are appreciated and valued. Positive feedback should be given frequently and be targeted towards areas which the individual values. Negative feedback shouldn't be avoided – it's essential to set performance parameters – but should always be preceded by praise. Provide clear direction and let the individual express themselves – "micro-manage" at your cost! Finally, creative people often like flexibility and dislike deadlines – unfortunately businesses can't operate that way. Set very clear performance expectations and deadlines, providing robust feedback to shape behaviour.

Watson: A lot of business leaders reach the upper echelons of commerce due to hard skills such as focus, drive, analytical thinking and commercial savvy. There can often be conflict when these values are confronted by the non-linear patterns of working and thinking associated with creative people. Most genuinely original thought comes from unstructured

discussion, free association and serendipity. So effective leaders resist the temptation of applying order, timescales and borders around their people. Creatives will never be happy playing by the rules. Often they generate ten ideas and only one will be a runner. As a manager, it's your job to identify it and prevent resources from being wasted on the other nine. Usually, the creative person is the wrong person to lead a project to conclusion as they get too easily bored and distracted.

Ethics is an increasingly important part of business school courses. Will leaders of the future need a strong sense of social responsibility?

Gaffney: It's a truism that leaders should have a strong sense of social responsibility. What is less clear is how they can (a) acquire socially responsible values (b) define what exactly they are and (c) prove their business is value-driven. Job candidates will increasingly be judged on such criteria in addition to their other competencies. At HEC, MBA students have formed a Sustainable Development Club that attracts a great deal of interest from recruiters.

Myatt: Increasing attention has been paid to the inner motivation and values of leaders in recent times, driven by corporate scandals and research into "great" leaders. While these individuals have incredible amounts of drive and persistence, they have also had personal humility, sharing the credit for success and taking the blame for failure themselves. I think there will be a shift away from the charismatic leader, with organisations seeking leaders with these strong internal motivations and values.

Watson: Yes – if they want to stay in business. While remuneration and the company's financial strength and reputation used to be the big turn-ons for candidates for executive roles, these days they are asking questions such as "How does this company make its money?", "What value does it add?" and "Will I be making a difference?". With consumers also increasingly sophisticated, businesses need leaders who can comfortably serve the dual masters of hard-edged commercialism and social responsibility.

> MBA Employer BT

Jacqueline Vigne, talent acquisition manager, BT, explains the company's MBA recruitment programme.

How many MBA graduates do you take on?

It varies. We took on 20 MBAs for each of the last two years, but this year we will bring in 100 because our IT division is boosting its strategy team. Moving forward it's likely to be around 50 each year.

Why do you recruit MBAs?

For new ideas, innovative ways of doing things, dynamism and intellectual rigour. The company has transformed itself from a telco to an IT solutions business over the last five years, and there's a need for the fresh ideas and skillset that MBAs bring.

What kind of roles are available?

It changes from year to year, but opportunities are typically in the following areas: strategy; IT consulting; business improvement; business development; finance; product management; marketing.

What characteristics and skills do you look for?

Primarily talent and ambition. We're not just looking for IT skills – specific experience comes second to attitude. As a minimum we expect six years' proven management experience, with evidence of progression and significant responsibility in your previous roles, and a GMAT score in excess of 650.

Why BT?

We're an organisation that will enhance your CV: a market leader in our sector and a leader in innovation and R&D, with a presence in more than 170 countries. We're a diverse business without rigid career paths, which offers huge opportunities if you're proactive about managing your career.

Where can I find out more?

You can get more information and fill out an online application form at www.btplc.com/Careercentre/MBAs/MBAs.htm. Applications for 2006 are now closed as our main recruitment cycle runs from January to March.