

# Skills that put the wind under high-flyers' wings

THERE is no doubt that Adrian Brown is a high achiever. He left school at 18 and at 41 has just become UK chief operating officer of Royal & Sun Alliance, the insurance giant.

Brown's upward progression was somewhat unorthodox in that he skipped university because he felt he could qualify as an accountant faster elsewhere. He remembers a time when industry was "very male, very conservative and very old" — which didn't fit his cheerful, outgoing style.

Last week I tried to find out what makes a high-flyer by talking to Brown and three other executives who made it to the top more quickly than most.

The one thing they had in common was that all four had done some development work with Kaisen, the business psychologists, and what stood out was the extent to which they shared similar goals and ambitions.

Brown's first move after school was to become a management trainee with British Gas, before moving on to a small insurance company, The Insurance Service, where at 25 he became financial director. "But I only did finance to help me get into general management," he said. His next move led him to become customer-service director and then he went on to a similar role at Royal & Sun Alliance (RSA). There he set up More Than, the insurance company.

It was a valuable experience. "Small companies take risks with people earlier than big companies," he said. It was a new venture, growing fast and employing a relatively new concept, direct-writing insurance. If he had pursued a career within RSA, he doubts he would have got as far as he had when he moved there. "It's changing now, the industry has woken up," he said. "When I look round now, I see lots of people in their early thirties. There are opportunities to run big customer-service units."

Brown has just appointed a market-

**Roger Eglin** identifies the common attributes that helped four young men in their rapid rise to the top in their chosen business sectors

ing director from Onetel, someone he would not have been able to attract into insurance a few years ago.

It is important to know where you are going and what you want to achieve from your career, he said. "Young people are drifting from job to job."

When Brown left school, he was set on qualifying as an accountant as fast as he could. "There has to be absolute clarity about what you want to achieve and you don't talk about what you'll be doing in five or seven years. Business is moving too fast for that. It's where you want to be in 18 months."

He said it is essential to be able to get on with people. "It's being able to adapt your style whether you are chatting with someone in the call centres or talking to a main-board director."

Brown's snapshot view of what it takes to get to the top matches the findings that have emerged from Kaisen's research. It used a sample of 800 senior managers drawn from its own database to find whether there were any psychological differences between those who reached senior positions quickly and those who took longer.

The top quartile reached their position within eight years. The rest took nine years or more.

The study, due to be published later this year, showed that high-flyers differ significantly from their peers on several personality and thinking issues.

Broadly speaking, they are higher

on many indicators of effective social functioning as well as breadth and creativity in thinking.

Overall, the study points to a senior manager who is more broad-thinking, more challenging of norms, more open to doing things in new ways, more capable of understanding themselves and their colleagues' emotions. They will pay more attention to communicating in ways that preserve and strengthen relationships and that allow others to understand them more fully.

Stewart Roberts started off selling advertising space, but decided he didn't want his boss's job — a move into the costing and purchasing department of a manufacturing company was more like it.

After two years he started in financial management and later tried software business with an American company. By 28 his career had achieved what he describes as a "major platform" and when his boss asked him what he wanted to do, he replied that he wanted to be a board director at 32.

The business grew rapidly and he became involved in acquisitions. On his 32nd birthday he was appointed to the board. "I'd forgotten about it," he said.

Roberts stuck to finance "as a tool for a better understanding of business". He kept setting himself targets and worked very hard — two or three days of nearly 24 hours on the trot.

He gets on well with people and spends a lot of time with them. He became more involved in commerce and sales until his big move came with the company he worked for being acquired by Royal Bank of Scotland.

The bank is keen to develop people. Roberts has moved round, and after two years has had five jobs. He is now, at 44, manager of e-commerce and, like Brown, enjoys having an entrepreneurial role. "You're always trying to fill a gap in your experience."

Daniel Meere graduated from South Bank University in 1995 and now earns



Adrian Brown says small companies are more likely to take risks with people

£170,000 a year as a management consultant with PIPC, a project-management firm. At 33, he has much in common with those mentioned above. Outgoing and approachable, he has followed in their footsteps by acquiring strong financial know-how.

"Nobody is born with limitless talent and experience," he said, and for that reason he has worked at supplementing his knowledge. He appreciates the importance of personal relationships in what he said was "very much a relationship-based business".

"If something isn't a very good fit with clients, we will quietly drop it," he said. The work is challenging but so far Meere said he has enjoyed it.

At 31, Jonathan Clarke, who runs

the business-customer division of Anglian Water, is the youngest of our high-flyers. He started with Anglian's high-potential team. His definition of a high-flyer is "someone who can see the bigger picture and work on it". He feels it is definitely a creative role.

"It's spotting the relationship and the opportunity. The key to the job is having some idea of what you want, of having a goal and working towards it. But it's important not to fall into the trap of trying to take on too much."

Two things stand out about these four men — they all have a good grounding in finance and are approachable: two essential traits on the way to the top.

roger.eglin@onwight.net