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# ‘Make or break’ years for careers

The average successful executive only gets two or three opportunities to maximise their career between the key ages of 38 to 50. How do they ensure they get the right breaks? By Niki Chesworth

THE most significant movement in a career happens between the key ages of 38 and 50," says Kit Scott-Brown of InterExec, the company which finds executive roles for top candidates.



**Landing a punch: Ian Dyson, 46, the finance and operations director of M&S has just quit after failing to secure the top job at the retailer. However, Dyson has still made the leap to chief executive by joining Punch Taverns, Britain's largest pub group. At 46, Dyson is in the key age group for those making successful steps to the top**

"To be realistic, during these years a successful executive is only going to get two or perhaps three opportunities to move to the jobs which will enable them to maximise their career."

Missing just one of these "make or break" opportunities could mean losing a chance to rise up the career ladder.

"The key thing to focus on is how to find these opportunities and to not miss out on them when you find them," adds Scott-Brown, whose job is tracking down suitable positions for high-flying candidates.

InterExec is unusual in that it is an executive agent which acts for the individual rather than the headhunter or company looking to recruit. It deals only with senior executives earning around £125,000 plus who are often too busy jetting around the world to search for their next role or require absolute confidentiality.

Rather than relying on the services of a few headhunters, InterExec offers executives access to around 4,000 contacts. But this comes at a price, with fees starting from around £15,000.

"The more senior people get, the more time and thought they give to managing their careers — and maybe that is why they have achieved what they have," adds Scott-Brown, whose company has seen a sharp increase in senior unadvertised vacancies this year, with IT roles alone trebling in the first quarter.

"Our average client is already employed and is aged 46," he says. "The younger they are, the more times they will come back to us, so a client in their 30s will generally come to us three times in their career. The reason for moving to another organisation, and not waiting for promotion from their existing employer, is because it is possible to make a big leap by making a change.

"Executives can expect a 25 per cent increase in their reward level by making a move. The number of times you can do that within an existing employer are limited."

For those who are unable to afford InterExec's career development and search service, what are the best steps to take to secure the right role?

Scott-Brown says that below the £150,000 salary level the market is sufficiently open for candidates to do their own job search — but they need to be clear about what they want and to plan their careers rather than seizing any opportunity.

#### BE SPECIFIC

To stand out, candidates need to know their relevant selling points, says Scott-Brown. "Most people have objectives that are far too wide," he says. "To get that top role, you need to identify and target your relevant selling points and ensure that all written and visual presentations meet those targets.

"The vast majority of candidates believe they are good at this and good at that. What they need to say is 'I am the greatest thing since sliced bread at this ...' but are often afraid to do so because they feel it may cut them off from other opportunities.

"Our advice is that these 'other' opportunities are not ideal if they do not meet the candidate's specific requirements.

"Then identify what you ideally want out of your next move. Why move if it is to something that is less than ideal? It is far better to take a bit longer and get the right move than just simply to make a move because it is offered. Taking an 'also-ran' offer is a waste."

#### SELL YOURSELF

"The ideal CV is two pages long — and that is two pages of readily legible type — so it does not give you much space to sell yourself," adds Scott-Brown. "So your entitlement to that job has to be obvious on your first page. If it is not, you are likely to be put in the reject pile. Avoid talking about things that are not relevant and narrow down your unique selling points."

#### BE PREPARED TO WAIT

Even after identifying your core skills and what your ideal role should be, there is no guarantee that the right opportunity will come along.

"Be prepared for it to take at least six months to find the right job," adds Scott-Brown. "As you rise up the ladder, it is even more vital for employers — and candidates — to find the right person for the job.

"Our average client gets between two and three job offers and there can often be a difference of around 50 per cent between the lowest and highest paid offer, so it can be worth waiting."

#### APPEAR ON THE RADAR

While InterExec offers a confidential service looking through opportunities from headhunters (it says it is notified about a third of all assignments), candidates can do their own search.

Headhunters are bombarded with CVs, emails and calls from possible candidates. To stand out, find out if any colleagues have used the services of the headhunter in past, and use that as an introduction. When introducing yourself, demonstrate your network of contacts and the fact that you may be able to recommend potential contacts. If you can help them, they may be more likely to contact you.

Other ways to appear on the radar are to raise your profile by:

**Boosting your profile:** Write for trade journals, speak at conventions, get involved with industry associations or volunteer your services to business organisations or charities. Document your involvement online so that your name pops up in any searches.

**Network:** Many of those who are headhunted are recommended as a potential candidate. Keep up with former colleagues, those you have met on management courses, your alumni network and maintain your profile on networking sites such as LinkedIn.

**Join professional bodies:** Being a member of the relevant trade bodies will give you the chance to attend events and network. With many senior posts filled without being advertised, this network could also enable candidates to find out about opportunities.