

# Putting people first

## Your career in the coatings industry: Part one

*In this issue, Nicola James, Managing Partner, Thomas Brooke International, looks at how to prepare for promotion in the coatings industry*

**P**ast columns have focused on your role as leader and manager within the coatings industry. But I often get questions from people interested in changing jobs or entering a new career path in the industry, whether by choice or due to corporate restructuring. Most people are too busy thinking about their day-to-day responsibilities to give much strategic thought to their careers until they actually want or need to make a move. The only problem with that approach is that you can't prepare overnight.

So the next couple of articles will focus on some of the most useful, practical things you can do if you are thinking of changing jobs or seeking an internal promotion or transfer.

The first thing we will look at is how to prepare for promotion, intentionally, in the coatings industry. The same principles can be applied whether this is internal or external (change of employer).

### STRONG FUNDAMENTALS

The most important (and overlooked) item is simple but not necessarily easy: take ownership of your career. Have a clear and compelling value proposition of what you bring to the job and the company. Why should another employer hire you? Or, why should your current employer give you greater scope of responsibility? Hiring is a business decision. Companies hire (and promote) people they believe will bring the highest tangible value. More than just responsibilities, companies are looking for results.

All discussion of value proposition basically boils down to one simple question with a follow-up: Are you worth it? How do you prove that?

Nobody knows your career achievements as well as you so it is up to you to articulate them clearly and back them up with real examples of what you have delivered.

For example, suppose you are in Technical Service and want to get into a commercial role. Have you actively supported sales people in their efforts? Have you perhaps helped sell a key account because of your technical knowledge or customer relationship? If so, what was the value of that to the company? Or if you are presently in a commercial role looking for promotion to General Management, have you directly led cross functional teams to successful outcomes?

Be careful of implicit entitlement, that your value with your current employer will carry over to a new employer. Especially if you have a sizeable earnings package, it is imperative that you can clearly demon-



strate that your ROI to the company makes such an expense worthwhile. We will look further at the mechanics of this below.

### KNOW YOURSELF

Before taking any active steps towards a new position, you need an objective understanding of your personal inherent strengths and weaknesses. Although that sounds obvious, most of us have the ability to rationalise our weaknesses or tell ourselves that a change of scenery will change our outlook.

To move forward and thrive, you need to focus on what you are truly and uniquely gifted at. Working super-hard to overcome a natural weakness will at best allow you to become marginally competent. By contrast, identifying and pursuing roles that play to your strengths will make you far more effective and also enhance job satisfaction. Of course, you have to learn things you may not be best at. Any GM excels in some functions and is passable in others. But the key is to know where your gifting lies. If you are really a technical person at heart, for example, a research-driven organisation may be the right place for you. If you are a natural sales personality or strategist, your greatest value may be to an organisation seeking aggressive growth.

Also, many people dream of moving from a large company to an entrepreneurial environment with more autonomy; yet one of the most frequent career missteps I see senior managers make in the industry is moving from a large business to a small one on the assumption that a smaller business must be easier to run.

The lure of equity or greater scope of responsibility in a smaller business can be powerful but a couple of years later they are back looking to re-join the corporate world. The risk profile and the more self-sufficient, entrepreneurial culture of the smaller



organisation is often less of a fit and more of a factor than they thought.

### KNOW YOUR PERSONAL PRIORITIES

Your life situation and priorities also contribute to your overall career plan. Any new opportunity needs to be considered up against a well-thought-out checklist of priorities, in order to remain objective.

For example, do you value security? Opportunity to keep learning? Financial reward? Prestige? Travel (or not)? If you are a parent with school age children, how important is it to be home every night? If you are used to making presentations at conferences or to customers, how important is it to be the visible expert? Make a list of essentials and preferences and discuss with any important family members whose opinion may factor in your eventual decision. The more specific (but realistic) the better. If you were going to buy a new car, you would certainly know what you needed and what would be nice to have. The same goes for your career.

### KNOW YOUR FINANCIAL NEEDS

Following on from the mention of your financial package above, I have put this in a separate section because it is such a central part of preparation for promotion. It is remarkable how many otherwise astute industry executives cannot immediately provide summary information on their total pay.

A simple spreadsheet works well for the purpose. List all the components of your current package and how they have actually paid out over the last three years. Include salary, performance-based incentives, bonuses, stock or shares, benefits such as housing, car or ex-pat perks. How and when you bring up this information with a recruiter or potential new employer is a big topic for another column but at this stage we are talking about preparation, and for that, having information ready to hand is the key.

### PUTTING IT TOGETHER

After thinking through your abilities, strengths, weaknesses and priorities, make a list of your must-have items and the nice-to-have items. As you qualify potential opportunities, a clear set of parameters enables you to assess whether a given position meets your requirements. Surprisingly, most people don't do this effectively and end up investing time on opportunities, for which they are ultimately not suited or which contain showstopping negatives. For example, I recently spoke with a candidate from a major coatings company who was interested in a position with our small company client that would require him to open up a new market with limited name recognition. The job description was explicit, that the culture required an entrepreneurial profile with a willingness to take on a role with a lot of ambiguity and not much structure and make something of it. After we both invested a significant time in the process, he

later withdrew his candidacy because he didn't like the lack of clarity about the position. Was this really a surprise? But on this same search, as we go to press on this issue of APCJ I am currently in dialogue with two individuals working for an equally large company, who see such a position as their opportunity to take on a challenge and make a name for themselves. They are quite aware of the risks; but they both prefer a less structured environment with more freedom to take the initiative and be measured on results. The point here is that individual personality plays a major role.

In past articles I have highlighted this from the perspective of the business leader and hiring manager, making sure you bring into your organisation those individuals who are most likely to thrive in the type of culture you offer; and it is equally true from the other direction.



### BRIDGE THE GAP FROM PAST EXPERIENCE TO FUTURE GOALS

Now you have a clear and objective perspective of your past achievements and how they relate to what you want to do next. This focus and clarity are absolutely essential. But if you want to set yourself apart as a candidate of excellence, there are other things you can do. One that is frequently associated with other 'top candidate' characteristics, is to be proactive in pursuing training or education that bridges the gaps between what you have done in your past roles and what you want to do in the future.

#### Example 1: Changing employers and industry segments

*Finishing equipment salesperson selling to OEM's and coatings applicators, who wanted to work for the coatings manufacturing side of the industry.*

This individual knew that his intimate knowledge of coatings application could be a value-add to a manufacturer because of his insight into customer needs and challenges; but his knowledge of coatings chemistry was too weak to make the case for hiring him as a technical salesperson. So, he took the initiative to attend industry educational programmes on his own, to improve his knowledge of coatings. Starting with an industry association course, he also took a University-based Short Course and developed a good level of techni-

### 'Take ownership of your career path by taking the initiative to bridge the gap from past experience to your future goals'

cal knowledge.

#### Example 2: Seeking growth long-term with existing employer

*R&D Manager who aspired to a General Management role eventually with his current employer.*

This individual knew that his deep technical expertise provided a competitive advantage; but he had no experience outside the R&D function and this would limit his growth with his company in the long term. He first took some sales training and financial classes; and actively sought out opportunities to be involved with the commercial team on projects even though it was in addition to his job responsibilities and he was not being paid for the additional scope of work. He later pursued an MBA and developed a reputation with his company as being a valuable source of technical insight who could also understand the needs of other departments better than any other technical leader at his level.

These two examples illustrate different approaches for different personalities; but in both cases, clear focus and initiative absolutely set the individuals apart as candidates for their chosen growth paths.

### SUMMARY & KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Plan long-term for your career growth. You won't get to the top of Mt Everest by wandering around the world waiting till you find yourself at the highest point. Apply the same level of strategic attention to your career growth that you do to the business you are in.
- Take objective inventory of your capabilities and priorities.
- Take ownership of your career path by taking the initiative to bridge the gap from past experience to your future goals.

In the next issue we'll look further at practical tactics to advance your career in the coatings industry with this solid foundation in place.

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