

Breaking the glass ceiling

Peter Bellingham shares some thoughts on his progression to a senior executive role

Given the enormous progress made in the professionalisation of arts marketing over the last ten to fifteen years (credit for which must be given to the AMA), it's surprising that all too often a glass ceiling still stands in the way of senior marketing professionals' aspirations to be the industry's next executive directors/CEOs.

If you look simplistically at career progression within the arts industry, more often than not it follows a linear approach to career development. A junior marketer is most likely to hone their marketing skills and gather experience as they work their way through the hierarchy of their chosen specialism. Whether gathered in a single organisation or more than one, and whether an individual takes all the steps or skips one or two, the pathway from marketing assistant to officer, manager, head of and eventually director would not be untypical.

While I'm sure there are some non-arts businesses that also follow the 'specialist' route, there are many others who adopt a more generalist development path. These businesses develop managers, not specialists, identifying the more talented individuals within the organisation and fast-tracking them via a series of moves from department to department. This zigzag journey provides exposure to a range of disciplines and a greater overview of the company as a whole. This route mitigates against the single-function approach that is the biggest barrier to the arts marketing specialist.

Let me tell you about my own

situation. Prior to joining Welsh National Opera (WNO) as Director of Marketing in 1994, my career had been a bit erratic; although I considered myself to be a marketing specialist and marketing was a constant thread through my career, I was exposed to other disciplines from time to time. My very first job was as Management Trainee in a multi-purpose arts centre and although my interest in publicity (as it was called then!) came from this traineeship, I also undertook a whistle-stop tour of all aspects of venue management. Following this, a degree of job-hopping gave me insight into a range of organisations, art-forms and scales. Later, I also had a couple of brief but important excursions into programming. This breadth of experience proved to be very useful in later applications. I guess in an unplanned way my career path was a hybrid of the specialist and generalist approaches.

The second influential factor was that I got lucky. At a time when I was thinking it was time for a move, I was asked to project-manage and co-ordinate WNO's stabilisation programme. Leading this in-depth look at the company and mapping its future direction gave me increased confidence, demonstrable experience and an appetite for more. Not long before this I had put myself forward for an Executive Director role at another company and, while my CV was varied enough to get to interview, I fell short on demonstrable experience – in a senior executive role I was still a risk to a prospective employer.

One of the outcomes of the stabilisation programme was the creation of a new role at WNO of Executive Director. My application, against strong external competition, was successful – the addition of project-management experience and in-depth, cross-company knowledge had added value to my CV to the extent that I had become more of a calculated risk, one that my existing employers, who were obviously in a much better position to see the potential, were prepared to take. (Since appointment eight years ago the role has expanded further as recognised by a title change to Managing Director in January 2009.)

So, if you have chief executive or similar aspirations, what can you do to strengthen your own chances if your career has followed the specialist route?

- Create opportunities to demonstrate broader experience and competencies: grab any project-management opportunities that come your way.
- Seek out opportunities to get in-depth knowledge of other organisations – this could be by short secondments or by joining the board of another arts company.
- If possible, take opportunities to attend seminars, conferences and networking events for disciplines outside your own specialist area.
- It's worth checking your suitability for the Clore and other leadership programmes, although with the salary sacrifice involved they're not for everyone.

- Within your own organisation, make sure you really understand how each department functions. Learn as much as you can from your senior management colleagues (they may even be interested in what you do!).
- Love the numbers – and understand them. Start with your own company’s management accounts and annual report and accounts. If you’re not comfortable around budgets, forecasts and five-year plans then a CEO position is probably not for you. ●

Non-arts businesses develop managers, not specialists, identifying the more talented individuals within the organisation and fast-tracking them via a series of moves from department to department. This zigzag journey provides exposure to a range of disciplines and a greater overview of the company as a whole.



© Neil Bennett

Peter Bellingham

Managing Director,
Welsh National Opera
e peter.bellingham@wno.org.uk

Peter Bellingham has worked in arts management for 33 years. He has worked for a diverse range of organisations including the Fulcrum Centre, Slough; Torch Theatre, Milford Haven; Northern Ballet Theatre; and Bradford Theatres. He joined Welsh National Opera in 1994 as Director of Marketing and is currently Managing Director. WNO has a turnover of £17m a year and 250 permanent employees.



CITY UNIVERSITY LONDON
The University for business and the professions

Cultural Leadership MA

An ‘MBA for the cultural sector’, run in collaboration with Cass Business School

One of the world’s first fully-accredited cultural leadership courses at Master’s level, this two-year part-time MA provides **professional development for existing and emerging cultural leaders**.

Structured around a series of **short, intensive workshops**, it is designed for people who aspire to greater personal and professional development but have demanding jobs and busy personal lives.

- You will benefit from **access to experienced leaders and sector analysts** via workshops, mentoring and networking
- You will concentrate on **key leadership concerns** such as strategy, governance and interpersonal skills
- Three course alumni – Jenni Lewin-Turner, Claire Whittaker and Sarah Munro – were featured in the CLP 2010 ‘Women to Watch’ list

To find out more visit www.city.ac.uk/cpm/jam
Email cpm@city.ac.uk or call us on +44 (0)20 7040 8753.

www.city.ac.uk/cpm/jam