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Management and Business Trainee

Patrick Jonsson; Thomas Clayton

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Patrick Jonsson & Thomas Clayton

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Management and Business Trainee
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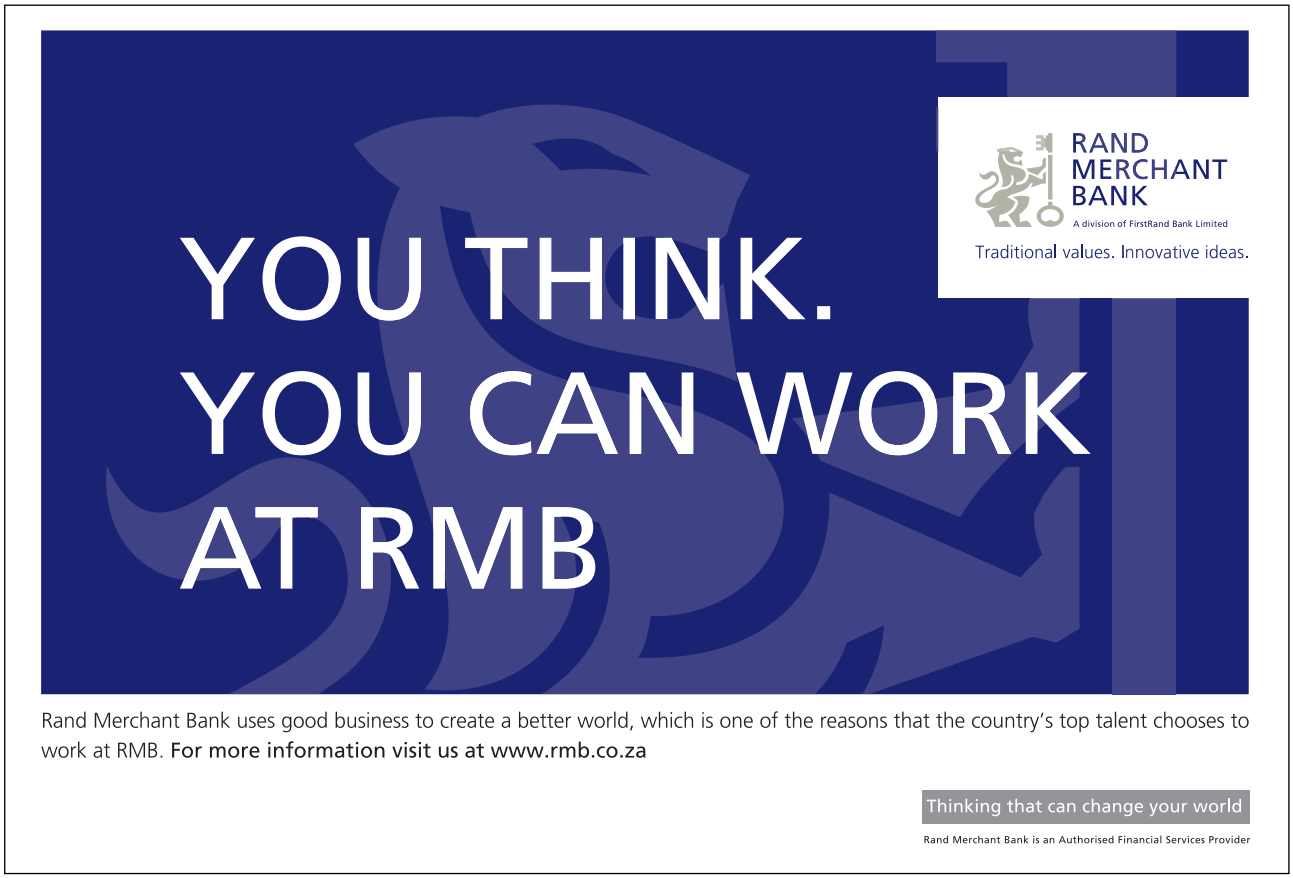

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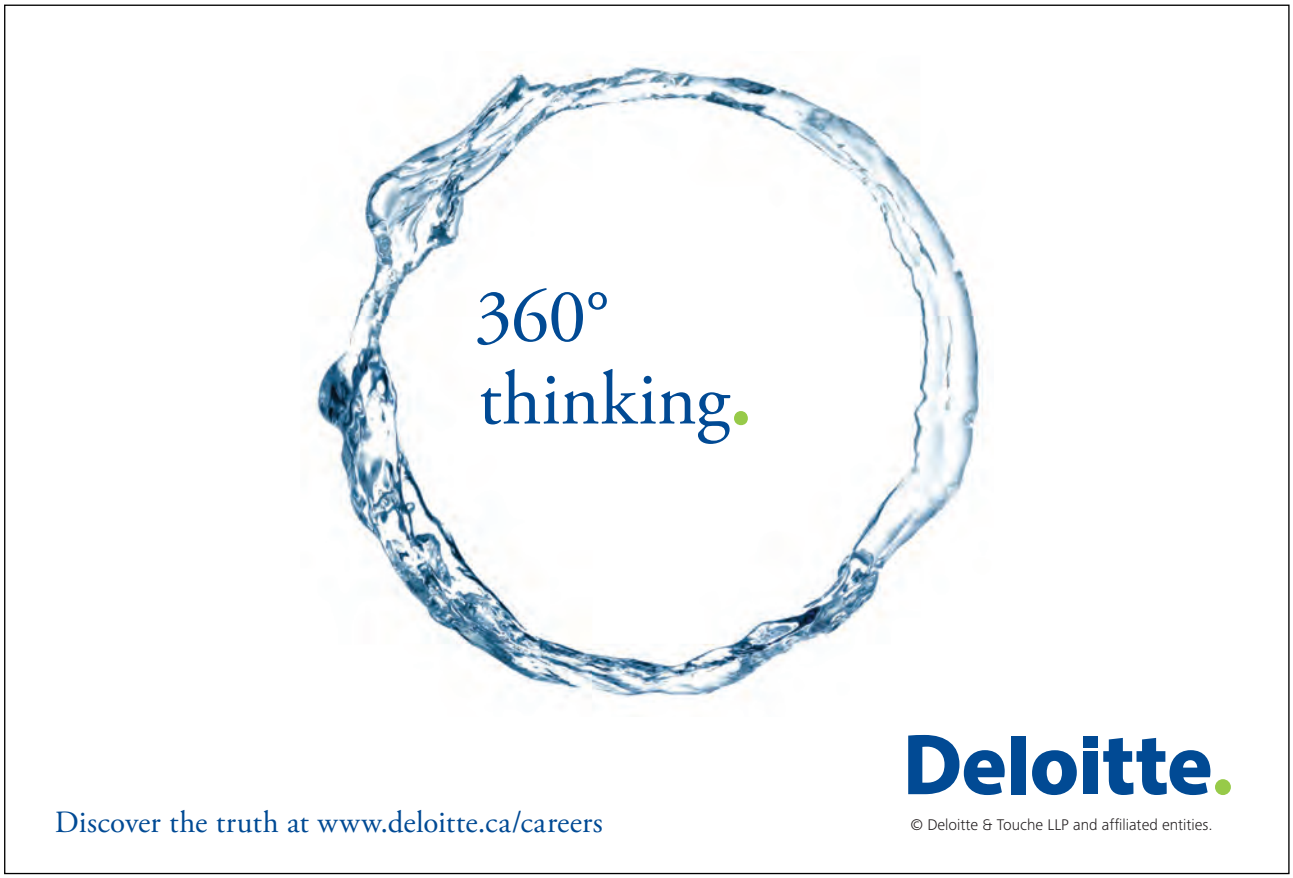

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Acknowledgements

This has been a three year side project and now it is finally done. The goal was to write a useful book. Now it is up to you to evaluate if we succeeded.

We would like to thank our friends and family for being there. We would also like to thank the Leadership Team for the Trainee Program we participated in, who put up with us for more than two years.

Patrick and Tom, February 2015

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Introduction

It is early morning at a country hotel on the outskirts of London. The Induction week for an international trainee program is about to start. When the morning session begins, approximately thirty graduates from various backgrounds and countries sit in the conference room curious and nervous about what is going take place in the next few hours, days and months. They think they have a general picture about what lies ahead of them, but they really do not. We, the authors, wish we had had a better idea of what a Trainee Program actually meant along with better knowledge of which program to choose. This book is about the choices you will make at the very beginning of your career. It is about the mistakes you will make, the hours you'll spend weighing up options, and ultimately this book is about giving you a platform for success as a Graduate Trainee. It is not about one particular company, nor one particular program.

Our aim is to tackle the issue of Graduate Programs in a general sense, using our own experiences, mistakes and achievements to provide something resembling guidance in the early stages of your working life. This, at least, is our intention. We have no axe to grind, no scores to settle and we have not been asked to write this book by our employers. Indeed, as we write this book some 7 years after first meeting during an Assessment Centre, we no longer live in the same country, let alone work for the same company. The aim, quite simply, is to write the book we ourselves needed all those years ago.

* * *

At University you will have no doubt spent hours assessing the pros and cons of various economic systems, and if you are anything like us, you will not have paid too much attention to one of the many labels associated with the benefits of globalisation. Alongside such terms as "Comparative Advantage" "Market Forces" and "The Big Mac Price Index" you may have talked at length about the "Flexible and Mobile Workforce" which is both a product and a necessity of Globalisation. We have a slightly catchier term for this mass of people who wander the globe like a benevolent Mongol army, seeking out opportunity and experience where Gengis Khan sought Power and Wealth. We call it the *Global Generation*. We, and you, are part of this neglected group of nomads. We are neglected, not in terms of our personal well-being, but rather by the students of globalisation who fail to dig beyond the surface to examine what exactly it means to be an actor in the globalised world of business. To the smallest of small degrees, we will attempt to redress that imbalance, and add a touch of colour to this often ignored and ever increasing cog in the global machine.

Over the last ten years, the amount of people living international lives has exploded. More and more people study and work outside their home-country and many, just like us, settle down abroad. Of course, this doesn't apply to everybody and, for some years to come, we will be in the minority. Still it is an ever growing minority of millions. In beginning to examine this group of people, or rather in examining our own characters and personalities, we found three common, overriding traits that bind the *Global Generation* together.

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Firstly, we have a certain mind-set, a particular way of approaching how we live our lives. We have an appetite to travel and explore the world and, thanks to huge advances in transport and communication, we also have the opportunity to act on these urges. Together with this desire to be on the move comes an acceptance of certain facts, particularly that we can cope more than adequately with frequent change and even to an extent embrace being the outsider or stranger in a given situation. This is part and parcel of the lifestyle; if you move regularly it is likely that you will often find yourself starting over, back at square one, making new friends, finding a new place to live and generally not being a local with a set routine and habits.

Secondly, we are from all walks of life, from all different types of social backgrounds and from all over the world. The main "driver" behind our mind-set is not borne out of wealth or privilege but rather out of curiosity. Previous generations of "twenty and upwards" travelled the globe in the name of adventure, experience or education. In the last century, particularly in the UK, it was necessary to belong to a certain social class or a particular university to do this. The difference between our forefathers and the *Global Generation* is that "belonging" is no longer a prerequisite and access to higher education, furthering one's career and broadening one's horizons are readily available to everybody.

Naturally, some people choose alternative routes, but the important thing to remember is that it is a *choice*. The curiosity that drives us to leave the comfort of home is also likely to be evidenced in our linguistic abilities and our far-flung friendships that span the globe. You *don't* have to speak another language fluently to consider yourself part of the *Global Generation*, but it is likely that you will be conversant in at least one foreign tongue with a smattering of knowledge in a couple of others. We do understand that there is huge poverty in the world and of course, not everybody on the globe does have the privilege to choose to become part of the *Global Generation*. However, in the Western World the number of people that do is increasing exponentially.

Thirdly, and it could be argued that this is merely an amalgamation of our first two points, we are ambitious in our quest to explore the possibilities afforded to us. Most Westerners *can* head across the water and begin life in a foreign country, but most don't. It takes ambition, and maybe a touch of bravery, to leave our natural surroundings to act on the opportunity for career growth and personal development. The career aspect is perhaps easier to quantify and back up with statistics, but the personal side should not be underestimated. In some ways balancing career progression with personal development and happiness is one of the hardest obstacles to overcome as part of the *Global Generation*. We will cover this throughout the book.

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Of course in order for the *Global Generation* to take advantage of the endless possibilities, the will to explore and travel has to come from within, but who is to say whether that will is driven by the opportunities themselves? In short, we are fortunate adventurers, beneficiaries of circumstance and situation and otherwise no different from our forefathers. The *Global Generation* can thus be summarised as a large swathe of people who have been presented with seemingly endless possibilities to travel, explore and experience new cultures, countries and working environments without the natural brakes previously applied by finances, methods of transport and of geographical borders. We are lucky, of that there is no doubt.

* * *

In many ways, our collaboration on this book is both a key topic within these pages and the perfect example of the success of a graduate program. We are not saying that either one of us is the perfect example of a success story from a given graduate program, but rather that one of the key things we learnt along the way was the importance of collaboration, asking for opinions and ultimately seeking out and overcoming challenges.

Anyone entering a job for the first time does so with trepidation, fear and a dash of anxiety; feelings that disappear over time, once day to day life takes over and the job becomes second nature. Everyone has these feelings, they are not unique to people embarking on graduate programs, but there is an added challenge with Graduate Programs: most graduates have not worked anywhere else and the job is anything but routine. Good graduate programs constantly push you out of your comfort zone in order to speed-up your learning and development.

Up to and during 2012, Patrick had been writing a draft for a book that Tom had edited and re-edited a few times. We first met in the summer of 2006 and got to know and respect each other as professionals. While living in different parts of England we met every 6–9 weeks for training over a nine month period. Over time we took different paths in the Trainee Program and drifted apart. Patrick ended up in Philadelphia and Tom in Vienna. A few years later a Facebook post about the original book brought us together in this endeavour and eventually we decided to write a new book focused on guidance and learning for potential and existing trainees.

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One thing that soon became clear in our many email exchanges about the original book, was that although we had both followed the same graduate program, we had had vastly different experiences. We had also formed a number of opinions about the relative values of what we had learned along the way, and how useful these learning experiences had been in our careers both during and after the graduate program. We came from different backgrounds, different countries and have different qualifications. It is these differences, as we shall see in the first chapter, that can help shape the graduate experience quite sharply, and also allow us to see both sides of an argument and offer a reasoned assessment of our experiences. We hope these experiences can be both valuable to graduates about to undertake such an adventure and interesting as a case study for leadership development teams who run similar programs. We mean to provide guidance, insight and opinion on the merits or otherwise of a graduate program, whilst remaining truthful to the experiences we had. There will be no pulled punches, no sugar coating of facts and no rose tinted reminiscing of our days as graduate employees. Equally, we will be as honest as possible about our own performance, failings and achievements throughout the program. The major benefit of collaborating is the honesty that is necessary, although our paths differed we also shared lots of experiences and that forces us to tell things as they are. To a certain extent, a trainee program is about failing over and over again. The more you fail while trying to succeed the more you learn and develop.

The book is split into three sections:
Part one consists of three chapters and takes you through what to consider when selecting a trainee program in the first place (Chapter 1), the induction week (Chapter 2) and the importance of having a positive attitude and what this means in practice (Chapter 3). Part two takes you through the perception of graduate schemes from within a company (Chapter 4), what to consider in relation to your fellow graduates (Chapter 5) and types of training you can receive and what this can mean for your development (Chapter 6). Part three gives you a handle on networking in general and networking across cultures in particular (Chapter 7), projects and internal politics (Chapter 8) and the down and up-side of relocating (Chapter 9).

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Part One
Selecting and joining a trainee program and the importance of having a positive attitude

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1 Selecting a Program

Graduate programs were, until relatively recently, an almost uniquely Anglo Saxon experience. Large companies throughout the UK and USA regularly held recruitment fairs and student events to help attract the best and brightest of that year's graduate population. In some cases, recruitment was focused on specific Universities or courses, or companies would "sponsor" events in order to bring them closer to their target market. The aim was, and still is, to attract a high percentage of strong candidates straight from University with the aim of retaining and moulding them in the coming years. Of course, similar programs existed in other countries but due in part to the widespread use of the English language in Global Business, it was in the English speaking world that they became not only popular, but almost a pre-requisite for a successful career. As we have seen in the introduction, the advent of a more upwardly mobile, forward thinking generation of students throughout the world has led to not only a wider array of programs being offered, but also a more international approach to recruitment. Companies now regularly look beyond the traditional confines of their local markets or national borders.

We will shortly begin to discuss the decision making process when selecting and applying for Graduate Programs, but before that we would like to give you an overview of the Program we both joined. This will hopefully help to make the following sections easier to follow and use when making your own decisions.

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We joined a two year long program for a large International company involved in the distribution industry. The Program had an international flavour, both in terms of the people who were recruited and also the structure of the two years. Prior to being offered the job, both of us had undergone a lengthy selection process to help the Leadership Development Team narrow down their choices. This is almost always the case with Graduate Programs, as it allows a company to start with a wide field of candidates which they can then whittle down depending on their needs and of course, the performance of the Graduates. For us the process involved a telephone interview (or a face to face interview at a career fair), a language test, a two day long Assessment Centre with three face to face interviews and finally the email or phone call alerting us to our success. It is important to point out at this stage that we are being vague about the company we worked for, for a good reason. Firstly, it allows us to be more honest in both our assessment of the program and also the recounting of our experiences. However, it is necessary for us to give you some details of how our program was structured in order for you to understand and follow our experiences.

The company had operations in approximately 30 countries when we joined, which was a result of a successful growth and acquisition strategy in the preceding decade or so, having initially been predominantly a UK/USA based organisation. One of the consequences of this growth into new markets was a need for a new breed of management, who were mobile, linguistically gifted and highly competent. The answer to the conundrum of how best to meet these needs was an International Management Program which aimed to recruit between 20–30 people each year from across Europe. Despite being spread across 30 countries the business model was fairly standardised. In the UK and USA, the company operated a large number of Distribution Networks including Branches or Outlets, storage facilities and a large logistics operation. During our time as Trainees, this would mature into a Hub & Spoke distribution network with large central warehouses servicing up to 100 smaller outlets. In the other countries, the model was broadly the same with some variance depending on geography, size of country, market share etc. The business model was incredibly simple: buy product, add value, sell product. Of course, in practice nothing is so simple when 30 countries, tens of thousands of people and two dozen languages are involved. So the aim of the program was to recruit a number of future managers, train them in the ways of the company, mould them into leaders in various functional fields, and develop a select group who would help drive the business forward, provide better integration and ultimately grow the European side of the business.

The program was very well structured – the company had already been running this particular course for two years, alongside other, more established Graduate Programs in some of the subsidiaries. We met initially at the Assessment Centre, but of course had no idea at the time that we would soon be colleagues. Our second meeting took place on a Sunday evening in September 2006, when the 32 successful candidates had gathered to begin the Induction Week. During this week, we received information about the structure of the program, met the Leadership Development Team, and went over a number of administration points and, for the most part, lived in a Hotel Seminar Room for a week.

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The program was split into three sections or rotations as they were called. For the duration of the first rotation, all the trainees would be based in the UK, spread throughout the country working in various arms of the UK Business. Our experiences in this first nine month rotation were broadly similar, the key thing was to immerse ourselves in the day to day side of the company, understand where the money was made, who our customers were and learn as much as possible. We met as a group fairly regularly, every 6–8 weeks on average, for a week of intense training, each time with a different theme.

The first rotation ended in late spring of 2007, where we once again met for training, had the opportunity to do a presentation based on our experiences over the previous nine months and then began the process of heading our separate ways. We were split between eight countries for the second rotation, which also lasted nine months. The countries we went to were based on our language skills and the requirements of the business. Depending on the location the nature of the second role differed from the first nine months. Some roles were field based, some were more functional, and in some of the smaller business units it was a mix of both. By this stage we were no longer seen as "sponges" that needed to soak up as much information as possible, but rather as useful resources to be squeezed. We were also a gift in some respects, as our salaries and associated costs were covered by the Head Office in the UK, and not by the local businesses. This had both advantages and disadvantages which we will cover in Chapter 4. Training still took place during this time, but on a more local level. We only met once as a full group during these nine months.

At the end of the second rotation things became a lot more fluid, with the focus shifting away from training and learning and more towards finding a permanent role that was of interest to us and the business. The third rotation had a nominal duration of six months, but many people were offered permanent contracts or positions during this time.

This structure of 9-9-6 (months) is fairly common for Graduate Programs, particularly those which have an international element. Equally the pattern of regular training in the first year is also typical. We will now look at what other types of programs exist, and how you should go about choosing the one that suits you.

So, how to choose the right program for you?

The world of graduate recruitment can undoubtedly seem complex and daunting to the uninitiated. Graduate programs come in various shapes and sizes, with different lengths, different structures and different aims. So choosing a course is not straightforward, but there are some very simple first steps to take.They may seem obvious but bear repeating given the importance of making the right choice. Before we begin, we should stress the importance of doing as much research as possible when it comes to choosing a program that you deem suitable – trawl the internet, talk to friends and arrange to meet with people on graduate programs. In short, do everything you can to make your choice an informed one, regardless of your criteria.

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Many people, graduates and recruiters alike, will tell you to start with your degree subject. Having spent between 3-5 years at University immersed in one subject it would be foolish to throw it all away, right? For example, if you studied engineering, look for a graduate program with an engineering company. Evidently, this tactic has a lot of merit, not only does it ensure a higher likelihood of a successful application, but should also allow you to pursue your interests. On the other hand, there is absolutely nothing to stop you doing the complete opposite. Keep in mind that at the age when most people join such programs, few have a clear idea of their future career. Indeed, given everything we have said about the *Global Generation*, it would be foolish and contradictory of us to insinuate that the career chosen in your early 20s will be the one you pursue for the following 40 years. It is instead highly likely that this will be your first step in a varied career path. As such, another tactic for choosing a program is to think in terms of your future and choose a program that offers variety, either of job role or location or both. Choose a program that gives you good exposure to a business as a whole, one which allows you to try out different roles along the way and most importantly choose a program that sounds interesting and enjoyable. In fact, this last point is the most important whatever your chosen tactic may be. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking "I studied accountancy; therefore I will just join the first graduate accountancy program that comes along". There are hundreds of programs that will suit an accountancy graduate; the trick is to pick the most interesting one for you. We all have different criteria of course and some people may prefer to take the option closest to home or with the least travel and instability of lifestyle. This is perfectly fine provided you consciously have chosen the program for those reasons.

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The alternative to picking the most interesting program is to pick the program based on the company offering it. Maybe you have always harboured a desire to work for BMW or Haribo? Or you have a secret weakness for all things Apple? Maybe the prestige offered by the "Who" is more important than the "What"? Frankly, it doesn't matter what criteria you use to choose a course provided that the choice is a conscious one, a reasoned one, and one that ultimately you can live with for the duration of the program and beyond. For every moment you spend agonising over the whys and wherefores of each program on offer, console yourself with the knowledge that the recruitment team attached to every graduate program are equally troubled by their own decision making process. This brings us to our next but important point when choosing a graduate program: Choose a program with a history.

We will cover a lot of the important aspects of corporate culture in relation to graduates in later chapters of this book. We feel it is vital to touch upon it at an early stage. In simple terms, the attitude a company has towards graduates will be one of the single largest factors in determining your personal success within a program. For this reason, choosing an established program at a company with a history of recruiting graduates is crucial. The first and most obvious reason is that you are in effect signing over the first two years of your working life to a company by accepting their offer. It is a mutual commitment with the aim of shared success. However, in a company with no history of similar programs there are a number of almost unavoidable pitfalls and the chances of achieving that shared success are slim. The key to a successful graduate program is stability and acceptance. You need a management team who is supportive of the program both morally and financially. You need buy-in from the company as a whole that a graduate program is a positive step in the right direction. You need a solid structure for the program to ensure progress and learning. Most importantly you need experience around you to help you succeed. As a graduate you are, in the eyes of your employer at least, a resource to be moulded, shaped, educated and taught how to be successful within their business. If none of the above is present then unfortunately the chances are that after two years or less the company will see you less as a resource and more as a burden. Equally, your own experience will fall short of your expectations. Of course there will be exceptions. There will be examples of graduate programs that sprang out of nowhere with no structure in place and became almost instant successes. However, it is important to look at the history of the programs on offer in order to give yourself the best chance of success.

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Types of Programs

There are a number of models used currently for graduate programs but there are two fairly classical models that have been typically used in the UK and USA. The first is the "Generalist" model, usually spread over two years and involving two or three "rotations" or "placements". This would invariably mean working in two or three departments of a business over the two year period with time set aside during each rotation for training, assessment and appraisal. Depending on the business model of the company, this may also entail moving from one location to another during the two years in order to gain wider experience. The aim of this type of program is to produce rounded graduates with a broad understanding of the business model and strategy with a view to them progressing into a management role, either directly after the completion of the program or shortly thereafter. Typically, the different placements would aim to cover both functional and operational roles to allow the maximum exposure to the business depending on the business model of course.

The second type of model classically used is the "Specialist" model. Typically this refers to a business specific program, such as accountancy, where a certain skillset is required both to enter the program and to graduate from it. The structure of a specialist program may not vary too much from the generalist program, but the content of each rotation or placement, together with the training, will be more closely focused on a specific job role.

Both models involve structured training sessions, either from in house or external trainers, and regular assessment and appraisal sessions. The models described above still exist, are widely used and it would be fair to say that they are the established "norms" for graduate programs. However, with the advent of the *Global Generation*, those "norms" are being adapted, stretched and changed. These changes have also led to a greater variety of companies offering such programs. Gone are the days where graduate programs were the domain of banks, accountancy firms and supermarkets. Today, there are programs available in almost every conceivable field of business.

In summary, choosing the right course for you can be made far more straightforward if you take a little time to ask and answer the following questions:

1) Am I passionate about the degree subject I chose?
2) Can I envisage pursuing it as a career?
3) Do I want stability or variety?
4) Does it matter "Who" I work for?
5) Does it matter "Where" I work?
6) What kind of business am I most interested in?
7) Am I a specialist or a generalist? And frankly, does it matter?

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The most important advice we can give you when it comes to choosing a program is that there is no right or wrong answer. Upon completion of a degree, you will have a plethora of options. Everything is possible. Think long and hard about what you want to do, do your research and draw up your own personal criteria for what would make an ideal course for you. Also remember that "there are no silver bullets". Do not plan your career too much but be open towards opportunities coming your way.

The Application Process

Once you have chosen a number of programs which you feel are suitable based on your criteria, it is time to start applying. **By the way, as with all job applications, we advise applying to more than one scheme.** This allows you to compare and contrast different programs, weigh up the benefits of each and hopefully give you a stronger position from which to choose your new career. Hundreds of books have been written about the psychology of applications, the symbolism of CVs and who knows what else. Feel free to buy and use them if you so wish, but for what it is worth neither of us used such books. Instead we trusted our instincts, listened to the advice of friends, and most importantly avoided any gimmicks or trends.

When writing a CV, put yourself in the position of the person reading it. Ask yourself what information they are looking for and make sure that information is easy to find. Start with the basics – name, nationality and contact details. Put it top right, top left or in the centre, it ultimately doesn't matter provided the information is clear, legible and easy to find. Avoid fancy fonts, colours or unusual sizing and keep it simple. As a graduate, your work experience is likely to be limited to summer jobs, placements and other short term postings. Don't worry, you are not alone. Remember you are applying for a first job, any prior experience is a bonus, but one which should be taken seriously. Lay out the jobs according to chronological order, list the company, date and job title and if possible use bullet points to pick out your tasks and responsibilities. Also try to include references.

The next item to list is your education. Start with your recent degree results and list the University, the course title and the results you achieved. If relevant or applicable you can use bullet points to add further information about modules you studied, dissertations topics etc. but remember to think like the recruiter: they want to know what you studied, where you studied and what the result was. The next level of education is very much a personal choice. You can list your "A Levels/Baccalaureate/Abitur etc." only, or add older school qualifications if you think desirable. We feel that for a first job, your degree details should be enough.

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Finally, list any further qualifications you might have, any relevant hobbies or interests and any language skills. Use a professional looking layout for your CV. Keep it simple, crisp, uncluttered and easy to read and follow. Use a maximum of two A4 pages. Only one page should be needed, if this is your first job. Tailor your CV to suit the program you are applying for. This could be something as simple as listing an interest you have that matches the products marketed by the company. If you are applying for a graduate program for graphic designers you might wish to adorn your CV with some of your own artwork. On the whole, the advice we have is to make things as clear and simple as possible whilst transmitting all the relevant information.

The issue of a photograph on a CV is an interesting one, and one that is very much down to personal choice. From the point of view of the recruiter, it undoubtedly helps to put names to faces, create a sense of familiarity (albeit imagined) if the candidate is interviewed and it may help you to be remembered during the process. If you do opt for a photo stick to a head and shoulders shot, dress professionally and smile. Remember that the recruiter, despite rumours to the contrary, is a human being and may well react to a CV with a photo favourably for any number of subconscious reasons.

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First Contact

This will depend mainly on the size of the company running the program. Some companies employ Recruitment Firms to screen the first round of applicants and this may involve a telephone conversation and/or interview to begin with, or maybe a face to face interview with a Recruitment firm. Alternatively, your first contact will be with the internal recruiter who is handling the application process. Patrick's first contact was through an interview at a Career Fair. Either way, the same tips apply. The most important point, and we cannot stress this enough, is to do your research. A job application is a two way process; you, as a graduate, want to find the best possible program to suit you and the company recruiting for a program wants to find the best possible candidates. Too often, and we have all been guilty of this, we spend too much time worrying about what people will think of us in an interview and fail to find out anything of relevance about the company or program. So, research everything: the size of the company, the latest figures, the markets they are present in, the products they sell, the suppliers they work with, the key people in the business. Use LinkedIn or other tools to find out about the person you are meeting and most importantly make lists of questions for things you want to know, either about the company as a whole or the program. Think of questions you will want to ask the interviewer. This shows interest and can also give you valuable insights to the company and program.

Examples of questions you can ask are:

1. If I was to start tomorrow, what would be the top priority on my to- do list?
2. What would you say are the top two personality traits someone needs to do this job well?
3. What improvements or changes do you hope the new candidate will bring to this position?
4. I know this company prides itself on X and Y, so what would you say is the most important aspect of your culture?
5. Do you like working here?
6. Is there anything that stands out to you that makes you think I might not be the right fit for this job?
7. What are the possibilities for personal development, training etc. in the future?

Secondly, prepare for the interview questions that you might be asked. Again, this is easiest if you think about things from the point of view of the interviewer. What would you want to know if you were recruiting for a graduate program? Of course, there will be clichéd questions along the way, about strengths, weaknesses and challenging people you have dealt with. The problem with clichéd questions is that everyone will have a prepared answer. That is fine but, bear in mind that more importance will be attached to the non-clichéd questions, which tell the recruiter more about what he/she wants to know about you. On the classical question of what your main weakness is our advice is that you stop, ask for time to think and then give a completely honest answer of a real weakness. Everybody has them and being honest here shows integrity, humbleness and it also makes your strengths seem much stronger and truthful.

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The most useful information we have ever been given regarding interviews was to not treat them like tests or exams. It is a two way conversation where both parties are trying to find out more about the other, rather like a very formal first date. Obviously, you will be nervous but so will the recruiter.

They have a lot at stake as well. Below is a short summary of how our respective first interviews were conducted, and how they went.

Tom's first contact interview:

I had applied for a nameless graduate scheme via an online recruitment advert with REED. I filled out the form, attached my CV and within a week I had a date for a face to face interview with a recruitment firm in London, some 200 miles from where I was living at the time. As luck would have it, I managed to make the dates fit to coincide with a two day assessment centre for another graduate program with the Danish Shipping Company, Maersk. In hindsight, this was a bad idea. Assessment Centres, as we shall see shortly, are tiring and stressful and by no means ideal preparation for a face to face interview. I had done some general research for both roles with some more specific shipping based research for Maersk. REED had supplied little information about the company I had applied for, focusing more on the content of the program. This was deliberate on their part, as it prevents candidates from applying directly and ensured that REED got their fee when providing a successful candidate. So, after one and a half days of talking shipping, I arrived at the London office of REED to have my interview at 4pm on a Wednesday afternoon. I vividly remember how tired and exhausted I felt, both mentally and physically, when I arrived at the office. I was early and unwisely decided to fuel up on caffeine to get me through the interview. When the time came I was 50% exhausted and 50% wired on espresso. In many respects, I was fortunate that this interview was with the recruitment company and not directly with the people running the program as it was when Patrick had his first interview. The difference is that the brief given to external recruiters is very much based on personality, likeability and character with less emphasis placed on more technical HR issues, which is handled at the assessment centre.

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Obviously, I didn't realize this at the time and as is to be expected I was quite nervous going into the interview. I felt unprepared, exhausted, jumpy from the caffeine and if I am being 100% honest, fairly ambivalent about the interview. Sure, I wanted to do well but I think I realized (subconsciously) that I was in no position to put on any kind of convincing performance of what I thought the perfect candidate should be and my best bet was to be myself. Like I said, looking back it is easy to label this a result for my intelligent subconscious; the reality at the time was more a case of summoning whatever energy I had left to get through the final hour of the day. In contrast to Patrick's tale below, my interview felt very informal, very friendly and ultimately like a casual chat with a stranger. We talked about University, the course I had studied, the city I had studied in, the sports I played, how I had made my way to London, what I thought of the capital, what my favourite city was. In short we talked about lots of subjects seemingly unrelated to finding a new job. I relaxed, we talked some more, and suddenly our hour was up. Coming out of the interview, I had mixed emotions as it had been an enjoyable interview. I felt like I had made a good impression, but I had absolutely no idea if I had said anything remotely positive or interesting regarding my desire to get the job I had applied for. The more I thought about it on the train home, the more pessimistic I became. Maybe we had talked about so many unrelated subjects because the recruiter decided immediately that I wasn't suitable? Maybe she was just using the interview to kill time at the end of a working day? After two days of questioning and tests during an assessment centre I was capable of believing anything and by the time I got home that day I had convinced myself that a lifetime of shipping lay ahead.

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Patrick's first contact interview:

I studied the CEMS program at Stockholm School of Economics. At that time CEMS stood for "Community of European Management Schools". The company in question was a so called corporate partner to this Community or Network of universities. Every year CEMS would have a Career Fair were students could interview with the Corporate Partners. I applied for interviews with a few of these at the Career Forum in Warsaw. Students that received interviews would get part of the travel expenses covered. I found the description of the company quite interesting, while also thinking that their extremely aggressive growth strategy seemed a bit "over the top". I applied out of curiosity but since my profile fit pretty well with what they were looking for I also reckoned I would get an interview and hence my flight tickets covered. When I got to the interview I became even more interested in the company.

I had prepared myself thoroughly for the interview. I was going to make "a killing" in there. I knew who I was and I could answer all classic interview questions like a tape recorder. It was just a matter of pressing the play button and there you would have my answer. I was in selling mode. I left the interview with a sense of failure. I was very disappointed. My very first impression of the American interviewer had been positive but she had not let me say much during the whole time. In retrospect, I think both of us were trying to sell something to each other. I tried to sell myself and she tried to sell the company. Later, she also explained to me that if you let students take too much space at an interview, they might very well just talk forever. She was probably right about that. If she would have let me talk, I would never have stopped. Her technique was interesting, because she would tell me lots about the company (that I had already read up on) and then when she was about to lose my interest she would catch me off guard with a question. That way the answers she received were not the "tape recorder" ones, but genuine and very truthful answers.

Just like Tom I was very unsure about how I had been perceived at the interview, since I felt I had not really had the opportunity to sell myself. In all honesty, I did not think that they were going to choose me for the Assessment Centre. I wish I could have had more confidence back then. I was thrilled when I finally got the call inviting me to the Assessment.

Interview/Assessment Day

Regardless of our own opinions of how things had gone during our initial contact, somehow we both received invitations to a two day assessment centre in the south of England. Also, by now Tom had received more information about the company and was able to research more thoroughly and prepare for the assessment centre.

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We were both nervous going through our assessment centre for a number of reasons. Firstly, this was the make or break time for this particular job application. Secondly, assessment centres sound daunting no matter how confident you are and thirdly, Patrick had missed a flight and had to scramble to arrive one hour before the first activity took place. The rest of the group were unaware of Patrick's transport issues but it was not an ideal way to start an assessment for him. Patrick's key learning point here is to make sure you plan ahead and travel in the day before if possible; the extra expense is worth the peace of mind knowing that you are where you need to be. In order to reduce your nervousness, it is best to acknowledge that you are nervous and then apply techniques to deal with it. There are lots of techniques to deal with nervousness from breathing exercises and massage to positive visualization. Use what works for you. One way to reduce your nervousness is to firstly realize that you are there for a reason; the company sees you as an interesting candidate. Also, remember that everyone else is in the same position as you. Even people who have been through a couple of assessment centres already will be nervous.

In a rather interesting quirk of fate, we both ended up at the same assessment centre. In total, there were 10 assessment centres held by the company with around 30 invitees to each. In total, 32 people would be chosen from the 300+ interviewed.

Before the Assessment, we did two cognitive tests online; one was focused on mathematics and diagrams and the other one was more focused on logic in relation to words and language. At the Assessment Centre, the group of 30+ was split into two; half the group began with a series of face to face interviews with various senior figures within the business and the other half began with group activities and tests. The interviews were the easy part and to call them "interviews" in a classical sense is misleading. Essentially, each person had three 30 minute conversations with people in the business. Of course, there was an element of questioning taking place but few of the questions would be found in a HR Guide Book. The idea is to test communication skills, personality and ultimately, it is an opportunity for the Leadership Team who is conducting the Assessment Centre to solicit further opinions from senior figures. The people who assisted in the "interviews" were from various parts of the business, be it Finance, Marketing, Sales etc., and in our case, given the international nature of our Program, there was more than a hint of a "language skills check" taking place.

The group activity went well for Tom, but only okay for Patrick. The latter remembers that he felt that the whole setting was artificial:

"I am a talkative person in general, but I did not say that much during the exercise. All the participants had various pieces of information that we needed to put together to understand a scenario. Some people were talking, just to talk and to participate, which annoyed me because I felt it did not bring us forward and it muddled the understanding of the problem at hand and the solution for it."

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Today, in retrospect, we think you can approach these kinds of situations by dividing it into two parts. The first part is specialist knowledge towards solving a problem. The second part is the process or how you get to the end solution. A good way to start can be to establish the current situation or status. You need to ensure that everybody has the same understanding of what it is you are doing. It could also be that each person has received different instructions or at least interpreted the same instructions differently. Then, you can consider what the process should look like for getting to the end goal and it can also be advisable to take an inventory of skills in the group. So, you can contribute to the advancement and to the group in two areas, either by pure problem solving or by providing structure to the process and by e.g. ensuring involvement of the other participants or asking questions that can bring the process forward. In working life today, we find ourselves in situations where we sometimes feel the need for asking "the stupid questions", which might not be that stupid at all. Pausing and summarizing where you are in the process is also a simple tool that can really help the process forward; it ensures everything is captured and it ensures understanding. Ultimately, in a situation like an assessment centre for a job, the process is more important than the result. Of course, companies who run these centres are looking for strong leaders and strong personalities. At an early stage of a career, the ability to work with others, show understanding and think logically are equally important. Furthermore, don't be intimidated by other people who are participating at the Assessment Centre. They might be from well-known universities or seem to have done a heap of internships and have incredible experience. Again, there is a reason why you are at the Assessment Centre and what counts now is how you come across over the next one or two days and what future potential the assessors see in you. This relates a lot to your attitude and aspirations. Some of the people who joined our trainee program had almost zero work experience and limited business knowledge but their language skills, combined with their attitude and personality, ensured that they got the job. Equally, one guy was a former pilot and another was pushing thirty when he joined. Everybody is different and has different skills. Companies are not looking to recruit 30 identical people. They want diversity, a broad skill set, different backgrounds and experiences. This is how organisations grow, not through employing an army of clones! In my application, (Patrick) I wrote that I could see myself starting and running my own company. It was an honest description of my aspirations, which in this case probably made them more interested in me because they wanted the graduates to try out being branch managers after the trainee program. In a way, branch managers run their own small companies within the company.

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2 Day one and Induction

So you have signed a contract and joined a graduate program. You might be nervous and you are not sure what to expect. First of all, you should receive some sort of a *Welcome Package* from the company. Any respectable trainee program will see the geniality in sending out reading material for the graduates that they can read before you even have them on the payroll. If, for some reason, your chosen company is different and doesn't burden recruits before they join, ring up and ask for something anyway. The correct attitude, as we shall see in Chapter 3, is crucially important. You feel more prepared for the induction and the start of the program if you receive material and read it beforehand.

Secondly, if you have joined an international trainee program, you will need to move to another country, maybe a country that you have not lived in before. This means you will need to get used to a new culture-, infrastructure etc. Our advice is that you read up a little about the country you are about to move to and get started with practicalities as soon as possible. You will need to find a place to live, to get a social security number and a bank account. You might need to get a visa, an international driver's license, a car etc. Most established programs will have mechanisms in place to support you with these aspects. Also, make some considerations towards your life outside of work. A good way to start could be to find a sports club or something similar to join. Do some research on things like this and make contact well in advance of moving. It may seem trivial, or even unrelated, but we cannot stress enough the importance of having extra-curricular activities. Taking part in sports, meeting friends or even something as simple as going to the pub to watch football are important in helping to balance your life, particularly in a new country where the temptation is big to throw everything into your new job and neglect the rest of what makes you tick.

Once you have started to move, there will be so many things to keep on top of anyway. A good technique is to book time for yourself in your calendar. A holiday or simply time with friends and family which allows you to rest and relax before you start the Trainee Program is advisable. You will most probably hit the ground running as soon as you start day one of the program. We followed about 50% of the advice above but we wish we had known about the other 50% and that we had followed it. For example, Tom left one job on the Friday afternoon, played cricket all day Saturday, took a train south to London on the Sunday and began the induction to the Graduate Program on the Monday morning. This is not recommended.

We started our program with one week of induction and training at a nice hotel outside of London. The five days were completely full, beginning with training sessions and seminars and ending with dinner. The main advice at the induction week is to not get carried away. Many of your fellow graduates and probably yourself will want to stand out and impress from day one. In this respect, it can be a little bit like the assessment centre. Forget about this and remember you already have the job. Focus on getting to know your graduate colleagues and the Leadership Team, find out their backgrounds, their personalities and what makes them tick. It is important even at this early stage to understand how you are alike and how you are different since you will be working closely together.

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Socialize

The next tip is to *socialize*, but take it easy. You do not have to be the last person leaving the bar every night and you can have a couple of evenings when you do not go there at all. The induction will generally be quite intense and if you find some time to be on your own and reflect on what you are going through, why not take that chance? It is a good idea to process your experiences in one way or another. Admittedly, it is hard not to get caught up in the "festivities" and you may also wonder whether it might be badly perceived to go to bed early; trust us, it is a good thing. Why not write a short learning journal every evening and make a little "mind dump"? Over the time of the trainee program you will have plenty of time to get to know your trainee colleagues and the Leadership Team. One area where we do recommend you put some extra emphasis is to network with other people in the company. It is likely that high level executives and even the CEO will present to you during your induction and also that they will participate in dinners. You might be part of a so called rotational dinner where executives or employees from the company will rotate around islands of tables with graduates; use every opportunity you can to introduce yourself and ask a question or two about the job of the person you are talking to. You don't have to ask the perfect question every time but merely telling someone your name and asking a relevant question is perfect both to break the ice and more importantly makes follow up contact at a later stage easier. If this is not a natural part of your scheme, you should recommend it to your leadership team.

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Networking

The *networking* opportunities you get during the trainee program will be excellent. The key is to realize it and make the most of it. The problem is that as graduates we did not really understand this and should have been much better it . Again, try to put yourself in the position of the Executive or the CEO or whoever; they come to these events to meet and greet, to ask a few questions, to give advice and tell a story or two over a good meal! Will they mind if you ask a couple of questions, ask for a business card and tell them where you are from? Absolutely not. Use the opportunity as you never know when it might be useful. To give an example, in Tom's most recent role he wanted to get in touch with a company based in the Czech Republic. While doing his research he recognized a name on the Board of Directors, checked a couple of details and sent an email, which started like this: "Dear Mr XXX, we met a couple of years ago at a Dinner event in London as part of a Program organized by Company ABC…" It worked. Of course, you should not stress out about networking and you should not be too eager. The executives you meet will sometimes be tired and worked out. You need to have a feeling for that and be able to small talk about favourite films, this, that and the other if that is most appropriate at the time. It can be a great break for them and in order to really get to know people you might talk about many other things apart from the company and the business.

There are three main aspects of networking towards employees and executives in your company. First,they are an immense source of knowledge. Before meeting them, make sure you understand who they are and what they do. Again, do a little research on their job role, their previous roles, anything of interest which will help a conversation. By doing this, you will find it much easier to connect with them. If you show interest in them you will better be able to ask good questions and extract knowledge that can be useful to you. There is no need to hide that you have read up a little about them or looked at their CV. People love talking about themselves and people love it when other people are interested in them. Use their name and be open with the fact that you looked at their CV and want to ask them about a certain role or experience in connection with this.

The second aspect of networking is that executives and other people in your company will get to know you and can open doors for you either immediately in relation to a project you are working on, or in the future. Heck, they might very well want you to work for them later on. It is, of course, important that you are humble and genuine. You need to impress them but this isn't the moment to make the 20 second Elevator Pitch.

The third aspect to consider is that the more you network at dinners, after presentations the better you will become at it. The better you become at it the more knowledgeable you will be and more and more doors will start to open automatically for you. In the beginning, it might be a bit intimidating networking with high level executives but do not hesitate to go straight for it. They are people just like everybody else and, with time, you will become an excellent networker. Again, we could have done much better with regards to networking. In fact, we think this is so important that we will dedicate a good part of Chapter 7 to it.

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Get to know your colleagues

You will also need to get to know your graduate colleagues. If you are interested in people, this will happen automatically because you will spend so much time with them. It is important to be open and respectful of your colleagues. In our program there were14 different nationalities. Patrick was the only Swedish or Scandinavian person in the group and around a third of the group were of French origin. There were a few English people. However, we both felt that we quite quickly found a few people we could talk to easily based on background, nationality and shared interests. However, as the program progressed we started to get to know people across these invisible boundaries and by the end of the two-year program we were engaging more with completely different people. This was partly due to the fact that we went to the same country and shared professional experiences with other colleagues during the second and third rotation of the program and also due to the fact that we in time got to know more people in the group better. The key message here is that you should stay open to the experience and to the fact that things will change during the program. Let us be brutally honest, there will be people to whom you take an instant dislike. This is human nature. Sometimes you just don't like someone and there is nothing you can do about it. Just make sure that you are polite, courteous and professional in your dealings with that person and everything will be fine. Throughout your career, you will meet thousands of people from all walks of life; the trick is finding a way to get on with people to a sufficient degree whereby you achieve your goals. As we already mentioned, across a broad spectrum of people there will also be individuals whose skills or experiences you find to be lacking. Simply put, there is occasionally the odd person who slips through the recruiting net. This is not your problem, treat them like the people you don't get on with and let their own deficiencies account for their success or lack thereof.

Dress the role

You, of course, need to dress the role as a graduate. Make sure your appearance is up to scratch. There is no harm in going for the "upper end" of a dress code. Of course there are cultural aspects to consider here, but the general rule is that it is better to "overdress" instead of "underdress". It is far easier to discreetly remove a tie, pocket your cufflinks and roll up your sleeves then it is to magically make a tie and jacket appear out of nowhere. You are no longer a student – you are a professional now. Also bear in mind the cultural differences when it comes to dress codes. When we interview students for positions today, we are sometimes surprised by their appearance or lack of a proper one. It is unnecessary and brings down the impression of the candidate.

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What can you expect at the induction?

First of all you have signed up for *brainwash*. We mentioned earlier that the company wants to mould you and to a certain extent you should let that happen as it is probably what you want yourself. You will be overloaded with reading materials branded with the company logo, you will drink your coffee out of company coffee cups, write your notes on company paper with a company pen. In short, you will become a walking, talking advertisement for the values and ethics that company represents, often without realizing it. Our advice is to go with the flow, embrace the brainwashing and immerse yourself in the company culture as much as possible. This is not only wise from a career development point of view, but also in order to make any decisions about your career in the future. At the same time, you were probably hired partly because of your ability to remain critical. Don't be afraid to question decisions, ideas, suggestions or comments but be sure to do so in a matter that shows a constructive side to your criticism. Flat out disagreeing with something without backing it up with reasons won't get you anywhere. When disagreeing or questioning something of this nature, it is important to remember something we touched on in Chapter 1 and will cover in more detail in Chapter 3 namely, what is the perception of graduates within your company? The answer to this question will determine how your comments, challenges and criticisms are treated.

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First Day

The first day at the induction we took part in, the CEO of Europe stood up and explained with a strong American accent that the opportunities were endless within the company and that his biggest challenge was to hire 10,000 people, i.e. increase the workforce by about 12.5% over the next year. At the time, it felt like stereotypical bravado, mixed with reality. The curve was trending upwards at that time. Two years later, the company had started a process that within a couple of years led to the company almost halving in size. That is the reality of the corporate world. Changes can be quick and heads can start rolling faster than you can say "snap". Within Management literature, companies are, in a sense, portrayed to be ruthless with regards to "facing brutal facts" whereas people should be compassionate and still do what is in the best interest of the company. There is a clear tension there. You need to remember that at the end of the day you are a resource to the company. The difference as a graduate is that the company is investing in you now by forming and educating you in order to reap the benefits from you as a fully-fledged high performing resource later. This can make you feel like you owe something to the company. We felt this way. In retrospect, we do not think you should. The main reason for this is that when times get tough they will not hesitate to let you go, if that should be in the best interest of the company. Yes, you need to let a certain amount of brainwashing take place but that does not mean that you should put the company in front of everything else. You need to remain truthful to yourself and what you want in life and in your career. One trainee actually decided to leave the company after a few months to take on a Management position for a golf company. It was well in line with his interests and his career has been successful so far. To summarize, while you might be of some importance to a company of 80,000 employees, what you want from your life and career yourself should be more important than what the company wants from you and your career. This is easy to forget.

Presentations and sessions

Apart from being brainwashed, you will listen to quite a few presentations about the company and the strategy of the company. Let us tell you about the Induction week in more detail. We started on a Sunday with a river cruise and dinner. Wow – we felt lucky and welcome! The day after, on the Monday, the CEO sponsoring the program started by explaining to us that we were like Bilbo and that we were going on an adventure. In retrospect, this was a very good comparison. In fact, if you stop reading this book right now and read Bilbo instead you would probably in some way capture 50% of the content of this book. It was made clear to us that the company was investing big time in us.

After the session with the CEO, we were welcomed into the program and the objectives of the program as well as what was expected of us were explained. At that session, we were also introduced to a short learning diary and the following definition of Leadership:

"To manage through confusion, anxiety and change. To add purpose, focus and direction to a situation where it didn't exist".

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We then had a session on intercultural competence, a topic that we would revisit many times during the program. We focused on "The Wheel of Culture" depicted in the middle column in the table below and we also mapped ourselves out on a scale on each of these aspects. Our company realized the importance of cultural understanding in order to be successful when working internationally. We feel that the cultural training we received has helped us in our international lives after the trainee program.

The Wheel of Culture

One end of the scale	Cultural Aspect	Other end of the scale
Task/ Contractual	Relations	Person/ Relational
Monochronic	Time	Polychronic
Explicit	Communication	Implicit
Instrumental	Communication	Affective
Action	Action	Reflection, analysis
Low Power Distance	Hierarchy	High Power Distance
Compartmentalized	Rules	Diffuse
Universalist	Rules	Particularist
Open conflict	Conflict	Hidden Conflict

See appendix 1 for a thorough list of good books and links to use to enhance your intercultural skills. During the week, we received more cultural training and also went through the sessions containing information about the following:

- A trainee program in the UK that our company was also running
- Health and Safety
- Manual Handling – this was a legal requirement since we were going to work "hands-on" in a branch.
- UK Business Overview
- Administration – expenses, email account, holiday request form etc.
- Executive Forum
- Mentoring Program – the trainees that started a year before us were our mentors.
- Evaluation

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All trainee programs worth their salt will have executive presentations. This is an opportunity for you to learn about the business and about business strategy. Make the most out of it and listen carefully! Mentoring is also an important topic. We would however suggest that you get your own mentor from outside of the industry or a more senior person from within your company. The advantage with a mentor that does not work for your company is that it is much easier to talk freely and you also get a very different perspective. In our case the mentors assigned to our group were from the same graduate program, albeit one year older in terms of company experience. This was useful, to a degree, if we had specific questions about the way the program worked, or for relocation advice, but in general we recommend seeking a mentor with far more experience, and ideally one who has not had the same level of company specific brainwashing as yourself.

Jokes and culture

At one point during the induction week, I (Patrick) tried to crack a joke to lighten the mood up a little bit. The managers of the program had let us have dinner on our own one evening so that we could get to know each other in a more relaxed way. That morning we were asked if the previous evening had been good. Everybody said that it had. Then the person leading the session asked why it had been good. I raised my hand and said bluntly and crisply "because you were not there". She had not expected that answer and reacted defensively by being quiet for a few seconds while everybody in the room laughed nervously. She then found herself a little and said "mmm, okay…Patrick, next flight back to Sweden" and then asked for clarification. I was stomped by her clearly defensive way of reacting and became very nervous myself and mumbled something. She had not reacted to it in the way I had expected. I had given the answer she was after in a blunt way that was meant as a joke but she took it personally. One of the trainees saved me a little by taking over and saying that it was relaxing that we could spend time on our own. The person leading the session then went on by saying that had been the intention. Years later she would still bring up my comment now and again. I had made a name for myself already at the induction week. I think that played both to my advantage and disadvantage from then on. It is interesting that if you say something stupid with two people in the room it is bad but, if you say the same stupid thing with 10 people in the room, it is not five times as bad but 50. The climate might very well be a little tense at the induction so a key learning point here is to go a little light on jokes. Furthermore, there might be people from many different cultures in the program which can also make it sensible to go easy on jokes since jokes often are culture specific.

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You are being watched

Also, it is important during the induction and any subsequent training sessions to remember that you are constantly being watched and assessed. I (Tom) remember, at the end of one training session, being pulled to one side by the leader of the Program. It was early on in the induction week and we were having a housekeeping session about administrational procedures, how to fill out expenses claims, request holidays etc. At one point, the issue of sickness and time off was brought up with the Leadership Team stating that it would be unacceptable to use sickness days to increase the holiday entitlement, for example, by phoning in sick for a day or two, while skiing in Chamonix. Personally, I found this both redundant and insulting. At the time, I said nothing but my facial features betrayed me! The leader of the program asked if there was something wrong, as I had looked incredibly disinterested, bored and even angry during the previous session. I explained my position and my thoughts and the matter was closed. I recall thinking to myself that I had to be on guard a lot more in such sessions, given the constant scrutiny we were under as graduates.

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The very first day, I (Patrick) wrote "I am being observed and evaluated" in my learning journal. In fact, the leadership team had been very clear about that and spelled it out for us. You need to put this into perspective though. The fact is that there are many people who will affect your career and what happens during your Trainee Program is important. At the same time who you are will shine through no matter what and furthermore your career is going to be much longer than the Trainee Program. You should make sure you expose yourself as much as possible to learning situations during the program. You should not be afraid to make mistakes. In fact, if you do not make mistakes you are not learning anything.

Tax and currency risk in your salary

We had a specific session on taxes. We recommend that you pay great attention to the tax situation, especially if you are on an international trainee program. You should in a way account for a "tax risk" in your salary. By this we mean that there is a risk that you will be hit by unexpected taxes or unexpected tax benefits when moving across borders. This is a risk that you should be compensated for in your salary. If you on top of that, receive your salary in another than the local currency of the country you are in, then you should get greatly compensated for the currency risk that you are accepting as well. We believe a 10% higher salary due to currency risk and maybe a 5% higher salary due to tax risk is completely fair. However, you need to have covered this up-front of course. It is advisable to ask questions regarding the policy with respect to these aspects before you sign-on to the program. Again, if the trainee program has been around for a long time, the company should have found ways to reduce that risk and to deal with it in a good and fair way.

Flirting

At the induction, you might very well meet a fellow graduate that you fancy and want to flirt with. We were crisply informed that we were not on a dating program. However, by the end of the program four couples had appeared. The advice we have here is to be careful and smart about it. Do not rush in to anything. This goes for any romance at a work place. Many people meet at the work place but it can also become extremely complicated if things go sour in the romantic relationship once you try to get back to a normal work relationship again.

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3 Attitude

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life.

Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company…a church…a home.

The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past…we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude… I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you…we are in charge of our attitudes.

By: Charles Swindoll

This quote was presented to us on more than one occasion during the trainee program and could be regarded as part of the brainwash we went through; in fact the last line almost became the slogan for the program. We believe that a strong drive and a positive attitude is the most important aspect for success on a trainee program. You will face many different scenarios and circumstances throughout the program and go through many parts of your emotional register. There will be times when you can cope easily with the situation you are in and other times when things are not so straightforward. In fact, the more challenges you dive into head-on, the more you will develop as a person and a professional and that is the whole point of the program. Accept every challenge presented to you. If during a training week, the question "any volunteers?" is asked, you should be the first person to raise your hand. You do not have to perform the best and do everything right during the exercises; the most important thing is the process and your learning. Your positive attitude and willingness to dive into exercises and challenges will be seen and appreciated by the Leadership Team more so than the fact that you complete everything flawlessly. The exercises at the training weeks where we learnt the most were the ones where we failed miserably.

Case Study

As an example we had a three day session on project management during the second year of the program. In teams of 5 or 6 people we were assigned a case study about the construction of a new warehouse and given some time to read the information in our groups. We were then given additional information about time-frames, materials needed for the project, and documents to use during the session; in short we were given all the information we would need. The Case Study then became a turn-based role playing exercise, where each person in the group was assigned a task (booking the labour force, ordering supplies, budgeting, complying with Health and Safety etc.) and we "played" the scenario over the course of the day.

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The principle aim of the "game" was to finish the task on time, under budget and make a profit, which in the planning stages seemed like the easiest thing in the world to do – after all we had all the information we needed, and 5 smart people to put the plan into action. However, in reality, it wasn't quite so simple. During the course of the day we learned more about the case study, some of the information changed, or was updated, and unexpected events occurred (the accommodation we ordered for the staff didn't arrive on time, the labourers went on strike and we were fined by the local council, for example!). Of course with 5 like-minded, smart but argumentative people in the team, there was the occasional moment of tension to add to our ever increasing troubles.

To cut a very long story short, our team missed the deadline by 5 weeks (5 turns of the game), we "lost" a staggering amount of money on the project, and had it been a real-life scenario at least two of us would have been sent to prison for breaking Health and Safety laws! However, and this is the longwinded point we are trying to make, by encountering so many issues and really being quite humiliated in front of my peers, I (Tom) learnt far more about myself, my approach to group work and ultimately my ability to plan, than if we had delivered the project on time and made a profit. Each time I begin to plan a project now, the first thing I do is build in time to the plan to deal with contingencies and unexpected events. Lesson learnt!

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Your colleagues on the floor

There will and should be times where you feel miserable. If you do not experience this, then one could argue that you are not learning enough and your experience is not challenging enough. Many of the generalist type of trainee programs are bottom-up, meaning that you start on the floor, in a warehouse or behind a sales counter to really learn the business. Some of your colleagues on the floor will want to test you. This is their chance to have a swing at you. You are well educated, but you are in their territory now. You are nothing without them. They are your teachers now and you better respect them and take a genuine interest in them if you want to learn and develop and have a rewarding time on the floor. Cherish this time and make the most of it. There are all kinds of people in this world but let us attempt to describe three archetypes of people you might run into on the floor. Firstly you can run into "The Real Characters". These are people with a real interesting story. They will take an interest in you and you will find them interesting and different. They take real pride in their work and are very knowledgeable. These will be easy to approach. They might approach you. They have a lot to teach you and they love to small talk. You will learn from them and you will remember them.

Secondly we have "The Funny Fuckers". They can be quite tough at times and might give you a hard time and make jokes about you, especially as you are getting to know them. It is important that you get to know these guys and try to penetrate their hard shell slowly but surely. Be friendly with them and be yourself. It is important that you are not stuck up against these guys because they will "take you apart". Show interest in them and get to know them. They are also very knowledgeable and can teach you a lot but, more importantly, they can make your life miserable if you get them against you.

Lastly you have "The Grinders". These are hardworking people and they might be a bit shy. They are generally harmless and have no interest in picking you apart. They have opinions just like everybody else and they can also teach you a lot, if you manage to get them going.

Of course the three categories of associates just described are extreme stereotypes. Your main challenge will be that you are only on the floor for a certain time period and then you move on. The associates you will be working with on the floor know this, so ask yourself why they should take an interest in you and your learning? Should they do it out of duty? What is in it for them? In a way you need to show them that you are one of them but also that you are not. What do we mean by this? Firstly, get your hands dirty and dig in but if the opportunity presents itself where you can use your analytical skills or academic knowledge to actually solve a problem (and trust us you will run into lots of inefficiencies) why not do so? Patrick installed a barcode scanner in the branch where he was working. The counter staff, store manager and the branch manager loved it. Did he have to do this? Absolutely not. By taking some initiative, reading up about the system and talking to people in the company, he found out that it was possible to do this quite easily because there had been a central pilot project that had been stopped.

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Let us share a story with you. One of the girls at the program was constantly receiving sexist comments and sexual invites in front of the others at her branch. One day she said: "Okay let's have sex. Meet me in the warehouse in 5 minutes". She went into the warehouse and waited for him. She was probably ready to have him take his pants of and commenting on his genitals or something, but he never turned up. The next time he made a comment in front of the co-workers she brought up the fact that he had never turned up in the warehouse and after that he never made any more advances. This story should probably come with a "don't try this at home" disclaimer. However, it shows that sometimes unconventional methods can be beneficial, but they could potentially also involve some risk.

Customers

We would love to divide the type of customers that you will meet into archetypes, however this is quite industry specific. You will by default run into many different characters if you work in a customer facing environment. There will be some weird encounters but that is part of the experience. We remember jokes that would make your laughter get stuck in your throat or others that disgusted us. We remember customers coming in "flying high" on Marijuana and customers making racist comments and looking for agreement. Our advice on this is to mostly keep a smile on your face, be a bit lenient, but also stay true to your values and kindly renege on e.g. a racist comment without moralizing or lingering on the issue. There might be times where customers will test you as well. In most businesses, you will learn that customer service is of utmost importance and it is. At the same time, all companies have customers that are unprofitable. The reasons for this can be many but in the end, they are draining your company of more time and money compared to what they are paying for your services. As a trainee, you need to give high customer service but also be smart enough to pay more attention to profitable and strategic customers when necessary. No matter what level of the business you are working in it is important to understand the customer mix and the reasons for it. By asking about this at an early stage you are also showing the right kind of inquisitive approach that will be appreciated by senior members of the business. Most people like to pass on their knowledge to younger or less experienced team members, so give them the opportunity to do so by asking good questions.

Trainee colleagues

With 14 nationalities, as on our program, there will be frustrations and many different approaches to solving problems. Many times we were under time pressure when solving a task during e.g. a training week or in-between training weeks. The different cultures and personalities meant severe frustrations. Sometimes people just did not understand each other but most of the time many of us were too focused on the end result and not so much on the process and the people involved in it. This also relates to your personality profile (e.g. your Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Profile or your DISC-Profile). Our key advice is to over-communicate especially in the beginning and take an interest in every individual in your task group. Try to focus a little bit more on the process than on the end goal. This approach requires more time but it also allows for less frustrations.

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Another opportunity in relation to your trainees is to shadow them or switch roles with them if they are having a different experience. Why not take the initiative and at least ask the leadership team if you can do this? We advise you take initiative, form your experience by e.g. suggesting that you receive certain training and go the extra mile if there are opportunities to do so but do not get carried away. Remember that you are there to learn and that the company expects to reap the benefits of your training a little bit further down the road.

Attitude in relation to yourself

There are two main aspects to point out here and those are *pay* and *feedback*. Any well organised trainee program will constantly provide the participants with feedback of all sorts. If this is not a natural part of your program then you should suggest it. The best and most intense type of feedback is the 360 degree one, where you get feedback from all your trainee colleagues. When interacting and working with your trainee colleagues you might want to keep in mind that they will give you feedback during the program. In the beginning of the trainee program, we actually did not pay that much attention to the feedback we received. This was partly because we only respected some of our colleagues from a professional point of view and probably partly because we were still a bit young, naive and maybe even a little bit full of our ourselves and our abilities. However, when the very same feedback started to trickle in over and over again from different people and different assessors, one has to start to take it seriously and listen to it. So once you have accepted the feedback, which we suggest you do, then the next thing is to do something about it. Doing something about e.g. being perceived as quite dominant or too shy is not easy. Changing your way of behaving is difficult.

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"Watch your thoughts, they become words; watch your words, they become actions; watch your actions, they become habits; watch your habits, they become character; watch your character, for it becomes your destiny."

FRANK OUTLAW, Late President of the Bi-Lo Stores, 1977

A trainee program means that you are being moulded but you also need to mould yourself. You need to be aware of some of your weaknesses and find strategies to deal with them without losing out on your strengths. For example, being dominant has its advantages as well as disadvantages. You can try and reduce your dominance sometimes or ask people in a group if you are coming across as too dominant or even tell people that "sometimes I come across as too dominant, please let me know if that is the case". Exposing yourself shows maturity and other people will generally like you for it. You can try to change incrementally, but don't lose yourself in it. Fundamentally, you are who you are, accept it. We think you should focus more on finding strategies to deal with your weaknesses while reminding yourself of what they are from time to time rather than trying to fundamentally change who you are.

At times, listen to feedback from outside your industry. If you have chosen a trainee program instead of becoming a consultant, then you have also made a choice to "box yourself in" to a certain extent. You will thoroughly learn operations and how a business truly works but, in order to stay in tune with what goes on in other industries you need to actively read up on business literature, magazines and such like. Already after a year as a trainee, you will have started to look at certain things as "truths" of the industry or of your company. This can be slightly dangerous. Constantly make sure that you know your core assumptions or what you regard as being inherently true and at times question these assumptions or "truths". When you get an opportunity to interact with a newly hired director from another industry for example, make sure you pay extra attention to what he or she says because they will not have the same ingrained assumptions that you already might have. Some of the most rewarding presentations we listened to during our training weeks were from executives who had recently joined the company but had been around long enough to also understand our industry. These executives sometimes brought the best of two worlds with them. They had an outside perspective that they could apply to an inside understanding, so to speak.

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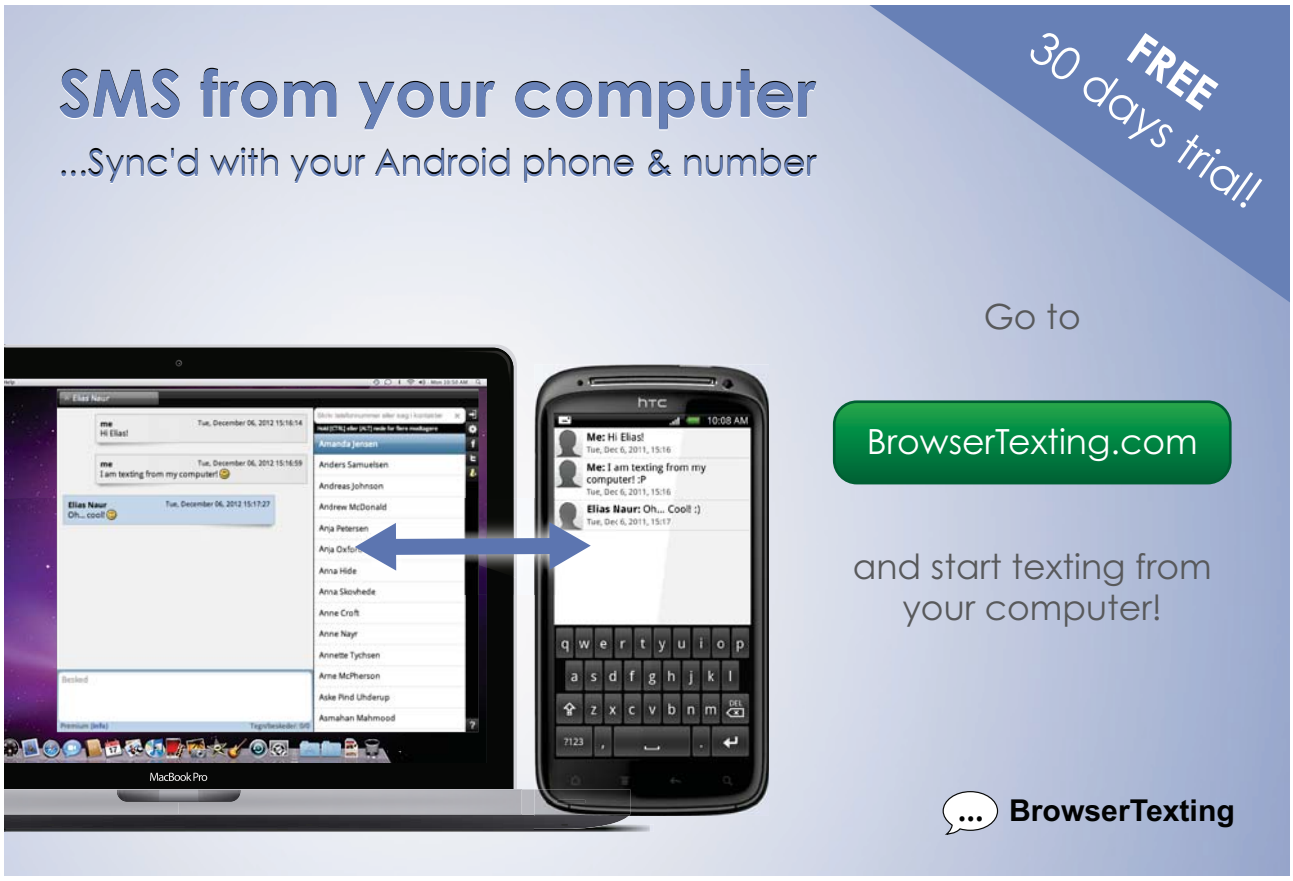
A positive attitude is important, however, this does not mean that you should e.g. accept any compensation package just to show that you have a positive attitude. A fair and proper pay shows that the company is vesting in you and it is also a motivation for you and that is nothing you need to hide. Often, it is not the pay per se that is the important part but the appreciation of your effort and work which it symbolizes. Nobody works for free or at least most people do not and neither should you. This does not mean that that there are non-profit organizations that will pay nothing or give you a low salary; nor does it mean that you never should offer to work for free or to give back to society. We just mean that when you work for a "for-profit" organization then you should be smart about your approach. Many companies will try to minimize pay and expectations on pay. Standing up for oneself and pushing back in a firm, but friendly way, shows integrity.



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Part Two

Internal perception of the program, your fellow graduates and training.

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4 The perception of graduate schemes from within the company

So far we have looked at the Graduate Program from the graduate trainee point of view. We are now going to switch to the other side and examine what a Graduate Program means for a company, how the program might be perceived, and what that ultimately means in terms of your own personal success.

As you will have noticed by now, we place a lot of emphasis on attempting, where possible, to try to view things from the point of view of someone else. This might mean imagining that you are the interviewer not the interviewee, the customer not the supplier, or as we shall see shortly, that you are the employee earning a minimum wage, working alongside a Graduate Trainee, who earns considerably more money. Before we get to that particular issue though, let us begin with the reason any company, would wish to operate a graduate training program, and the decision process behind the program.

The initial idea is obvious and one we have already mentioned. If you can take a group of recent graduates, train, mould and shape them into the kind of employees you need to drive your business forward and at the same time save yourself the trouble of casting the search net far and wide across the industry, then frankly why wouldn't you? In the long run, a successful graduate scheme should work out to be the cheapest way of acquiring a group of talented managers but of course this decision comes with associated risks. The graduates may leave before completing the course or directly after finishing. In both cases, the employer has received little return on their initial (costly) investment. Despite all the recruitment strategies, training sessions and attempts at moulding, it may be that the graduates are just not suited to that particular role or industry. You can't tell from a CV or even from 6 months of training whether the guy or girl you plucked from a graduate fair is going to go on to become your CFO in 20 years' time.

Strangely, the second reason many companies offer graduate schemes is rather like the reason so many people go to University nowadays – because everyone else does it! It sounds ludicrous but offering a graduate scheme is a sign of progress within a company, provides a great sound-bite for shareholders or investors and shows a commitment to employee development that stretches beyond the walls of the graduate training room and into other areas of the business.

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The trainee program we joined

Our program had started two years before we joined it, so as the Class of 2006 we were the third group to go through the program. Obviously, there had been teething problems to begin with and by the time we joined a lot of things had been corrected since the first year. However, we were in a very traditional industry with a very decentralized setup, which had its challenges. Of the 70,000+ employees worldwide it would be fair to assume that the vast majority were unskilled, low paid manual workers with few qualifications. As one of less than 100 European Graduates, we were in an awkward position in some respects, diametrically opposite our colleagues in professional terms, yet for the first 18 months of our Program we were expected to work alongside each other and complete the same tasks. For us as Graduates the situation was exciting, even thrilling. We were getting our hands dirty, rolling our sleeves up and beginning to understand the bigger picture of how a multinational corporation worked. We didn't mind the early starts, the shift work, the fork lift truck lessons or the daily abuse (mostly good humoured) we received from customers because we were playing the long game. We were young, enthusiastic and were looking to build a career within a company full of possibilities.

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Like we said right at the beginning of this chapter, try to look at things from the other side. To our colleagues in the stores, branches, offices and warehouses throughout the UK, we were variously seen as posh kids who didn't have a clue, corporate spies sent to ensure everyone was working and nobody was stealing, arrogant college kids who thought we knew it all; or quite simply an overpaid idiot who wouldn't know one product from another even after 6 months of being told the difference. Add to that the fact that despite the issue of salary being definitively off limits, we knew and they knew that the financial difference was staggering. In our example we spent the first 9 months working in a small branch as part of a distribution network. We had a warehouse, a yard, a sales counter and an office and between 6–12 co-workers ranging from Branch Manager to Driver or Yardman in terms of pay scale. Our first year salary as Graduate Trainees was roughly in line with the Assistant Branch Manager, or to be more accurate, £10,000–£15,000 per year more than the lowest paid person in the branch. In most cases it was only a few thousand per year less than the branch manager. The pay difference is a big obstacle you, as a graduate trainee, will have to overcome. You will be able to learn about products and processes and get up to speed with the business operations to be able to answer most questions of objections from your colleagues but if you join a "bottom-up program" the one question that you will never be able to answer satisfactorily is this:

"So, what are they paying you graduates then?"

We heard this question on numerous occasions and to this day we don't know the best way of answering it. You can deflect it ("Same as you"), laugh it off with a derisory snort ("Hah, not enough I can tell you that much") or try something else. Whatever you say, your answer is likely to be unsatisfactory. Do not talk about cash if you can help it and if you do, make sure you stay away from specifics. If you feel you are losing the battle do not forget that with the smooth comes the rough; moving home, living in a foreign country, leaving friends and family behind etc.. It may not win you the argument but it might make people forget the money issue (for a while). On top of this you will leave for training events now and again.

Our guess is that the total cost for each graduate was probably around 80,000 pounds per year, including all direct and indirect costs, such as our salaries, travel, hotels, training and also internal costs such as use of internal HR's time etc. That amounts to almost 5 million pounds for all the 31 trainees for the two year period. You can bear this in mind, but you might refrain from making it explicit to your fellow colleagues in the store, branch or department you might be working in. They will, however, have an idea of the fact that the company is investing significantly in you and some people will be jealous of this fact and that is unavoidable.

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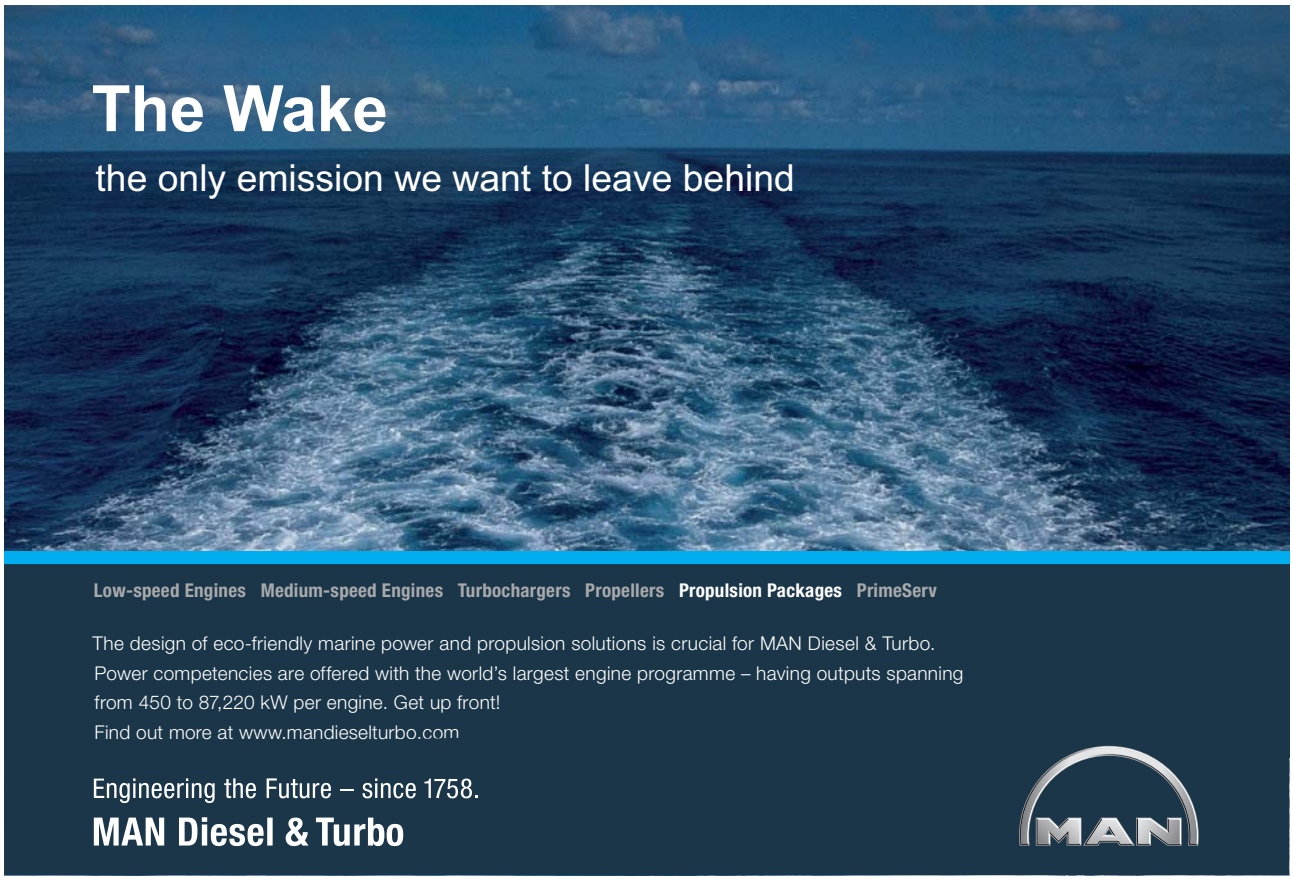
We joined the European program, and there was also a UK based scheme and a US based scheme run by the company, but without wishing to diminish those programs, the European scheme attracted the most funding and the strongest support from the Senior Management Team. The program had been initiated by the head office of the holding company that owned businesses throughout Europe and North America. This meant that the program was far from an established part of the business even though it received a lot of focus and attention from Executive Management at the holding company. This attention was also trickling down to top management in the individual business units. Most training and planning was being made by HR at the holding company and HR in the Business Units was also involved to a certain extent. Confused yet? You should be. And if you are struggling to grasp the various levels and interests involved, imagine being one of the 70,000+ "regular" employees at this company. We were employed by "Group" or "plc" in their eyes and were somehow set apart from the rest of the employees who all had a local identity of sorts. The simplest way to explain this divide is through email. The standard lay out for a UK employee of the company was: name@companyname.co.uk. In France it was name@companyname.fr and in all the other countries the pattern was repeated. Due to our unique position as "European Graduates" we were given a ".com" email address, a sure and immediate sign of our position as outsiders wherever we went.



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Why are we telling you this? It affects the perception of the program to a great extent. If the program is looked upon as a "stupid Head Office initiative" then that will affect your daily work life in e.g. a branch, store or regional office. Despite your best efforts at integration, in a given situation you may not be welcomed into a team, or else you may be over-exploited as a short term resource. Even if the "head office initiative" is received positively, your position relative to your work colleagues will be different, you will be apart. Of course, this may not manifest itself on a daily basis. We are not suggesting you will have your own separate table in the canteen or special shoes to wear or anything, merely that no matter how hard you try (and succeed) to be accepted as part of the furniture, your status will always surround you in the minds of others.

The perception of our program

The perception of our program varied. Patrick was lucky enough to end up in a well established store that had had trainees since the start. Management in that store had extensive experience of dealing with Graduates, as had the regular customers and other co-workers. Tom had the slight advantage of being in his home county on the first rotation, which although a fairly trivial aspect on the face of it, when that home county is Yorkshire it makes a big difference. It is the only place in England where gruff-looking-rugby-playing- beer-drinking Tradesmen address each other as "Flower" or "Love". They don't teach you that in your cultural training! Some of our colleagues were not so lucky, ending up in inner-city stores where unemployment was high and career aspirations low, not an easy combination for an ambitious, well paid, well-educated graduate to thrive. We are aware that it sounds very much as though we are negatively stereotyping or pigeonholing our former colleagues here but that is not our intention. We are merely telling it as we found it. As we have said, we were in a very traditional and frankly, simple industry, an industry not commonly associated with Master Degrees and multiple languages. This wasn't HSBC or PWC, but the reality is that most of the people who read this book, or indeed the majority of people who join a graduate scheme will not join either of those companies, and away from the corporate glitz of Head Office, perception is everything.

Salary and productivity

Your first challenge is to answer the salary question. The second problem is one of productivity. You will be working alongside people with years more experience than you, whatever the role may be. To begin with, you will be useless to your colleagues. They will realize quickly that your contribution does not match theirs and as always try to see things from their point of view. This way you will improve your performance and limit any potential conflict. Imagine you join the Graduate Program at a large supermarket and your first role is to join the shelf stacking team. Clearly, as a Graduate Trainee you will be on more than the minimum wage of your colleagues, and you are likely to have next to zero experience of that job. In contrast, your colleagues will be experts in that role with years of experience. It might not be your chosen career path but it might be seen as a good role for them. The best thing to do is to show a positive attitude, watch and learn, ask questions to improve your performance, work hard but most importantly show them respect. If you want them to respect you it will take more than hard work.

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Out of your comfort zone

If your first placement within a graduate scheme does place you at the coal face of the business, where the deals are made and the profits earned, then there is a chance that you will feel like the outsider to begin with. You will be in unfamiliar territory, working with people from different backgrounds. You might be working in a warehouse, in a supermarket, on a production line or any number of other roles but no matter what, you will be out of your comfort zone. Remember, you are in their turf, so "when in Rome do as the Romans do" but again do not lose touch with yourself. As a Trainee, you have an almost schizophrenic role to fulfill on behalf of the company. You have to try as much as possible to assimilate quickly to your surroundings, learn as much about the role as you can in order to become productive and an asset to your colleagues. At the same time, you have to have the bigger picture in mind. It is a difficult balancing act, with many pitfalls along the way. Imagine how easy it is to go from being a friendly guy trying to ingratiate himself with new colleagues by sharing a joke and a laugh about some minor aspect of the job, to being the guy placed in a really difficult situation another day when the same colleagues openly complain about the boss of the business. What do you do? Agree to fit in? Disagree to show your "true colours" as a company guy? Stay silent and hope for the best? We can't say what is best for you but needless to say this will happen one day. It is easy to forget that the role you have as a graduate goes beyond the day to day life of the job you are doing temporarily. One way to approach these situations is to try and stay a little bit neutral and moderately opinionated and if asked, give a calm and straight answer while being understanding and appreciative of other viewpoints.

Your colleagues

Regarding your colleagues, there are many challenges you may face. Our best advice is to engage with them and use the fact that you are different to your advantage. It may be that you are from different countries, different parts of the same country or different educational backgrounds. You can use them to your advantage whatever the differences are.

One example is when Patrick came from the UK to the USA. In the yard where he had been, the yardmen used to say "How are you mi darling?", while in the USA they used to say "What's up Couso?" Greeting a particularly tough nut in the USA with "How are you mi darling?" was incredibly amusing for both parties involved and it opened up for a good laugh and for an interesting conversation about cultural differences and Patrick's experiences in the UK. In summary, just like with the interview process treat any such personal challenges as a two way issue. You can be sure that Patrick's American colleagues were as nervous at the thought of talking to the blond haired Swedo-Irish guy as he was talking to a warehouse guy from downtown Philadelphia. The problem is that being part of the *Global Generation* isn't all plain sailing; we tend to forget that people are people wherever they come from.

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Clueless graduate

In terms of internal perception, an important aspect is the perception of your work and abilities. On Day One you know nothing, either about the task you have been assigned or the company as a whole. To some people that will never change, you will be labelled as a clueless graduate who will never know anything. Fine, if people want to believe that let them. The most important thing for you is to show the people who matter that this is incorrect. As a graduate, the reality is that on Day One you are given some leeway. It is fine to know nothing at the beginning but by Day Five you need to know everything. The learning curve is steep in any job but the expected level of performance for a graduate is steeper still. This is the fast track for high achievers, the company you work for will support you with a good salary and good opportunities and the rest is up to you. If the perception is that you are not excelling, or contributing to the business, then fear not, someone higher up the food chain will tell you. Your co-workers, your line manager and ultimately the people who are funding your program will expect you to perform at all times. If they perceive otherwise your career may not hit the heights you thought it would.

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It is therefore imperative that you do everything in your power to ensure that you are perceived accurately. While working on the floor, you will also run into improvement potential. You will find out that there are practices, procedures and circumstances that just do not make sense or you will find out that with some changes things could be improved quite substantially. Think up solutions, talk to people who will be directly affected by any changes; include them in your plans and discuss them with the relevant people. At the same time, you will find out that there is complacency about trying to change things. Some associates will have given up and just accepted the status quo. You should not accept the status quo but you also need to be careful. You should not necessarily expect middle-level or top level management to happily embrace your ideas or suggestions for improvements. It is very possible that they will be reluctant to listen to them and criticize your ideas and approaches only to behind your back start working on them themselves or bring them up at management meetings as their own. This is normal and common. We have both experienced all sorts of situations like this. In order to be successful with an idea for change that you have, you need to find a sponsor for that idea. This person needs to be somebody higher up in the hierarchy that believes in it and in you. The best trainee programs will provide you with such a sponsor when you run projects. However, sometimes it is recommendable to find a sponsor yourself who wants to help you instead of one who has been appointed to help you. If you e.g. need a report, you will many times be able to get things done just by saying that you are a trainee since the program is usually sponsored by high level executives. Nobody wants to get into trouble with them. Again, be respectful, humble and careful in your approach. You want people to want to help you.

Running projects

When running a project that is to be presented to higher Executive Management for example, middle level management might be afraid of you "digging up dirt" that they are responsible for. The best way to deal with this is to try and get these managers on your side and have them help you or at least make them feel like they are guiding you in your work, which will then warrant credit to them when the end result is reached. We can recommend Dale Carnegie's book "How to make friends and influence people" here. It is from 1936, but it lays the ground-work for many books to come even into modern days. Asking for advice and guidance, showing genuine interest in the manager and listening will bring you far. The following is a summary of the book.[1]

Fundamental Techniques in Handling People

1. Don't criticize, condemn or complain
2. Give honest and sincere appreciation
3. Arouse in the other person an eager to want

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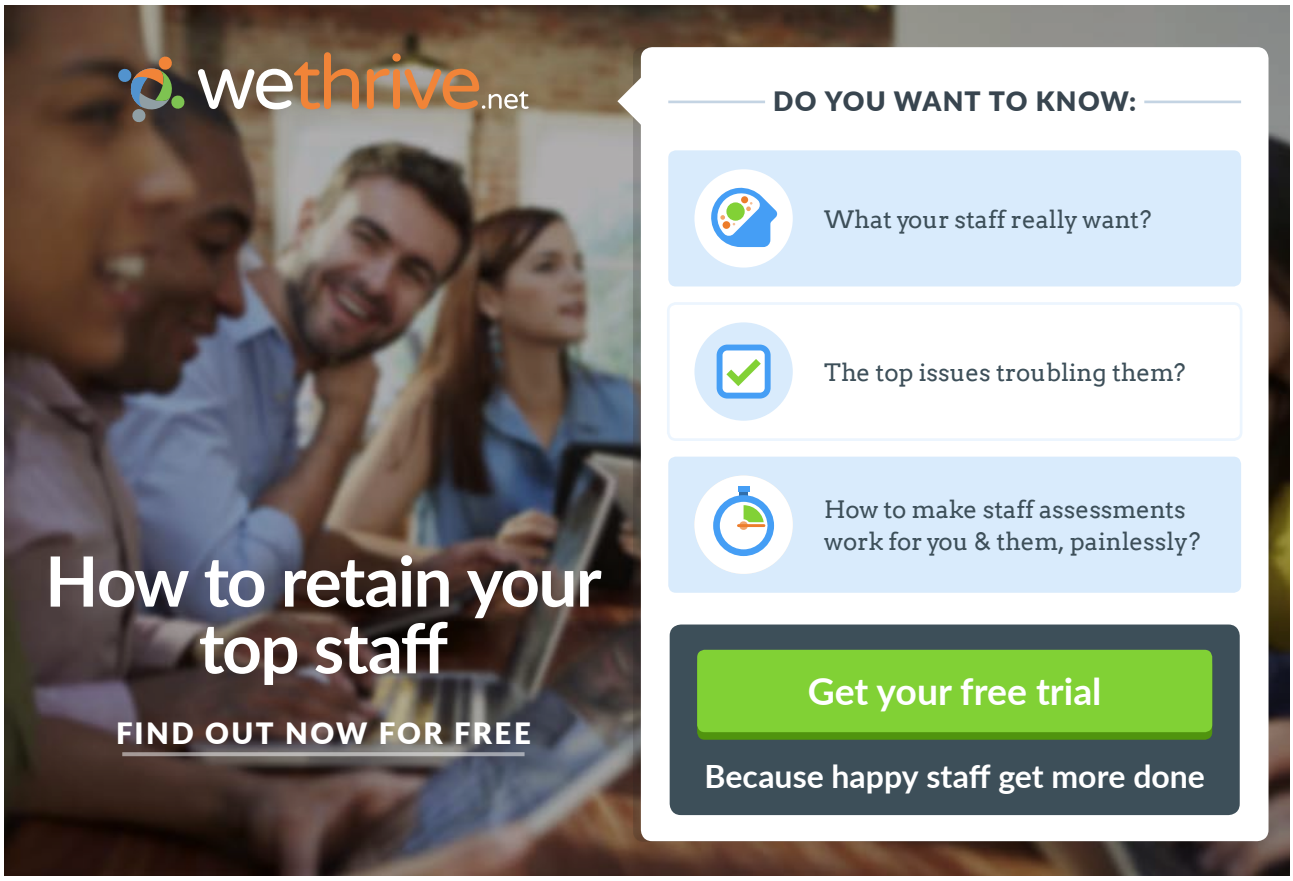
Six Ways to Make People Like You

1. Be genuinely interested in other people
2. Smile
3. Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language
4. Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves
5. Talk in terms of the other person's interests
6. Make the other person feel important and do it sincerely

How to Win People to Your Way of Thinking

1. The only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it
2. Show respect for the other person's opinions. Never say, "You're wrong."
3. If you are wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically
4. Begin in a friendly way
5. Get the other person saying "yes, yes" immediately
6. Let the other person do a great deal of the talking
7. Let the other person feel that the idea is his or hers
8. Try honestly to see things from the other person's point of view



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9. Be sympathetic with the other person's ideas and desires
10. Appeal to the nobler motives
11. Dramatize your ideas
12. Throw down a challenge

Be a Leader: How to Change People Without Giving Offense or Arousing Resentment

1. Begin with praise and honest appreciation
2. Call attention to people's mistakes indirectly
3. Talk about your own mistakes before criticizing the other person
4. Ask questions instead of giving direct orders
5. Let the other person save face
6. Praise the slightest improvement and praise every improvement. Be "hearty in your approbation and lavish in your praise."
7. Give the other person a fine reputation to live up to
8. Use encouragement. Make the fault seem easy to correct
9. Make the other person happy about doing the thing you suggest

We both ran projects on a rare occasion where local management did not support us and where all the cornerstones for success were not present. Basically, we had limited backup, resources, budget as well as access to information. At the same time, we were perceived as naive over-paid little brats that did not know the business. This was of course difficult to deal with but there are ways, apart from using the techniques summarized above. Firstly, make sure that you clarify expectations with your manager and make sure you clarify to him or her, what you need in terms of back-up, resources, budget, access to information etc. in order for you to be able to meet those expectations. Make notes, summarize it orally and ask for agreement. Then email it to him or her and setup regular meetings were you review the tasks and items. If you feel that you are not getting the support you need then explain specifically why you cannot meet the expectations. Your last resort is to escalate to a higher manager or to your leadership team. At the same time, make sure you are courteous all the way through. It is not a bad idea to read up on Project Management and Change Management before starting a Trainee Program. We will delve deeper into the Projects and Project Management in Chapter 8. Again, failing on a task or a project will probably teach you more than a success. Failure could, in a way, be a success since you are part of the program to learn. Don't be afraid to fail.

"Dig in" and work, work, work

We were taking part in a Trainee Program during the financial crises. This meant extremely heavy downsizing with thousands of associates being let go. At the same time, the company was investing in us. Patrick was in the USA during this time. We only see one credible way to deal with a situation like this and that is to really "dig in" and work, work, work. Show that you are there to learn and develop and make sure that you prove that there is a reason why the company hired you and why they are investing in you.

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5 Your fellow graduates

How should you relate to your fellow graduates in relation to learning, help, friendship and competition? Should they become lovers or partners? What pressures will you need to relate to?

This is the harsh reality of a trainee program (and of corporate life):

1. The trainee program is a competition and you are being evaluated
2. Trainee programs are about management and development
3. Not everyone will last the distance
4. Not everyone is guaranteed a job after the program
5. All graduates are not "born equal"

1) Competition and evaluation

You are likely to be in a group of rather competitive people who want to achieve and succeed over and above. It is easy to get caught up in the competition and of course competition is an element that will be present all way through. This is unavoidable. The cynical way of looking at a graduate program is to see it as a survival of the fittest thought experiment being acted out in real life. Another way of looking at it is as a unique environment that pits dozens of people against each other whilst encouraging cooperation and team work. Our suggestion is that you do not get caught up too much in the competitive aspects, while not ignoring them. You are in a unique position to learn and develop. Throw yourself at every challenge presented to you and of course, try to succeed, but again don't be afraid to fail. When you fail, be open and humble about it and even highlight what you have learnt from the failure when you are being debriefed. In the long run, this approach is what will get you furthest. At the same time you need to be smart and should not talk yourself down all the time. You are being evaluated all through the program and how you perform will affect future positions that you get. However, we believe that it mostly has a short term effect. How you achieve after the trainee program in your first role and throughout your career will constantly shape your progress. Don't be too pressured in the beginning.

2) The management and development perspective

There are a few simple questions to answer in order to manage your colleagues and yourself. One of them is: What are my own strengths and weaknesses? A good trainee program will involve lots of feedback and opportunity to get to know yourself and how you react in certain situations. Make sure you listen to feedback and get to know your strengths and weaknesses and be honest about them. For most people it takes a while to admit their own weaknesses, but when they hear the same feedback for the third time they might start to listen. It can take years to achieve the extremely useful maturity level of properly knowing and acknowledging their weaknesses. Some people never get there. Make sure you are not one of them. Also know your strengths and use them.

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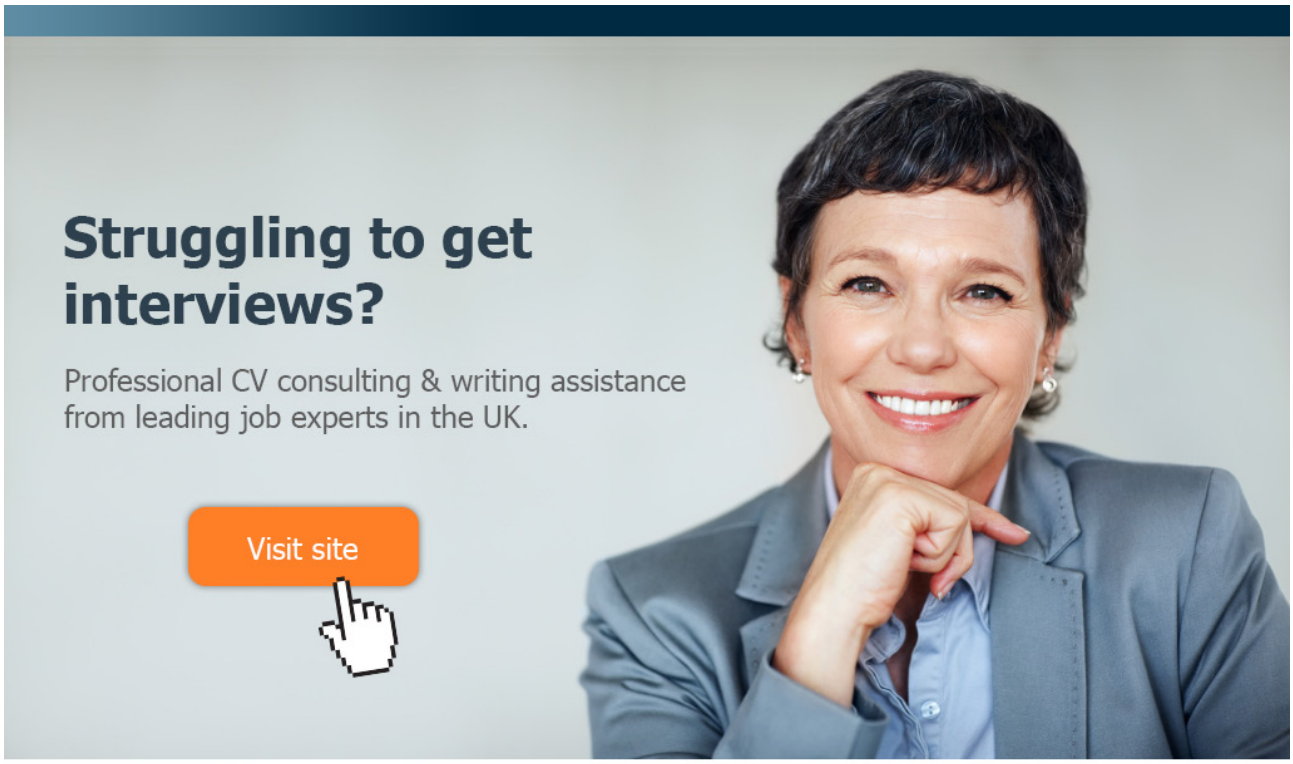
Once you know your own weaknesses and strengths, start to get to know the weaknesses and strengths of your fellow trainee colleagues. Once you become a manager you will want to pick a good team for your department. During the trainee program, you should do the same. Work with trainees that can bring you success in the form of personal development and acknowledgement from the leadership team. Work with people who complement your skill set, strengths and weaknesses. Interact with your colleagues, pick their brains and learn through discussing with them. Group work is where this is really vital, as you will need to use the skills of those around you to ensure you perform as a group. Whilst working with other people whose strengths differ from yours, make note of what they do, how they operate, what works for them and try to incorporate this into how you work. You may not turn yourself into a financial whizz by working with a finance expert but you will learn how to work with someone who thinks differently from you and also how best to use their skills.

Most of your training will involve group activities, projects or joint presentations. How you are perceived by the program leaders is thus determined not solely by your performance, but by the performance of others. You can't control every aspect of this of course but you can exert some influence over your colleagues. Think a little about how best to divide work based on your assessment of others for example, or if you have to team up in pairs, pick carefully who you work with. This doesn't explicitly mean you should not work with "a weak link". In fact, it might even be advisable to do so. If you have labelled someone as a weak link you can bet your life the program leaders have too. So, if you choose to work with them and still deliver a strong piece of work, the credit will be yours.



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The group work will often be under time pressure. Our key advice when doing so is to keep the three following aspects in mind:

1. Make sure everyone has clearly understood the task at hand and write down (on a flip chart if possible) what the goal for the group is.
2. Take a quick inventory of skills and personalities in the team, i.e. let everybody explain how they can contribute towards the goal and what the others in the team need to know about their working style that can be a culprit. Start with yourself. It could go like this: "I can contribute with structure, ambition and focus on key deliverables. At times, I might be perceived as overbearing and a bit harsh because I am so focused on the deliverables. Please tell me if this happens". It is quite astonishing how this can contribute to team moral and make the work at hand run smoothly.
3. Summarize, summarize, summarize. Pause to summarize what has been achieved and what tasks still need to be done. Summarize the result of a discussion. Ask a person to summarize what they have just said. Summarize your understanding of what has just been said. Again be smart about this, but it is incredible what a lubricant this is in team-work to ensure understanding and progress.

The general advice on managing is to do just that. To put it bluntly: Be the Boss! Yes, its early days in the program and you are all on a level playing field in terms of hierarchy. This doesn't mean you cannot become the de-facto leader of the group. There are many ways to do this, some more obvious than others. The trick is to play to your strengths. Be organised, be forthright in your opinions but be prepared to compromise and subconsciously people will listen to you. If you are arrogant, aloof and uncompromising not only will people not listen to you, they won't respect you either. Respect obviously has to be earned and in a forced environment like this, it doesn't take much. People listen to and follow successful people, so start with that. If you out- perform your peers yet maintain humility, half the battle is won. Similarly if you refer to a person whom you know is strong in a certain area, then you are also managing. Just like during the assessment centre where the key battleground was the flipchart and pack of pens, the same is true once you have begun the program. The Leaders of the Program are looking for Leaders too.

3) Not everyone will last the distance

Every program has them, people who are not suited for the role, don't engage with the philosophy of the program, or just simply don't perform as well as others. They might be the nicest, friendliest people on the course, or they might be idiots; it doesn't matter, the main thing is to know who they are and manage their impact on you and your work. Don't avoid them, don't distance yourself from them but be aware of their limitations.

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There could be colleagues that will not last the distance. That should not affect you or your choice. There could also be colleagues who decide not to continue the trainee program because a better offer from an outside company has turned up. You should be open to leaving the trainee program if you receive a good offer from another company. However, make sure you think through that choice. It should be a good offer for the long run. A trainee program typically offers you outstanding development opportunities. However, a management position can also offer you that. You have no obligations to the company that hired you. They would downsize you immediately if necessary. However, you should always leave in a courteous way. Don't burn any bridges!

4) There is no guarantee of a job after the trainee program

We were part of a trainee program during the financial crisis of 2008. When it hit, it hit our company almost as hard as the banks due to the market sectors we operated in. The trainee class that started the year after us were quite unlucky. Most of them were offered a position within the company. However many of the offers were for quite unskilled work. In essence, most of them had to leave the company as it underwent heavy downsizing. The program was shut down the year after. Change, growth, decline and downsizing are the harsh realities of the business world. Always keep that in mind.

5) All graduates are not born equal

Everybody has a different background. Some graduates came from a better school than you, had better grades or happen to have the same cultural background as the trainee leadership team. Some might have double degrees. Some might come from a country where your company is planning to expand. All people are not born equal and all graduates are not born equal. Get over it and deal with it!

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6 Training

So what training can you expect as a trainee? This can vary a bit, but we believe there are some common denominators across many trainee programs. Most of them will give you leadership training or *brainwashing* depending on point of view. We feel that the leadership training we received really helped us grow as persons. In Chapter 2 we talked about the induction week, cultural training and understanding, which is key in a globalized world. In Chapter 3, we touched on the importance of having a positive attitude. In Chapter 4, we mentioned Dale Carnegie's book "How to make friends and influence people", from 1936. In general, cultural understanding, a positive attitude and learning influencing skills are three very important factors to be successful in life. In this chapter we will give you an overview of what type of training we received during the trainee program we were part of and we believe it is quite representative for many trainee programs.

In the first session on the second training, we received the following definition of leadership to think about:

"To manage through confusion, anxiety and change. To add purpose, focus and direction to a situation where it didn't exist before".

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We were then asked to come up with our own definition of leadership and to have that in mind and something to aim for as we went through the training. *What is your definition of leadership?*

Rotations

Our training program was divided into three rotations. During the first rotation we had the Induction week, supplier visits, a practical application course (hands-on), then three other training weeks and a closing week. The second rotations varied because the trainees went to different countries but they included company presentations, intercultural training, product training, management training, negotiation skills, presentation skills, project management and much more. The third rotation was more of the same. In total, we had more than 80 days of training over two years.

As a trainee, you will be working in many parts of the business and also on various projects. This is in order for you to be challenged, learn and develop fast. The learning possibilities will be great and in certain moments you will most probably ask yourself why you are driving a forklift while your former university buddies are solving complex business problems. Remember that your career is longer than just a few months or a couple of years. If you are open to the experience, the hands-on skills you are getting "on the floor" ensures a deep understanding of how a business works. In the first few months as a trainee you might very well work in a store, at a counter, and do inside sales. You might shadow a sales manager, an area manager, a regional manager and you might work hands-on in a distribution centre during the night shift. On top of this, you might work on an Area Project and a longer project based on an improvement possibility that you have noticed. We will go deeper into projects in Chapter 8. The important thing is to show initiative throughout all your experiences and remember that it is all about your learning. The point is that as soon as you are starting to feel comfortable in one area, you should be pulled out of it and put into a new area. This way you are constantly on a steep learning curve.

Class-room training

In the following, we add some more detail to the class-room training we went through and also give you a high-level summary of our key learnings in those sessions. Sometimes we wrote in a learning journal during our training weeks.

In the Autumn of 2006, we received the following training…

- Financial Analysis for Non-Financial Managers

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:
  - Important to have good Key Performance Indicators
  - Compare performance between Business Entities
  - Commercial Finance – you can't manage what you don't measure

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- The Principles of Professional Business Writing/Report Writing and Correspondence

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:
  - Clarity
  - Conciseness
  - Correctness
  - Completeness
  - Know when to pick up the phone instead of emailing

- UK Managing Director – Questions and Answers Session

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:
  - Get the "right people on the bus" and "in the right seats"
  - A lot of companies have complex bonus structures towards their suppliers. This is costly in the form of administration and causes severe difficulty in understanding how and where you make money
  - You are good at what you enjoy and you enjoy what you are good at.
  - A rigid plan can limit your ability to see and grab new possibilities

- Sales Development Managers Course

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:
  - Sales is about asking questions, listening and finally
  - understanding the customer's needs
  - A good salesman quickly disqualifies customers when there is no fit and moves on to the next one.
  - Proper Planning and Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance

In the Spring of 2007, we received the following training…

- Presentation Skills

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:
  - Have a personal "opener" and a "closer" that connects to "the opener"
  - Know your audience
  - Be prepared, engaged, structured and passionate

- Prioritisation and Time Management

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:
  - Focus on the Big Rocks, i.e. the most important things
  - Take one thing at time! First things first

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- Global Sourcing Director – Global Low Cost Country (LCC) Sourcing

  Overview: *Company Sourcing Strategy*

  Key learnings from Learning Journal:

  - Low Cost Countries (LCCs) are a good source for Own
  - Brand Products
  - Low cost is the reason, LCC comes with challenges
  - Political and Legal Concerns
  - Currency stability
  - Cultural Issues
  - Infrastructure
  - Quality issues

- Brand Director – Brand Director Perspective: *Company Brand Strategy*

  Key learnings from Learning Journal:

  - A Managing Director typically spends 50% of their time on people
  - A company needs to stay closely in-tune with its customers
  - Dividing product into categories can be a good way to managing them
  - Know which customers you are targeting and why
  - Strategy is about choosing what not to do
  - High margin business with small products and a Distribution Centre (DC) setup can be an attractive business. However, managing the DC capacity is key.

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- Internal Communications Coordinator – Managing Our Reputation: *Communications*

Key Learnings from Learning Journal:

  - Identify who you are communicating with, why and how
  - Importance of external communication
  - Boil down your information
  - Write your core message simply
  - Limit each core message to 20–25 words
  - Muscle up each message, give it strength
  - Use the B word – because
  - Pinpoint your message to who "needs" to know
  - Time your contact
  - Use trusted sources
  - Multi-touch and multi-time communications
  - Messages are not like sparkling diamonds: "Spinach, spinach, spinach" – keep on repeating the message.

In the Spring of 2007, we also received the following training…

- European Sourcing Director – European Sourcing Overview: *Negotiation Skills*

Key Learnings from Learning Journal:

  - You are negotiating all the time
  - Three critical factors in any negotiation is power, information and time
  - Never narrow down negotiation to just one issue
  - What is your Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement
  - (BATNA)
  - What is your assessment of your opponents BATNA
  - Eight types of power
    - Title power
    - Reward power
    - Punish power
    - Referent power
    - Charismatic power
    - Expertise power
    - Situation power
    - Information power
  - Ask open-ended questions
  - Ask for restatements
  - Ask your opponents' subordinates questions

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- Supply Chain Director- Supply Chain Overview: *Supply Chain and Logistics*

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:

  - Mapping the supply chain
  - Cost structures
  - Demand Planning and auto-replenishment
  - Supplier performance
  - Key performance Indicators like Inventory days and On-Time In-Full
  - Vendor Management Inventory and Supplier Owned Inventory

- Graduate Panel – P*revious years graduates experience of their 2nd rotation*
- Individual Feedback Session and Performance Review

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:

  - *Make sure you are open to the feedback and really seek to understand it*

- Trainee Closing Presentations: *We presented a project we had worked on for nine months to the CEO and Executives*

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:

  - Make 100% sure you do not come across as naive. Use facts, facts, facts and as much data (both qualitative and quantitative) as possible to prove a point.

- Intercultural Training – *Transitioning into Second Rotation*

  Key Learnings from Learning Journal:

  - *You will most probably have a cultural shock one month into your new assignment in the new country*

During 2008, Patrick was located in the USA and Tom in Austria. We participated in two trainings together in Europe. Apart from that, we also received Project Management Training but not together. We also had "more of the same" as in 2006 and 2007. Repetition ensures proper learning. Since we see Project Management and Change Management as key skills as a trainee, we have dedicated the whole of Chapter 8 to that.

During 2008, we received more Leadership training in the form of a few days where we focused on leadership traits, brand and types. We also did some case studies where we learnt about bad leadership. Then we did some hands-on outdoor team exercises where we got to practice leadership skills. We learnt about John Adair and his idea of balancing attention between *tasks*, *the individual* and *the team*.

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We also studied Sir Earnest Shackleton's Antarctic Exploration and his leadership skills. Shackleton was born in 1874 and died in 1922. Key learnings from this case study were:

1) Clear Long Term Vision but short term victories

- You must set a new goal straight away once the old one is dead
- Do something! – Not doing anything can create despair
- Create engaging distractions
- Look beyond your own needs for action, focus and what is best for the group
- Overcome uncertainty with structure, organization, discipline and routine

2) Personal Leadership

- Give the right speech: Communicate directly and personally to the whole team. Explain the situation, the challenges, objectives and a clear action plan. Be authentic and tap into people's sentiments and feelings
- Lead by example: Demonstrate the behaviour you want to see in others and use vivid symbols to create impact and communicate your message
- Be visible: Let people see you leading

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3) Optimism Grounded in Reality

- Cultivate optimism in yourself
- Spread the spirit of optimism and build confidence in others
- Select the team to ensure a sufficient "Optimism Quotient"
- Know how to reframe a tough situation
- Instill optimism and self confidence, but stay grounded in reality

4) Maintain Stamina

- Look after yourself, your health and the health of your team
- Don't fall victim to "summit fever" (e.g. people climbing Mount Everest lose perspective with the result that one in four who summit the mountain die on the descent)
- Find outlets for your own fears and doubts, but do not share them with the team
- Let go of guilt (but learn from your mistakes)

5) Team Work

- Establish a common and shared identity
- Maintain the bonds between team members through continuous communication
- Keep everyone involved and thinking about solutions
- Make the best of everyone's talents
- Deal with behavioural or performance problems promptly and constructively
- Balance teams according to the challenges that will have to be faced

6) Establish Core Team Values

- Minimise status differences and special privileges
- Develop norms of mutual respect, courtesy and mutual support

As part of the various leadership training, we went through, we took an inventory of our own strengths and weaknesses and discussed them with our fellow trainee colleagues. We received feedback, feedback and more feedback. We did various hands-on exercises and workshops. We read and discussed the book "Good to Great" by Jim Collins, whose key messages are…

- Disciplined culture, people, thought and action is key for a great company
- Level 5 leaders *"builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will"*.
- Confront the brutal facts
- First who, then what (Get the right people on the bus and in the right seats)
- Focus on one thing, be passionate about it and make sure it is something you can be the best in the world at while understanding the key economic drivers in your organization. (Also described as the Hedgehog Concept, referring to a hedgehog that is really good at rolling up to a ball at the key moment to avoid the fox).

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We also did various Change Management Training sessions. Here is a summary of John P. Kotter's book "Leading Change"…

- Establish a sense of urgency, while not underestimating the difficulty of driving people from their comfort zones or becoming paralyzed by risks
- Form a powerful guiding coalition including senior line managers and encourage them to work outside of the normal hierarchy
- Create a vision that is easy to understand
- Communicate the vision and realize that over-communicating it is impossible
- Empower others to act on the vision and remove powerful individuals who resist the change effort
- Plan for and create short-term wins and recognize and reward employees who contribute to those improvements
- Consolidate improvements and produce more change but do not declare victory too soon
- Institutionalize new approaches by articulating connection between new behaviours and corporate success.

Monthly reports

Throughout the training program, we wrote monthly reports. In fact, this book would not have come about without those reports. The point of writing those reports was to give us an opportunity to reflect on our learning, set some goals for ourselves each month and follow up on our own goals. It was also a light form of control for the Leadership Team. We do not believe they read half of the reports that we sent in but maybe they read a few of them now and again.

The headings in the Monthly Reports were…

- Overview
- Summary of Activities
- Challenges
- Key Learning Points
- Objectives for next month
- Performance on last month's objectives

Even if your particular trainee program does not include monthly reports, it is advisable to sit down now and again and actually list in writing what your goals are, what activities you have been doing and what you have learnt. We found a certain satisfaction in documenting what we were learning. Setting goals also ensured a better sense of purpose and clarity on why we were doing what we were doing. It also gave some form of structure on how to react and act in certain situations while at work.

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Part Three
Networking across cultures, projects and internal politics and relocating

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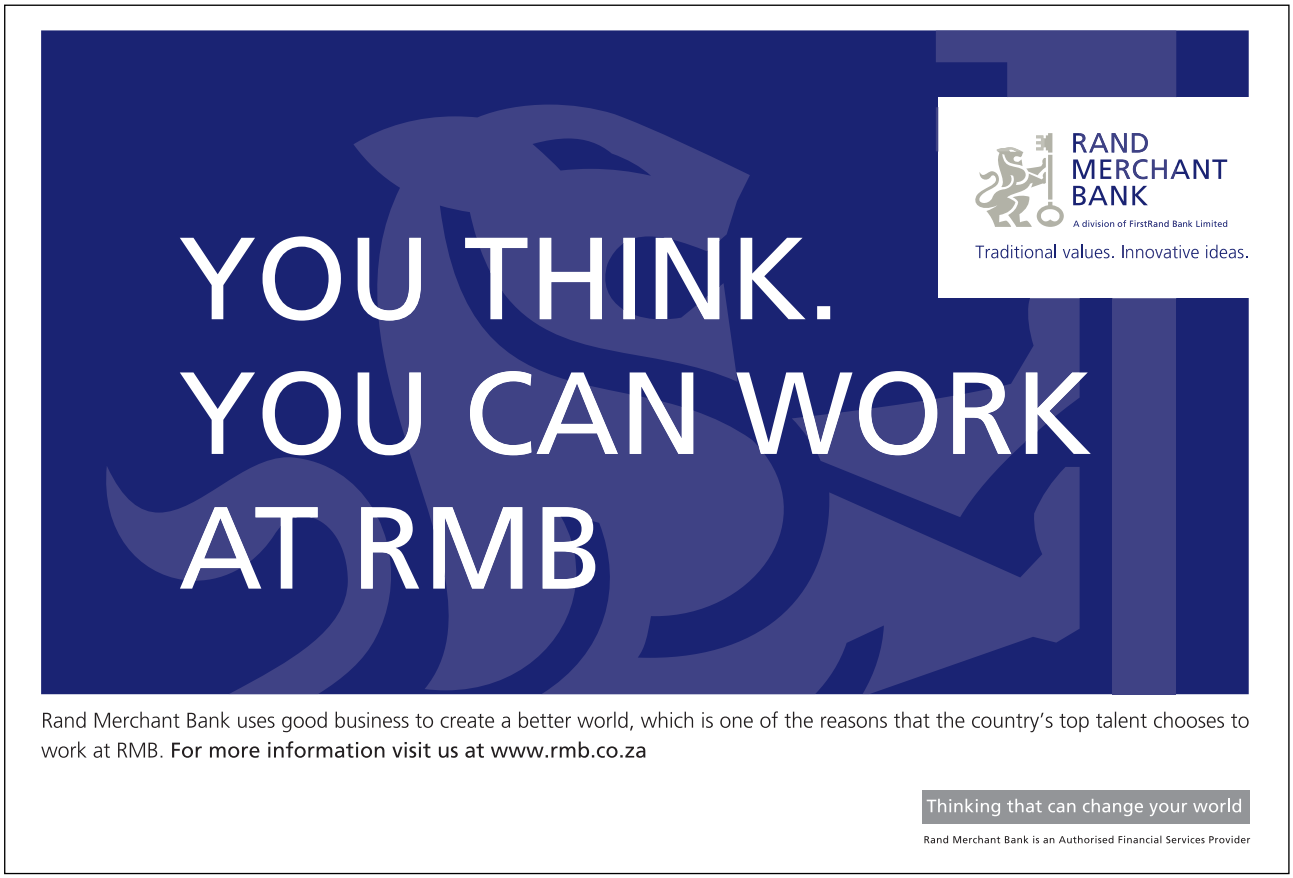
7 Networking across cultures

In Chapter two, we elaborated a little on networking. There we mentioned that there are three main aspects of networking. Firstly, you can tap into immense knowledge by networking. Secondly, the people you network with can open doors for you now or in the future. Thirdly, the more you do it the better you become and the more successful you will be in acquiring knowledge and getting to know people who will open doors for you. One small caveat at the start of this chapter, and one that will be difficult to grasp for some readers: we started our careers before the term "Social Network", Twitter and LinkedIn really existed.

Groom your network

Now let us elaborate a bit further. Networking is like running a marathon. It is hard work. Most of the way nobody will notice you and you will hit a wall and be ready to give up. However, if you keep on grinding and make it to the goal, you will be met by a cheerful crowd at the goal-line and feel really good about yourself. Rule number one when networking is to not be too passive. You need to keep on "grooming your network". Networking is not something you do once and then it is over. It is like taking care of your body through exercise. You need to do it regularly. As with everything else in life, you should have a purpose and be prepared. Why are you talking to the person you are talking to? What do you want to say? Before a dinner when people are mingling you should work the room and mingle. The point of a networking event is to do just that, i.e. to move around and get acquainted with quite a few people.



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Show interest and interact

There is nothing wrong with walking up to a person and saying "I wanted to talk to you because you are a Logistics Director and logistics is an area that interests me. I read about the work you did at the distribution centre. It is very impressive. I have a question about it that I would like to ask you if it is okay? What was your biggest challenge when implementing the project?" All people are different and you never know how they will react. However, it is very likely that the person being asked this will feel flattered, answer your question and tell you many more things. He or she will most probably show an interest in you as well. At some point, your conversation will start to die out while he or she starts a conversation with somebody else. Just before that happens you say "thank you" and leave. At a later stage you might meet this person again or you will choose to contact him or her with a particular purpose later on. Maybe you want this person as a mentor. Open-ended questions e.g. like "Where are you from?" are powerful. They can help you find some common ground. In all your interactions, you need to manage your own expectations. Don't be too "needy". Passion, interest and professionalism is what will interest other people. Networking is not a monologue. It is two-way communication which probably means more listening than talking on your part. Don't show off but be yourself.

Cultural Aspect

When you are dealing with people from various cultures, you need to be extra aware of etiquette and convention. You can give examples of etiquette and convention in your own culture and ask how it works in the country you are in if you are unaware of certain cultural aspects. Asking questions like that shows interest and shows that you are humble and that you care about being correct. People generally tend to enjoy talking about cultural peculiarities and as such it is a very good ice-breaker.

Networking with executives

We had many dinners with executives and managers and we felt that we were very bad at networking on these occasions. The executives would typically rotate to another table after each course. They were usually quite tired after a long day's work. Work was often the focus of the conversations. However, in such situations casual conversation focusing on other things than business strategy and work would have been better. Asking about something down to earth like "your favourite film" or "your favourite dish" or sharing fun stories from daily life would be a relief for them. On the very few occasions when this happened, we felt that we got to know them as people and they probably felt the same.

Always appreciate their situation, don't overstay your welcome and move on to talk to someone else after a short conversation with them, unless they obviously want to continue talking to you. By the end of a conversation be courteous and say thank you. Normal courtesy goes very far. Complimenting and flattering the person you are talking to often works but it has to be genuine.

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Follow-up

Follow-up quite quickly after an encounter. You can e.g. first work the virtual environment and connect via LinkedIn and a few days later via Twitter. If you had an immediate purpose in engaging with the person in question then you should always follow-up with a message (via an online platform like LinkedIn or email) or a phone call quite soon after the first encounter.

Get a mentor

One purpose with networking could be to find a mentor for yourself who can guide you information- knowledge- and network- wise. We strongly recommend that you get yourself a mentor relationship where both you and the mentor develop. A good trainee program will have mentoring programs, as part of it but once you are done with the trainee program it is typically up to you to find your own mentors in the future. We believe that a good mentor should have a genuine interest in you and your development and be at least a few years ahead of you in his or her career. The mentee or adept should typically be the driving force when it comes to booking meetings and phone calls.

Networking examples and cultural "bloopers"

Now let us give you some examples of other typical networking situations we found ourselves in and some cultural "bloopers". Again, the point of a trainee program is to make mistakes, fail miserably and learn from it.

Patrick experienced the following:
I was back in my home-town over the summer and received a phone call from my new trainer in the USA. He asked me if I was excited about coming to the USA. I said that I hadn't really had time to think about it, that I had been so busy with the VISA, setting up a bank account etc. and that my attention was mainly focused on enjoying time with my family. I think this confounded the trainer. As an American, he was expecting an over-positive attitude and me being super excited about going to the USA.

The day after my arrival, I was shown around the different stores by the General Manager and the Trainer. When we went for lunch and ordered a sandwich. I asked for a chicken sandwich. I remember getting maybe eight or ten follow-up questions on what I wanted on my sandwich. I was not used to all the choices and it took me some time to understand them *and to decide. I soon understood that in the USA "freedom of choice" was an important thing.*

The first day at work, the warehouse manager showed me around the warehouse and the store. At one point, we stopped outside the warehouse for a chat while he was smoking. It started to rain. Back in England, I had learnt that the best way to bond with people was to talk about the weather or better yet complain about the weather. I saw my chance and said "oh, it is raining, isn't it typical?" He looked at me and responded: "Well you are a negative son of a bitch, aren't you?" From that point on, I understood that being negative was definitely not the way forward in any conversation or situation in the USA.

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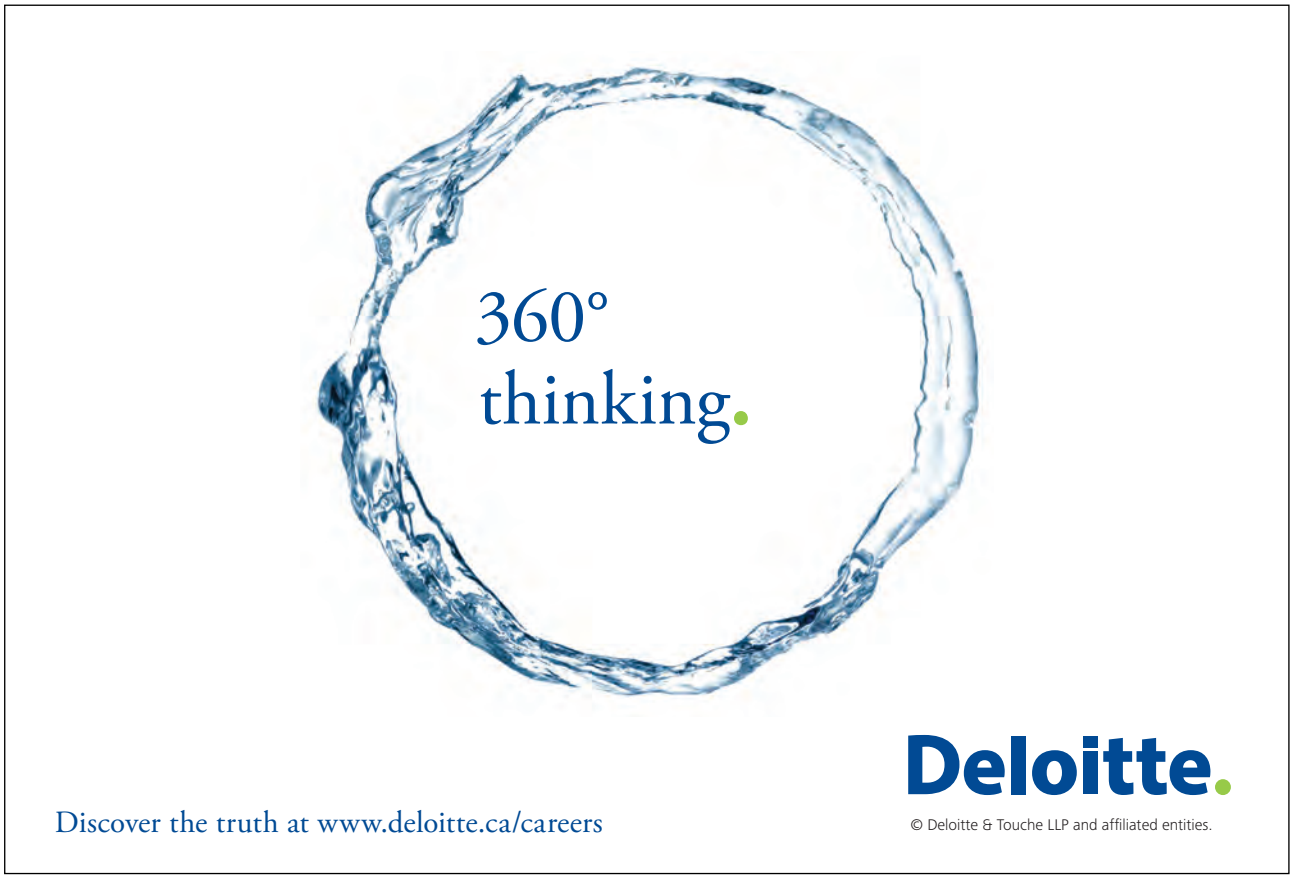
8 Projects and Politics

We touched on projects in the latter part of Chapter 4. We believe that having Project Management skills and understanding is key in any company. Project Management is about managing change and all leaders need to manage change, hence they need to understand project management.

Three ways companies deal with projects

Let us present three archetypical ways of how companies deal with projects. In the first scenario, there are endless discussions on what to do. When the decision is finally made to start a project, it is a pilot project with no clear project manager, limited resource and focus, and hence, little impact and result. The results will then need to be discussed extensively. This is an organization with no clear leadership and a lack of pressure to change.

The second scenario is a company maybe like the company in the first scenario where a clear leader has emerged and created a burning platform and need for change. Here, decisions are being made fast and people jump into execution mode. Proper resources are dedicated to it. However, due to lack of planning, the project members soon realize that the project is more complex than what they first thought, since the scope has not been clearly defined and it is not clear who the most important stakeholders are and how they affect the project. The likelihood of success is limited because what success looks like has not been defined.



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The third scenario could build on the second. This is a company that has learnt that planning, structure, clear scope, a communication plan are paramount for successful projects. There is a balance between planning and execution. They do not discuss unknowns to any great extent and they avoid lots of speculation about the future. They make decisions based on facts and understand that it is more important to make a decision and move on, especially when the decisions are not so important and can be changed later if necessary.

Competent Project Managers are scarce in supply

Project Management is an art and really competent project managers are scarce in supply. A project has a defined start and end, clear deliverables and a clear scope. The key stakeholders and risks have been identified and a communications plan has been made. A project organization has been established and if necessary a Steering Committee consisting of associates who can make decisions has been established and they feel ownership for the project. On top of this (and this is where organizations often fail) resource estimates have been made and resources have been allocated. Often the resource needs are underestimated because the complexity of the project has not been understood. One way to understand the complexity is to break down the deliverables in a so called Work Break Down Structure (WBS).

Projects we ran

We ran projects with limited resources and sometimes limited interest from local management. We wanted to make an impact and sometimes had to find ingenious ways to do so. We had some power as trainees. We were going to present projects to Executive Management which meant that some associates, managers and executives in the business would want to help but far from everybody did. We also had dedicated time to run projects.

Let us give some examples of projects we ran and what we learnt from them. Here are some examples from Patrick:

I ran an area project together with another trainee which focused on reducing overstock inventory. Our Area Manager was American and took great interest in us. He let us present at a meeting with the Branch Managers in the area. We had made a simple analysis of the overstock and presented how much it needed to be reduced and asked for ideas on how to do it. Just the fact that we highlighted the problem helped. We then spent time in each branch analyzing stock and looked at selling it off, sending it back to the distribution centre or relocating it to another branch in the area. One Branch Manager took great interest in the work and started to use his truck to get overstock from another branch which he could sell. It was our first project and we felt it was a success. However, we had not decided what was needed for it to be a success.

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The second project I ran was at the Distribution Centre. We had been instructed that we were to work with Distribution Centre re-configuration. The Head Manager of all Distribution Centres had made it perfectly clear at a training week that this was our task, no matter what the local Distribution Centre Manager would say. As soon as we came back to the local Distribution Centre, we were told that we should work on another project and so we did after escalating it to our Leadership Team. I was told to look at the process with returning goods and figure out if something could be done to improve the situation. After that the Distribution Centre Manager showed no interest in our work at all and he did not expect much from us. I booked him for a couple of meetings to follow-up on expectations but he showed little interest in the project. When I finally presented my conclusions on the project, he and his colleague were "out to get me". They were very tough and I got defensive. I learnt so much from that experience. I learnt to avoid being defensive and I now had had an experience of how it can be to present something to an adverse audience.

Focus on solving many small problems, if you face massive adversity and the way ahead is particularly dense. In my final presentation to the executives, I presented three smaller yet significant suggestions. The first one was to switch off a minimum order charge, which I showed was losing us a lot of money because of the way it was setup in the ERP system. It built on a hands-on experience from working with the system at the counter. The second suggestion was to switch on location codes on the printed receipts to make it easier to find where product was located in the store and warehouse. The third suggestion was to install barcode scanners by the counters, which was something I had done in my own branch with great success.

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In the USA, I ran a hands-on store refurbishment project and an extensive product assortment project. The last one was a full-blown project with advanced stakeholder management and risk. I did not manage my stakeholders well enough when running that project. The learnings from it were massive and in the end, the results were very positive but I had made myself partly un-popular at the same time. The project was brilliant and based on solid data and a very good idea. However, it was not received that way, by everybody, because I was pointing out something that needed to be improved. I probably focused too much on what was broken and less on what was working well and how it could be made even better. A couple of months later after I presented my projects positive results it was re-branded and ran as a national initiative from the Head Office of the subsidiary I had been working in.

"Not invented here syndrome"

In all your projects and encounters, you should not necessarily expect a good idea to be perceived as something positive by everybody else. The so called "not invented here syndrome" is very prevalent in most companies. The way to make a project successful is to make others feel ownership of it. One way to ensure success is to sit down with your manager and brainstorm together with him on a good project. By involving key stakeholders in identifying problems and solutions they will feel ownership of it. Your good ideas will also be taken and adopted by others. This is a reality that you have to get used to.

Stay cool

We remember tough situations of being called in to a manager's office, receiving some straight forward communication, often based on rumours or misunderstandings. Always stay cool and calm in these situations. Seek to understand, explain and discuss. However, sometimes you should just "take a hit". There could be times where other associates or managers put some blame on you for something and at times it might actually just be best to let them and move on. The reason for this is that it might actually not matter much to you, but it could matter quite a lot to them.

It is also possible to run a research project for an investment that is generally well received, present your findings and then hear absolutely nothing about it ever again. This happened to Tom and a colleague who ran a three month project examining what happened to damaged or faulty goods within the distribution network. The project was solid, the presentation to the board went well, the feedback from our peers, the business leaders and the people running the graduate program was all very positive and we thought we had cracked it – jobs for life, corner offices, and private jets! After all, saving millions over 5 years is a headline statement. What happened? Nothing. Nada. Nichts.

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There could be various reasons why a solid good idea, which is backed up with good data and solid argumentation will not be implemented. Internal incentive structures, high risk in connection to the project and a need to prioritize projects resource wise are three different potential reasons. Or maybe you have missed something important in your argumentation and analysis or there could still be uncertainty and unknown factors that needs to be investigated further. Executives sometimes shy away from major investments because of the risks involved should the project go bad.

We also remember meeting many different interesting characters during our different projects. These people could be in all levels of the organization. Sometimes this was fun and positive and sometimes it was disappointing and uninspiring.

There will sometimes be lay-offs in connection to change projects. During tough times, you can expect severe lay-offs and in the end you are not safe just because you are a trainee, however you are safer. You will not be the first to go, but again, remember that you are just an asset. The company needs to be calculating and ruthless. In reality, lay-offs will be mixed a little bit with internal politics. In your assessments, you should not be ruthless, but you should face the brutal facts when necessary.

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9 The down and up-side of relocating

So what are the down and up-sides of relocating? For the *Global Generation* moving around a lot is the norm. You have to be aware that there are some benefits but also some costs in doing so.

As part of our trainee program, we moved physically three times within two years but we moved positions constantly within the company. Over a six year period before, during and after the trainee program, we moved physically on average once a year. The move was often to another country, as well. For a few years this is great. You get to know new people and experience new cultures. However, you also leave good friends behind when you move and you have to start to prioritize and make an effort to stay in touch with old friends in other countries.

"Hit the ground running"

As mentioned earlier when moving to a new place you want to "hit the ground running". The way to do this is to make sure that you arrive as early as possible to the new city and quickly join clubs, language classes, dance classes or whatever interests you. You need to put yourself in situations where you can get to know new people. We believe it is advisable to make friends outside of work to allow for balance in your life. Joining Internet communities of all sorts is a great way to get to know new people. Seek them out and do not hesitate to contact people and openly explain that you are new in a city. As soon as you have got to know two or three people, you will soon have an opportunity to get to know more people through them. You should not be too picky in the beginning when it comes to new acquaintances. Later on you can pick and choose your friends but in the beginning you should engage with everybody.

A great up-side with relocating to other countries is that you can go on vacation and explore the new country at a reasonable cost. We did skiing trips, Highway 1 and much more while living in a new country. At one point Patrick did not see his family for one whole year though, because he chose to go to the warm Bahamas instead of home to cold Sweden over Christmas.

Loneliness

It is also very likely that you will experience loneliness or feel lonely at times. This depends a lot on the start you get in a new place. If you don't get new friends in the very beginning, it is easy to become lazy and find a routine where you do not seek them out either. You might end up working a lot for example. Even if you do manage to get a lot of new friends early on, there is still a high likelihood that you will feel lonely and misunderstood at times. This is part of the experience. Deal with it. Grow, develop and become stronger as a person.

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Plan ahead

You should plan the moving and relocation long before you move. There are some basics like finding a new apartment etc. We feel that all the practical parts are necessary and you will deal with them in one way or another. Try to plan ahead as much as possible. Make to-do lists and look at the schedule of your trainee program, at least in general terms. When moving, make sure you do not have too much stuff. The rule is to throw away anything that you have not used within the last 6–12 months. We found that it was often easier and faster to deal with it ourselves through internet searches and alike rather than to use a realtor that our company paid for. Some of the places we were shown by realtors were horrid and a waste of time to look at. We would buy a minimum amount of furniture at an auction place or at IKEA. Months later when it was time to move, we would often sell it to our landlord or on an internet page for half price to get rid of it quickly and move on. The flat-packs of IKEA are genius when e.g. buying a bed, especially if you find yourself in a country far away with limited moving help available.

Relocating requires some resilience. The "n-th" time you move you will start to get a bit sick and tired of it. At the same time, you will get better at it and will probably be excited by new prospects and possibilities in the new place.

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Balance and stress

What about spending time with your colleagues after work and even making friends with them? We don't see any major problem with that. The main aspect to consider though is that you need to be able to disconnect from work. The issue here is that it is very easy and convenient to meet up with your colleagues after work when you find yourself working long hours over a longer period and your colleagues do the same. However, this is also the situation where you should be the most attentive because there is a risk that you will talk about work with your colleagues and in that sense not disconnect from it. We had times where we found ourselves in this trap and it meant not having balance at all. Patrick was working in the USA during the financial crises while the company was making 50% cuts in the number of employees and everybody was working 10–12 hour days including weekends. The company was investing in him while it was letting other senior and experienced people go. This put quite some pressure on Patrick to perform "over and beyond over and beyond". During this time, he found himself spending most of his sparse free time with his trainee colleagues after work.

Tom was going through a similar experience back in Europe. You learn some "life-lessons" from these kinds of experiences and often you need to experience them first-hand. However, a prolonged period of pressure, stress and imbalance has long-term negative real physical and psychological effects which can easily become permanent. We believe that some parts of the *Global Generation* suffer from great imbalances and stress. As a trainee, there will be times when you just have to accept certain amounts of imbalances and stress. However, there are some ways to deal with these. Firstly, get some routines into your life, e.g. a ten minute workout routine every morning and some daily walks or bicycle rides to at least secure that daily exercise. Routines are healthy!

Secondly, make sure you find ingenious ways to win control of your free-time. Pay to get your apartment cleaned. Get groceries delivered to your home etc. Thirdly, ensure you do not only think of work after work, by e.g. not checking emails after a certain time in the evening and by booking in time, in your calendar for yourself.

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10 Appendix

Intercultural books and links:

- *Beyond Culture*, Edward T. Hall, Anchor/Doubleday Books, 1976.
  Also by E.T. Hall:
  - *The Silent Language*, 1981
  - *The Hidden Dimension*, 1982
  - *The Dance of Life*, 1983

- *Cultural Awareness*, Barry Tomalin & Susan Stempleski, Oxford University Press, 1993
- *Culture and Interpersonal Communication*, William Gudykunst & Stella Ting-Toomey, Sage Publications Inc. 1988
- *Culture Clash*, H. Ned Seelye & Alan Seeley-James, NTC Business Books, 1995
- *Cultures and Organizations*: Software of the Mind, Geert Hofstede, McGraw-Hill, 1996
- *Do's and Taboos around the World for Women in Business*, R. Axtell, T. Briggs, M Corcoran, M.B. Lamb, John Wiley & Sons, 1997
- *French Management, Elitism in Action*, Barsoux & Lawrence, Cassell, 1997
- *The International Business Book*, Vincent Guy & John Mattock, NTC Business Books, 1995
- *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*, Nancy Adler, Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991
- *Management international*, Sabine Urban, Editions Litec, 1993
- *Mindsets: The Role of Culture and Perception in International Relations*, Glen Fisher, Intercultural Press, 1988
- *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, Fons Trompenaars, Nicholas Brearly Publising Ltd., 1993
- *We Europeans*, Richard Hills, Europublications, 1992; also by R. Hill:
  EuroManagers & Martians: The Business Cultures of Europe's Trading Nations, 1994

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Focused on the United States

- *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, A.C. Stewart & M.J. Bennet, Intercultural Press, 1991
- *American Ways*, Gary Althen, Intercultural Press, 1988
- *Doing Business Internationally*, Terrance Brake and Danielle Walker, Princeton Training Press, 1995
- *International Negotiation: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Glen Fisher, Intercultural Press, 1980
- *Living in the U.S.A.*, Alison Lanier, Intercultural Press, 1996
- *Management in the USA*, Peter Lawrence, SAGE Publications, 1996
- *Management in Two Cultures: Bridging the Gap between U.S. and Mexican Managers*, Eva Kras, Intercultural Press, 1995
- *Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French and Americans*, E.T. & M.R. Hall, Intercultural Press, 1980

Intercultural websites

www.bridgeconsultants.com
www.dialogin.com
www.greenleafconsulting.com
www.intercultural.org
www.interculturalpress.com
www.stoegerpartner.de
www.sietar-europa.org
www.edwdebono.com
www.academy.umd.edu/ila
www.diversophy.com
www.coaching-newsletter.com
www.global-excellence.com

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Endnotes

1. http://www.eriksmartt.com/blog/archives/520/

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