

Women on top

Want to reach the top of your profession? Five high-achieving women share the lessons they've learnt on the path to success



The secrets of career success

'Successful women know what they want to achieve before they set out – their plans are clear and they believe they can make it happen,' says Lynette Allen, MD of The Women's Coaching Company (pictured). 'They learn to trust their talents, understand what they're good at and surround themselves with people they trust to plug the gaps in their own talent. They're excellent at communicating with their team and ensure everyone knows where they're heading.'

Visit www.thewomenscoachingcompany.co.uk for corporate coaching and mentoring for women in business and female entrepreneurs.

Recruitment

Helen Reynolds, 33, is MD and co-founder (with James Caan) of HB RIDA. She is tenacious and puts in long hours

A career was what I wanted, not a job, and my goal was to work for myself. I left college at 18 with an HND in business and got a job at a recruitment firm. I worked up to senior consultant, branch manager and regional director, in both high street employment agencies and executive search companies.

'I was project-driven, staying in each company just 12-18 months to start a new 'desk' (area of recruitment) or branch, or turn around an underperforming one. I eventually joined The Recruitment & Employment Confederation (the trade body of the recruitment industry) as deputy CEO, then acting CEO.

'A chance meeting with James Caan in 2008 was a turning point. While many people wouldn't have followed it up, I

made an appointment with him to discuss my ideas and we co-founded HB RIDA (www.hbrida.com) to provide management services for small- to medium-sized enterprises in the recruitment sector. Backed by a £2.6 million capital investment fund, I provide strategic growth plans for directors to develop their companies and increase their value. We now have a portfolio of businesses across the UK.

'I was motivated by money at first, but it's not enough – you have to be passionate about achieving goals. I've always been confident and tenacious. While others in their 20s were partying, I was putting in the hours. Maintaining work/life balance isn't easy, especially as I travel extensively. Fortunately, my husband is happy to stay at home and look after our two children.' >



You must be **motivated** by more than money

Retail

Clare Rayner, 35, is a top retail manager and MD of Retail Acumen. She believes in working hard and playing hard

Chemical engineering was what I went to university to study but I soon realised it wasn't for me and dropped out. Needing to pay the bills, I talked my way into a job at Harvey Nichols, running a small designer shoe store. In the evenings, I worked as a shift manager at McDonald's.

'Although I wasn't a graduate, the area manager enrolled me on the McDonald's graduate management programme. By 20, I was acting store manager of an Oxford Street branch, managing 270 people. But I soon wanted a new challenge and got a job as graduate trainee merchandiser at Marks & Spencer. I worked my way up through management roles in companies including Safeway, Bhs, Dixons and Argos, learning to manage supply chain, stock

replenishment and complex forecasting for departments making up to £30 million of sales a week. A willingness to take risks and a talent for problem-solving meant that I progressed quickly.

'I believe it should be possible to do your job within contracted hours, so I didn't give up my life for my work – but I worked hard, always looking for the next challenge.

'In 2006, after having children, I founded retail consultancy Retail Acumen (www.retailacumen.com), and have since worked with Sainsbury's, Disney and ASDA, as well as smaller retailers. I'm also founder of The Retail Conference (www.retailconference.co.uk).

'I believe people can have it all. It takes a lot of juggling but with focus and passion, it can be done.'

‘Always look for the next challenge’



Education

Gail Larkin, 57, is a trail-blazing head teacher and education campaigner. She thrives on seemingly impossible challenges

A classroom teacher in a junior school for 12 years, not having a BEd degree – only a certificate of education – was a disadvantage. Plus I had no performance management and never received advice from my boss, so I never thought to apply for promotion.

'However, when I moved schools, my new head told me I had deputy head potential and should apply for a job at another school for interview experience. To my shock, I got the job! It was tough, but I enjoyed the challenge and discovered I'm good at building and inspiring teams.

'To progress further, I studied for an MA in School and College Management in my spare time. I was bringing up a family and overseeing a special school as acting head – the workload nearly killed me! Luckily,

my husband and lecturers supported me and I achieved my first headship aged 39, in an infant school (age three to eight) that was expanding to include juniors (eight to 11) – a very satisfying challenge.

'Seven years on, I was asked to take over a failing school for a term, while running my own school. Auriol Junior in Surrey was in a horrible state, but once I'd started to turn it around, I decided to stay. It was soon a thriving and popular school.

'Teamwork is key and I encourage staff career development. I'm on the national council of the National Association of Head Teachers, working with heads across the country and campaigning on issues like abolishing SATS, which involves meeting MPs and speaking on TV and radio.'

‘Invest in the career development of staff’



Law

Joanna Tall, 48, is a commercial lawyer with two businesses. She was driven by the desire to spend more time at home

After completing a law degree, I did a one-year postgraduate course at law school to become a solicitor, followed by two years of articles (training in a law firm). I worked for several high-profile City of London law firms, staying three or four years in each. Eventually, I tired of the long city hours – staying until 3am wasn't unusual – and moved to in-house legal teams in global companies such as Burger King and SAP.

'Wanting more flexibility to look after my two children, I set up Trading Terms Ltd (www.tradingterms.co.uk) in 2004. I marketed myself as a 'legal Mary Poppins', helping in-house legal teams during busy times or special projects. It's an unusual

service – I drove around business parks to find clients at first – but it's been very successful and I work regularly with major clients such as Sony.

'I set up www.offtoseemylawyer.com last year. It's a virtual law firm for female entrepreneurs. Around seven out of 10 small online businesses are acting illegally without realising it. I enjoy helping them function in a professional manner.

'I'm fluent in French and German, which is helpful for cross-border deals. Qualifications in other subjects – such as medicine or education – is an asset for lawyers, as it allows them to specialise.

'I've worked hard, often long hours, and I have to be super-organised at home. But running my own businesses allows me to spend more time with my family.'

‘Create your own niche market’



Healthcare

Cathe Gaskell, 46, a former health services CEO now owns a healthcare consultancy. She took risks to progress

Starting out as a nurse, at 34, I was a ward sister managing 28 staff when I took a massive leap to become director of nursing – managing nearly 1,000 people. The chief executive took a big chance on me but she could see I was driven, focused and enjoyed coming up with creative systems for better care.

'I progressed to operations director, deputy CEO and CEO, working in a community hospital, a mental health service with 52 sites, and a chain of 50 care homes, managing budgets of up to £70 million. The health sector is unique in that patient care must come first – manage that well and profit will follow.

'It wasn't until I was a director of nursing that I did a

BSc in Professional Issues in Healthcare, while bringing up two children.

'Although healthcare has a large female workforce, boards are predominantly male. More women are needed at senior levels, but they aren't always willing to take risks and learn on the job. Finding female mentors and emulating the traits you admire is key. I also believe generosity to colleagues and staff goes a long way.

'I loved being a chief executive but it isn't great for work/life balance, so I set up my consultancy, The Results Company (www.theresultsco.com), advising NHS and commercial sectors. This can involve investigating failures in patient care; sales and marketing for corporate healthcare companies; and advising training companies on due diligence.'

‘Find an inspiring mentor’



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