

MANAGER or SPECIALIST **Which rôle is most suitable for you?**

There is a proliferation of MBA courses on offer and each one invariably promises prospective students the acquisition of skills to enable them to become managers, as if this were the only career ideal to aim for. However, probably only half of these candidates really have the potential to become *good* managers—the rest being more suitable for a career as specialists. What is the basis upon which this distinction should be made?

As explained in the Management Excellence book**, the fundamental reason is that a manager of a department requires certain interpersonal skills which some people do not possess nor are they capable of acquiring. Typical among these skills are the abilities to motivate & coach their subordinates, to handle certain difficult situations—especially those dealing with conflict, and to foster the good performance of the whole team rather than just of themselves.

The origin of this situation is that we all have an innate preference either for dealing with people or for working on tasks: very few of us are excellent in both. It is thus the first group who are more suited to be managers, whereas the second group can follow a career as 'specialists' be it in research, information technology or in other specific departmental functions like accounting. Among auxiliary characteristics of these two groups are opposing perspectives (broad & general versus narrower & detailed), and the usually less extrovert behaviour of scientific specialists, who are also more at ease to work on their own.

A common error made by companies is to designate a successful but non-suitable person as manager. Take the example of a good salesman gifted in dealing with his clients but who could be ineffective in managing other salesmen. Promoting such a salesperson to sales manager will have a doubly negative effect in that the firm acquires a bad manager and at the same time 'loses' a good salesman.

However, there are of course many people who are not at either of these two extremes; they could be represented by coordinates of say 5,5 on a 10x10 graph showing emphasis on people as opposed to task (as depicted in the attached figure 3.1 from the book)

For such people, there is the possibility of being project team leaders where, from time to time, they lead a multi-disciplinary team working on a specific project. The project team leader option is therefore useful for specialists to get an experience of management, and for managers to improve their knowledge of complex factors concerning the product or process being developed. The latter is particularly important in Anglo-Saxon companies which frequently select as managers people who do not have much product knowledge. Thus, for example, one finds General Managers within electrical engineering firms who do not have scientific degrees—something which would never occur in a German company who would insist on the person having an engineering or at least a physics degree.

To conclude, a few words about careers for the two types of employees. In the more progressive firms there are parallel avenues of advancement for managers and for specialists with fairly comparable salary scales. Although the managers may be seen as being more important and possessing greater prospects for reaching the top levels within the company, they also run greater risks of being made redundant especially during periods of change when they may get a new boss who appreciates them less than did the previous one. Moreover, as there is obviously only limited space at the top of the organisational pyramid, the less successful candidates reach a positional and salary plateau from which they are encouraged to depart from the firm after the age of 45. Such a situation is more rare for specialists who, if they have been keeping up with progress in their subject, can maintain their post to a later age.

While on this topic, it should be emphasized that managers also have to 'keep themselves in shape' by frequently making use of the four management processes (planning, organising, leading, controlling) for handling complex projects. These processes (fig 10.1 on website), remain largely unchanged, in contrast to management functions—especially marketing & finance, which need to be considerably adapted to deal with the present situation of crisis and recession.

