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Web chat: Lisa Chin-A-Young



Lisa Chin-A-Young: "Broaden and value your network"

Welcome to the Financial Times live web chat with Lisa Chin-A-Young who features in our Ten Questions Q&A.

Lisa Chin-A-Young, MBA alumnus from Insead in France and Singapore, co-founder of The Marriage Development Company and an associate lecturer at the Open University Business School, will answer your questions on **Thursday, 26th April 2012, between 12.00-13.00 GMT.**

Post your questions to ask@ft.com and they will be answered on the day on this page.

What is the one thing you learnt on your MBA that you think would be most helpful in a successful marriage?

Lisa: Great question - thanks for asking it. I had to stop and have a think - as I don't think it would be anything specific to the course content per say, but rather to the MBA experience overall.

I'd have to say that the most valuable lesson was around building great diverse teams and partnerships. Insead is a very culturally diverse MBA - one of the requirements is that all graduating students speak three languages and as such it tends to attract very globally minded participants.

At the beginning of the programme, you are placed into groups of about five, matched with people who are culturally as well as professionally very different than you are. Throughout the course of the groupwork - and the heated debates that inevitably were a part of it - I learned to appreciate how much people actually do think differently and that my way of viewing problems and solutions was not the only way. People are a product of the environment and norms that they grew up in as well as their natural strengths and talents.

There's no right or wrong - just different. Learning how to work together to get the best result was a very valuable lesson.

I think that is a great lesson to translate through to marriage. My husband and I are very different - I love exploring and change, he loves routine; I'm a bit more of a risk taker and he's a bit more conservative. But respecting his point of view and understanding (non-judgementally!) where he's coming from has been very important in making us the best team we can be together.

What would be your advice to a professional marketer in their late 50s with 35 years international experience who has done plan A and plan B, finds themselves under severe pressure in a brutal economic environment, can't find work (age) and needs a plan C, but doesn't know what it is (yet)?

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Lisa: Tough one. First off, believe in yourself and stay positive. Even if you've had a rough patch, you know yourself best so judge yourself rather than having others judge you. Think through your strengths, areas that differentiate yourself and what you have a passion for. Cast your net wide in considering options: going back to the corporate world, different industries, academia, starting a business for yourself, partnering with someone etc.

Reconnect with people that you have worked with over your 35 years - this is a great source of leads for opportunities that you may not be aware of. You inevitably have built dozens or even hundreds of relationships over your years - go back to those relationships and let people know that you are thinking through your plan C. Most likely there is someone out there that is looking for your skillset. The key is to make the match, which is very difficult to do in the open job market in this environment so go where you have some relationship or where your skillset is a unique advantage.

Finally, I also would suggest that you take a step back and make sure that in crafting your plan C, you are doing something that fits with your overall life goals not just your career goals. Stay positive and good luck!

What made you decide to move from mechanical engineering to brand management? Do you think more women should be encouraged to study engineering?

Lisa: It was one of those forks in the road in life that you don't really pre-plan. My plan had always been to do my MBA about five years after completing my engineering degree and eventually end up in business, as my dad was a general manager at a multi-national company and I had wanted to do the same.

I chose engineering as an undergrad because I loved maths and sciences and thought it was a good general degree to have. I had applied to P&G for product development but was fortunate enough to have won an award in my final year and at the award dinner sat next to the marketing director who then encouraged me to also apply for brand management. So while it was nowhere on my radar at the time, I went through the process and eventually came to the conclusion that it was the better route for me. I am still grateful to that marketing director for taking the interest and opening up a door in my life that I wouldn't have otherwise considered.

Regarding women in engineering - I loved studying engineering and think the analytic skills and rigour that I learned have made me a better business person. Many of the technical skills have also come in handy throughout my life - I also recently built my own website! We live in a world where technology is a key part of it and engineering has a very important role to play. It only makes sense then to encourage half of the talent to excel in it!

What inspired you to start The Marriage Development Company - sounds like a unique business?

Lisa: My husband and I met relatively late in life, well after establishing each of our respective careers. I think perhaps because it was such a challenge for us to meet the right partner in life, we don't take it for granted and we are very appreciative that we "found" each other (through a blind date set up by a mutual friend!)

When we got married, we starting going through a back of the envelope process where we would talk about our key priorities and map out by quarter the key activities for the year ahead (usually over a dinner out, writing on a scrap piece of paper!) We found that the conversations we had were really robust and that it helped keep us on the same page.

Within the year we were fortunate enough to have our son, but things were busy between work and home! Inevitably, there was the occasional "I didn't know that" or "You never told me". So we went back to basics and ensured that we set aside time to plan and we always found that this helped us on the "operational" day-to-day to have a joint plan. It allowed us to separate the planning from the execution and have robust discussions on any disagreements at the planning stage.

We started talking to friends and family about our approach and realised that not many people have an explicit planning approach and so decided to develop ours further and share it with other couples. I left the corporate world to take some time off when we were having difficulties having our second baby and started up the business based on this area my husband and I are both passionate about. We've had great feedback so far (and also

now have our little girl!)

Do you think a man could successfully run a company such as yours? After all, most MBA graduates are men.

Lisa: I don't see why not. My husband and I both co-founded The Marriage Development Company and he is involved in the development of the materials and the direction we are going. That being said, I have found so far that the women tend to be the ones that make the decision to attend a workshop (and sell it to their hubbies) - although I've come across many men that are also very interested in applying the concept.

Marriage is a partnership and both partners should feel that they can take the initiative to proactively improve it. The reason I named the company as I did was that I found it interesting how natural and accepted it is for us to do "career development" in the form of leadership courses, teambuilding, technical skills training, etc but that there seems to be little to no proactive "marriage development" going on.

It would be great to see more men and women in this space, to encourage a behaviour change that will lead to more successful marriages!

What advice would you give couples before they commit to a long-term relationship such as marriage?

Lisa: Talk to each other. Talk about things that are important in life and important to each of you. Know your value systems. A marriage is like a joint venture - you need to go in to it knowing that you can be better together, rather than on your own. Values are so important and form the basis for so many decisions in life. Know where you share common values and where they are different. Talk about the differences and determine if they are deal-breakers.

Make sure you are having robust conversations, rather than just superficial ones. My analogy is that often we tend to run our relationship at home as if we are having "water-cooler" conversations - eg, when we happen to see each other and whatever comes to mind for whatever time is available. Set aside the time and make sure you are having the type of robust discussions you would have at work if you were launching a new product or acquiring a new business. It's the most important decision of your life!

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