

A crash course in making CFO

HOW CAN TREASURERS BOOST THEIR CHANCES OF CLIMBING TO THE TOP OF THE FINANCE TREE? SALLY PERCY SPILLS THE SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL FINANCE LEADERS

Not every treasurer hankers after the CFO's job, but many wouldn't rule it out. And neither should they. After all, the route from treasury to the executive suite is relatively well trodden.

Former treasurers who went on to hold the top finance job include Nick Luff, CFO of information provider RELX, Teri List-Stoll, CFO of clothing company Gap, and Keith Nichols, former CFO of chemicals giant AkzoNobel. Other finance leaders may not have had the title of treasurer, but still held treasury responsibilities, such as Paul Edwards, group FD at transport operator The Go-Ahead Group.

Commit to personal growth

Ronan Dunne, executive vice president and group president at US telecommunications giant Verizon Wireless, held treasury roles early in his career. When I interviewed him for my book, *Reach the Top in Finance: The Ambitious Accountant's Guide to Career Success*, he explained that he initially studied treasury qualifications while he was

working in banking because he saw them as a way to build knowledge and network with corporate treasurers.

Little did he know then that those qualifications would be a crucial step in a journey to the very top of the British business world. Following a stint in treasury, Dunne was head of strategic finance at logistics operator Exel before working his way up to become CFO, then CEO of Telefónica UK, part of the Spanish multinational communications group Telefónica.

Dunne explains his success like this: "I always had the mindset in my career that I am on a journey," he says. "So I am looking for interesting things that stretch me and help me to develop my knowledge. I have seen every role as a developmental opportunity and a learning opportunity, not just as a job, and I was always very open-minded about where I might find myself."

Ultimately, the more open-minded you are, the more likely you are to be receptive to new experiences that enhance your knowledge base and enable you to grow as an individual.

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Tear up the career plan

Julie Brown, now chief operating and financial officer of luxury fashion house Burberry, believes that what she calls the 'ABC of success' has been instrumental in helping her get to where she is today.

"The 'A' stands for ability – your own ability to learn so that you're knowledgeable in your area of responsibility," she explains. "The 'B' stands for bravery – being willing to take opportunities when they present themselves and willing to take the risks associated with those opportunities. The 'C' stands for chance – senior positions are often about being in the right place, at the right time, and seizing the opportunity."

In her own career, Brown has applied the ABC of success principles over and over again. After qualifying as both a chartered accountant and a chartered tax adviser with KPMG, she did a secondment as an interim FD that gave her a taste for life in industry. She then joined ICI as the finance head for R&D and ended up staying with the company (which later became Zeneca, then AstraZeneca) for 25 years.

During that time, she held 11 different roles, in four different countries, and she gained experience in both finance and general management, albeit not

specifically in treasury. She puts the breadth of expertise she gained down to her managers being prepared to take risks on her and she herself being prepared to take risks and seize the opportunities that came with them.

Brown's big break came when she was made AstraZeneca's interim CFO during a period of transition for the management team. This role put her firmly onto the headhunters' radars and she moved to medical equipment manufacturer Smith & Nephew as CFO in 2013, then to Burberry earlier this year. Interestingly, she says she "never had a plan to become a FTSE CFO". Instead, her plan "was to broaden my experience base and learn from the best".

Take the rough with the smooth

Resilience is another important attribute for would-be CFOs, as Andrew Bonfield, group FD of National Grid, knows only too well. He was appointed CFO of FTSE 100 pharmaceutical company SmithKline at the age of 36, but lost the job soon after when the business merged with rival Glaxo.

"I had to go through a set of merger discussions where I was not going to be part of the new company," he recalls. "That was hard and it was a learning experience having to go through it. After the merger discussions, senior bankers from the other side came up to me and said: 'You did a great job.' That stuck with me."

Later in his career, the arrival of a new CEO resulted in him leaving his job as CFO of US pharmaceutical company Bristol-Myers Squibb. He was also CFO of confectionary group Cadbury when it was taken over by US food giant Kraft.

It seems that being philosophical about moving on is the only way to survive the brutal uncertainty that comes with holding a senior finance role – that and not falling into the trap of taking the position for granted. "You know it's going to happen," says Bonfield. "It's part of your job."

The value of treasury

Not all the finance leaders that I interviewed held treasury qualifications. But those who did, or who

had some experience of practising treasury, believed that it was a very valuable skill for a would-be CFO to have. For example, David Tilston, interim CFO of drug manufacturer Consort Medical, says that his MCT gave him an "extremely good toolbox of techniques and skills, plus experience in the classroom of dealing with ambiguity and complex situations".

So if you're a treasurer who wants to reach the top in finance, take heart from the fact that your skills and experience will certainly stand you in very good stead. But don't forget that what you do with those skills, and how far you get them to take you, is entirely down to you. ♦



HOW TO REACH THE TOP IN FINANCE

What should you do to increase your chances of career success? Read our tips from leading CFOs:

"As you move through your career, it is important to take on different roles and build up your all-round experience."

David Tilston, interim CFO, Consort Medical

"People invest so little time in their own careers. They expect their employer, or HR, or somebody else, to manage their career. But the only person responsible for your career is *you*. My career has not been a straight line of always successful, but I have always put myself in a position to be lucky."

Ronan Dunne, executive vice president and group president, Verizon Wireless

"International experience is a must. The world is increasingly mobile, open and transparent, and most large companies compete on a global scale."

Julie Brown, chief operating and financial officer, Burberry

"Complacency is your biggest enemy. If you assume that everything that goes well is down to you doing a good job, and you're not aware of what could go wrong, then potentially you are setting yourself up for failure."

Andrew Bonfield, group FD, National Grid

Sally Percy is a freelance financial journalist and author of *Reach the Top in Finance: The Ambitious Accountant's Guide to Career Success*



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