

Knowledgeable Sherpas

Leadership in corporate communications is an excellent basis for senior careers in several directions: this is especially true in Asia Pacific, where the diversity of opportunities can be a doorway to global responsibilities. But how do professionals at the top of corporate communications find the time, inspiration and motivation to make that next move? What are the stumbling blocks to avoid and what are the practical tips to bear in mind? Here are seven keys that unlock the next stage of your career.

BY **KATRINA ANDREWS**

After taking on the challenge of a senior corporate affairs position, what can an Asia-based communications practitioner do next? Many worry that such a job represents the highest rung of their career ladder; that, afterwards, only a succession of similar roles in similar companies awaits. It is a concern our report *Pathways* was designed to address, as we explored the very divergent career paths taken by nine former top professionals in the region. Since their spells as heads of APAC corporate communications for various multinationals, our interviewees have all moved into very different professions – public sector, private sector, non-govern-

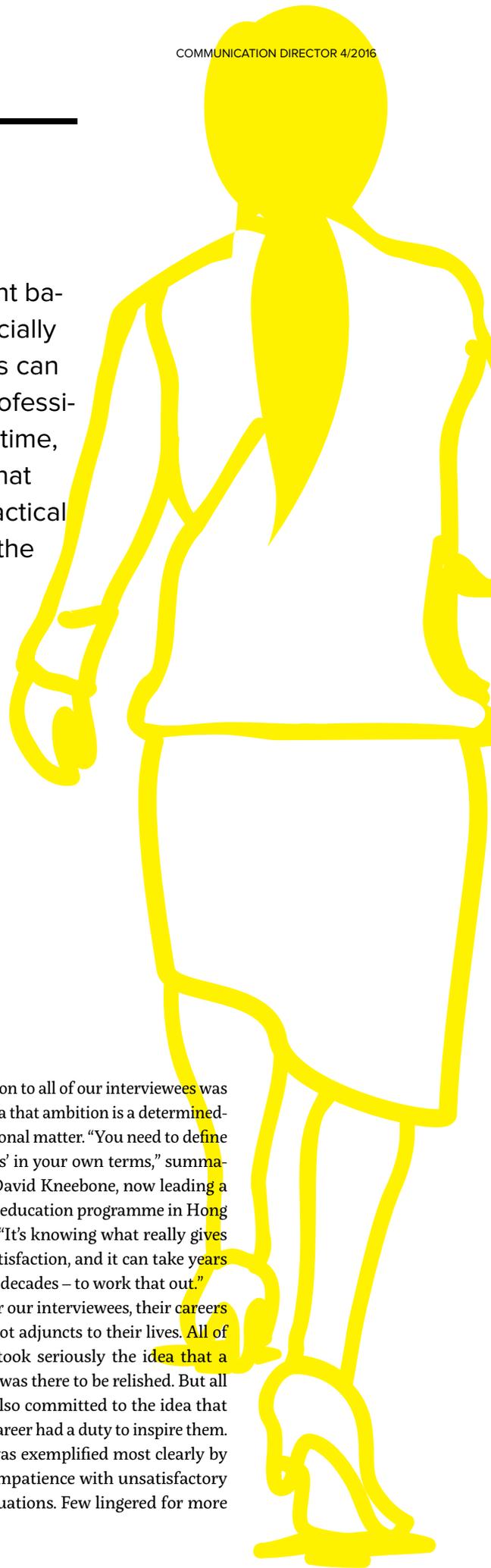
mental organisations, governments, public relations agencies, alternative in-house roles or their own businesses. That diversity alone demonstrates that communications in Asia should never be seen as a glass ceiling but rather as a career launchpad.

Many common themes emerged time and again from our conversations with these high-achievers:

I.
Don't be shaped by your career, shape it to you

Common to all of our interviewees was the idea that ambition is a determinedly personal matter. "You need to define 'success' in your own terms," summarised David Kneebone, now leading a public education programme in Hong Kong. "It's knowing what really gives you satisfaction, and it can take years – even decades – to work that out."

For our interviewees, their careers were not adjuncts to their lives. All of them took seriously the idea that a career was there to be relished. But all were also committed to the idea that their career had a duty to inspire them. This was exemplified most clearly by their impatience with unsatisfactory job situations. Few lingered for more



than a year in a job they felt wasn't advancing their skills and leadership capabilities. Most had changed jobs at least a dozen times, and through many different professions, companies and countries. It was a clear lesson: the successful and fulfilled show the initiative to lead their career from the front.

2. Build personal networks

"I was out in Asia with the company," recalled Tim Cobb of his time leading APAC communications at Merrill Lynch. "But I would often visit New York on business and, while I was there, I was taking 40 meetings a week with the people at headquarters, building up my contact list. That makes the difference when a vacancy opens up, of course it does."

It was an approach that soon landed him the role at Group as Merrill Lynch's global head of communications. A decade later, while heading up APAC communications for UBS, he repeated the trick – and in even bolder ways. "In the end, I just got on a plane in Hong Kong and flew to Zurich. I decided to combine a long-proposed skiing holiday with visiting UBS headquarters. That was my first time at HQ. And while there, I basically forced everyone to meet me." Eighteen months later, he was made head of external communications for UBS Group. Career growth is a personal responsibility, and it should be managed as you manage all communications campaigns: by capitalising on your expert powers of persuasion.

3. Take 'handbrake-turns' in your career to develop broader skills

"I'm an evangelist for saying 'Yes' to new challenges," Mark Devadason told us. "I couldn't be doing the not-

for-profit work I'm doing now – liaising between industries and professions – if I didn't have a great diversity of experience in my own background." Many interviewees talked with great passion, even zealotry, about the benefits of taking radical 'handbrake turns' in their careers that more conservative careerists might balk at. Most had jumped between agency and in-house work. Several had taken up completely new challenges – tax lobbying, marketing, training, starting their own agencies.

Devadason went from core banking roles at Standard Chartered Bank to become global head of training; from there back into retail banking, country CEO positions and, ultimately, through more contortions, to become head of corporate affairs and sustainability. "Moving around just gives you so many new skills, and that gives you more options further down the line," he argued. "Ultimately, it also gives you better odds of landing by chance in a field that you suddenly find to be a real passion." That is precisely what happened to him: his final corporate role sparked a sudden interest in the topic of sustainability, and he now happily sits as a non-executive director on the board of several charities in the field.

4. Grasp opportunities that appear, don't pass because you're 'waiting for something more comfortable'

A high proportion of those career moves for our interviewees had come about not because they had actively sought out a new position, but because one had come up unexpectedly and they had decided to grab it. Rather than say, "That's outside my comfort zone" or "I'll think about it", these high-achievers had leapt at the opportunity immediately.

"There are not many people who move to the agency side after 13 years in-house," said Ruby Fu, the new CEO

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at Burson-Marsteller China. "But when that opportunity presented itself earlier this year, it was just obvious. Yes, I've taken a calculated risk. But what is that 'risk', really? Only that, if it doesn't work out, I'll go back to corporate communications."

None of our interviewees expressed regrets about opportunities grabbed in an instant – even when they turned out to be false moves. Wesley McDade took an executive job during his early career, before later recognising it as a step too far, too soon. "But here's the thing: as tough as it was, if I had said 'No' to that opportunity in 1998, I would probably still be in Hong Kong

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today, still head of communications for Asia Pacific. I wouldn't have progressed any further in my career. So although it was well outside my comfort zone, I now look back on it as developmental and necessary.”

As David Kneebone pointed out, “the moves that took me the furthest outside my comfort zone were the points where I grew the most.”

5. Be open with people about your career frustrations and goals

One unconventional theme to emerge was our interviewees' habit of sharing their personal ambitions (and frustrations) with the leadership around them.

Joanne Tan, for example, felt she had done all there was to do in corporate communications at HP over a 15-year career. But it was because she was unafraid to share that sense of stagnation with the managing director of HP Asia that, behind the scenes, he went out of his way to create an entirely new role for her: HP Asia's first ever “chief-of-staff.”

Telling top leadership that you are dissatisfied can often be seen as a fast-track to losing your job. But if done in the right way, and with the right people, it can stimulate ideas from people who have an objective view of your skills. They might see more clearly than you how to move you into the role that best fits your talent.

6. Don't underestimate the career value of being in Asia

The two interviewees who have now left Asia to take on global roles had, perhaps, the most objectivity about the value a position in Asia can bring. Looking back, both were clear that it



RUBY FU'S CAREER HISTORY

- CEO China, Burson-Marsteller (Beijing 2016-Present)
- Head of Corporate Affairs, Greater China Region and Hong Kong, Standard Chartered Bank (Hong Kong 2013-2014)
- Head of Corporate Affairs, Hong Kong and Japan, Standard Chartered Bank (Hong Kong 2013-2014)
- Head of Corporate Affairs, Standard Chartered Bank Taiwan (Taiwan 2008-2012)
- Director Corporate Affairs, Philip Morris International (Taiwan 2003-2008)
- Executive Directors, Cloud Gate Dance Foundation (Taiwan 2001-2002)
- Managing Director China, Ogilvy Public Relations worldwide (Shanghai 1998-2000)
- Managing Director Hong Kong and China, Ogilvy Public Relations worldwide (Hong Kong 1996-1998)
- Managing Director Taiwan, Burson-Marsteller Taiwan (Taiwan 1995-1996)
- General Manager, Ogilvy Public Relations Taiwan (Taiwan 1986-1994)

was a professional goldmine. Wesley McDade reflected that being Asia communications lead for Morgan Stanley had given him rare levels of executive access, as senior leaders flying out from headquarters relied on him to guide them around the region. "It's an incredible career opportunity few employees in your organisation will ever get – to be the experienced and knowledgeable 'Sherpa' for the company's top management in unfamiliar terrain," he said. For McDade, it was what led directly to him being offered the job of group head of communications at Morgan Stanley in New York: the company's president, now a personal contact, had put him forward for the open vacancy when it came up.

Sometimes, a career for a multinational in Asia can feel like being at the thin end of a long wedge. But you're also in a region renowned for its work ethic, diversity, complexity and rapid growth. If you put yourself forward for a new job, you present an incredibly compelling story by virtue of having worked in this astonishing region.

7. Remember that you take your skills with you

"It's not that different in many ways," said Tim Nicholls, reflecting on his new life running his own agency after years in in-house corporate communications. "I'm still working with business leaders, I'm still coming up with creative solutions. I still spend my days inside corporations. I haven't gone left or right at a crossroads and shifted direction; it's all an evolution of the same career journey."

The same sentiments were echoed by all our interviewees, whatever their new roles. Change can be daunting. It makes the future unclear. But all of our interviewees – without exception – were adamant about one thing: you should never see a career move as leaving you stranded. "Every time you move on, you bring everything with you," explained Mark Devadason.



MARK DEVADASON'S CAREER HISTORY

- Director, The Mekong Club (Hong Kong 2016-Present)
- Member, Board of Directors, Business for Social Responsibility (Hong Kong 2015-Present)
- Group Head of Regions for Corporate Affairs and Global Head of Sustainability, Standard Chartered Bank (Hong Kong 2010-2015)
- President and CEO, Standard Chartered Bank Thailand (Bangkok 2008-2010)
- CEO Standard Chartered Bank (Tokyo 2003-2008)
- Various management and leadership roles – debt recovery, head of global corporates, (Hong Kong), Group Head of Training for the Wholesale Bank (Singapore), Head of Corporate Banking (Thailand), Group Head of Offshore Banking (Hong Kong), Standard Chartered Bank (1985-2008)

"That's the great thing about a career: it builds. The slate doesn't wipe clean with each move, it just gets richer and more detailed. So the idea of change should never stop you: it should actually drive you on." ●

To preorder a full copy of the Pathways research study, Pathways: Beyond APAC Corporate Communications, head online to www.andrews-partnership.com

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KATRINA ANDREWS
Managing Partner,
Andrews Partnership

Katrina Andrews established Andrews Partnership after four years as a board director at VMA, where she founded VMA Group Asia Pacific with the creation of its Hong Kong and Singapore offices 2011-12. In 2015, Katrina became the first recruitment professional ever-listed in PRWeek's global Power Book 500. Previously, Katrina spent seven years as APAC Managing Director at Melcum, global specialists in internal communications research, where she founded the company's first operations in the region.