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## Why you should read this?

Most applicants aged 25, without a university degree, professional employment or leadership experience have few career options. Read about 8 such women who followed a 3-step process to join McKinsey and BCG, and defy their past.



## Who should read this?

Applicants who have weaker professional profiles due to poor career choices made in the past.

Female applicants from the emerging markets.

Those not possessing undergraduate degrees and therefore any form of graduate education.

Candidates who are 30 years or younger.

Candidates with some work experience on their resume. There is no ideal experience though we find entrepreneurship and social endeavors create the best platform for us to build upon.

Emerging markets candidates are ideal. These candidates tend to get the benefit of the doubt from recruiters.

Single candidates are ideal. The demands of the program and sacrifices are excessive, and married candidates find they invariably neglect personal commitments.

## What steps must you take?

Write out the resume, using the Harvard format, you *would* need when applying to McKinsey about 3 to 5 years from today. This creates a timeline of prioritized milestones and goals.

Remove all non-necessities, costs and time, and focus exclusively on the plan in the resume.

Immediately sign up to an accredited undergraduate program. It may be part-time or evening-based. Major in a pure science, applied science or analytical social science like economics. Finish with highest distinction.

Join a brand-name firm, if you can, but at least aim to show rapid progression in your current role through consistent promotions.

If you possess an undergraduate degree with average grades, a personal turnaround may still be possible. You would need to join a good MBA program and graduate with distinction.

Achieve a GMAT score of 700 or higher.

*Must* lead an exceptional MBA/school endeavor to demonstrate extraordinary leadership skills and differentiate your resume.

# Unemployed to the Big-3

Most applicants aged 25, without a university degree, professional employment or leadership experience have few career options. Read about 8 such women who followed a 3-step process to join McKinsey and BCG, and defy their past.

*Co-written with eight clients including those featured in this article*

Irina<sup>1</sup> did not follow the path of a typical Ukrainian high school graduate. Unlike her peers who studied the arts, economics or mathematics at university, she did not have the luxury of pursuing post-secondary education. She could not afford the opportunity cost. The only child to a widowed and ill mother, she had grown up with the expectation that taking care of her mother was the natural next stage of her life. Therefore, despite graduating 1<sup>st</sup> in her class, she pursued the unlikely path of shunning an essentially free university education to seek full time employment in Ukraine's black-market economy.

Irina openly admits that even if her mother had been healthy and able to work, she was unlikely to have pursued higher education since there was no one advising her of its value. Irina did not have many role models in her life, yet was inspired by US television shows to dream of a life on the US west coast. An option she felt was out of her grasp.

Both her grandfathers had succumbed to alcoholism, and her father had passed away when she was 4

years old – also due to alcoholism. Irina remembers a happier time just after the fall of communism when her father still had hope for the changes to come and tried to keep the family together. Visiting the port as a family and watching the navy battleships sail out was a fond memory of hers, especially since her father always allowed her to eat as much ice cream as she wished. Things changed when he lost his machinist job at a local metal works; a job he had held for over 30 years. He could not handle the loss of his role in the family, their deteriorating fortunes and hopelessness, and quickly drank himself to death. Her mother was ill-equipped to handle the loss. Though educated as a physicist, a poor respiratory system and limited employment opportunities forced her mother to work just 2 days a week at the local technical institute. The salary was far from enough to pay the steep food and heating bills.

After high school, Irina worked for 3 years in informal retail and printing jobs before realizing that working her way to a middle-income lifestyle was not a reasonable plan. She could barely make ends meet on her meagre salary which was not always paid on time, if at all. Her hopes of moving to Moscow were dashed when a close friend recounted the challenges of

finding employment in the metropolis and the stringent permitting system for non-city residents – let alone non-citizens. Irina either needed an education to succeed in Ukraine or to leave Ukraine altogether. Irina became even more resolute about gaining an education.

Again, poor advice led to poor choices further hampering her chances. She was encouraged to pursue vocational studies over an accredited degree. Therefore, by the age of 22 she had completed her engineering trade certification and was earning a small but sufficient salary working as an electrical assistant for an oil services company. She was able to support her mother who was let go due to budget cuts. To Irina, things seemed slightly more promising.

Yet by the age of 24 Irina had had sufficient exposure to visiting European and American technical specialists to realize she had far more potential and she needed to leave Ukraine to enhance her chances of success. Sadly, her technical credentials were not sufficient for any type of US work visa. Irina eventually, after spending over \$500 for visa advice which was basically copy and pasted off the information on the Immigration Canada website, applied to the Canadian government's special-skills visa program for the province of

<sup>1</sup> Due to our commitment to client confidentiality, we have altered some details to protect the client's identity.

Alberta. The province was looking for professionals with trade skills heavily in demand across the burgeoning oil sector – and Irina barely qualified.

She arrived in Canada and had to share a room in a youth hostel which charged her \$50 a night – a staggering sum considering she only arrived with \$870 in cash and Travellers checks for the remainder of the amount required by immigration. The Travellers checks were also issued on borrowed money and she hoped to return them within a month to avoid stiff penalties, which her mother would need to pay. She spent her days at Starbucks – for the free Wi-Fi - scouring ads for any jobs in her field and quickly found a promising role in the booming oil sands industry. Irina had to pay for her own credentials verification process and submit to an extensive background check which took 4 weeks. Sadly for Irina, the company chose to hire someone who was already based in Alberta.

Learning from her mistakes, she moved to Alberta and began the process again, eventually finding an entry-level technical support role. Irina focused on creating a stable income, securing her job and sending money home monthly to help her mother. A disciplined, creative, bright and hard-working employee, Irina was promoted 3 times in 2 years to lead her own electrical reticulation crew. At the age of 26, she was the only non-degree manager and the only female. She was usually the first person on site, the last to leave and was routinely cited for “lacking work-life balance.”

Irina recalls her decisions:

*“Successfully coming to Canada was important. It was my first step to something better. The day before I started working there I had only \$91 in cash left – I celebrated my offer by ordering a hamburger and fries! I couldn’t use the traveller’s checks since the money was borrowed and we needed to pay them off. So I was misleading immigration by carrying the checks with me - it was not my money and I could actually not use it to survive in Canada. When I look back*

*and think about 3 promotions, I am proud of myself. The work was difficult for everyone. Yet, only I needed the money and I had to constantly prove myself. No matter how bad it was I was always the first person on the work site. That is how I earned respect. I was a thin person and I weighed less than 55 kilograms. That did not stop me. Once I dropped my insulated gloves down a tank during an inspection. Rather than calling for help I spent the next minutes turning that screw as fast as I could. I hurt my hands badly from the sub-zero temperatures*

**I felt sick that day. It was like he kicked me in my stomach. I thought everyone was listening to the conversation and thinking: who was this stupid girl...**

*but did not lose my dignity. That is how you earned respect with male operations employees. All the preaching about equal rights meant nothing on the field when it was just you, your all male crew and physical labour.”*

Irina’s typical day meant going to sleep with her cell phone under her pillow and getting up as needed – very quietly so as not to disturb her roommates – if the new distribution lines or converters stopped working. In her worst night she had to lead her crew through a marathon 4 hour assignment to get the distributors online while installing a backup generator during a snowstorm. Irina felt she had finally vanquished the legacy of her poor decisions and was ready to move forward. She believed she was on firmer ground.

During her 2<sup>nd</sup> year at the company, Irina was called into her managers’ office and asked if she would spend time with the McKinsey team benchmarking energy efficiency on the heating and thermal insulator units. Irina’s enthusiasm, quick wit and solid grasp of the business made her a firm favourite among the McKinsey consultants who asked that Irina be allocated more time for their engagement. Irina was soon travelling to meetings at the head

office, validating McKinsey findings, helping with workshops and guiding the team’s hunt for important data.

Irina was easily bitten by the consulting bug. This was the life she wanted – “helping large companies fix big problems and making a tangible impact each and every day,” a desire she did not know she had until working with the consultants. She *could* not imagine a future fixing electrical generators at 3am in the middle of the Albertan expanse in sub-zero temperatures.

Irina used her performance on the McKinsey engagement - overwhelmingly positive feedback from her operations manager and McKinsey team - as validation that she could do the work and would fit into the McKinsey culture. Over lunch on the final day of the engagement, Irina politely broached the subject of applying. She was excited and thrilled with the prospect of getting ahead. The engagement manager, who felt Irina was an exceptional employee and liked her, gently explained that Irina needed at least a recognized undergraduate degree and possibly an MBA. Although he tried to let her down easily, Irina was crushed.

Irina recalls her emotions on the day:

*“I felt sick that day. It was like he kicked me in my stomach. I thought everyone was listening to the conversation and thinking: who was this stupid girl who did not even know what McKinsey needed? I could not eat and wanted to just go home and hide in my room. If I had known my technical training was so limiting I would not have done it. The money was good but at least I could have studied part-time and not wasted so much of my life. Good advice was the most essential requirement for graduates in Ukraine and we did not have it. I*

*made so many mistakes because I just did not know better.”*

In that moment Irina felt the desperation of her situation. She was 26, never had a childhood, had worked her entire life and had been rapidly promoted at a Fortune 100 company to the position of crew leader. Yet she had no degree and no way forward. She had a vocational qualification which would make her an outstanding operations crew member but would never allow her into management, let alone management consulting.

Irina did not have the luxury of going back to school, had limited funds to go back even if she wanted to and had no plan out of her predicament. She had reached her ceiling and dreaded the thought of becoming an operations specialist while her peers and friends were given greater opportunities, largely due to their degrees.

In that time, it dawned on her that she would likely never wear a suit, she would never get the type of respect the McKinsey consultants immediately garnered and never know the feeling of having achieved something others felt was significant.

At that moment Irina decided to use her savings and embarked on what we call a “personal turnaround.” What this meant in practice was that Irina would need to rebuild her resume, and life, from scratch while navigating three atypical obstacles.

First, she had to simultaneously maintain her existing fulltime work commitments while playing catch-up on education and skills.

Second, Irina would need to complete this turnaround in a much shorter time frame because she was starting 8 years later and had to accelerate the process to catch up to her peers.

Third, her achievements needed to be stellar to compensate for her earlier mistakes – parity to her peers was not an option. This is not easy to do, even with the best guidance.

Irina was the first of these “personal turnarounds” undertaken by our firm. It was an unproven and risky career

strategy which could only be executed over an arc extending 2 to 3 years. The phrase we use for this kind of career strategy is “parking a super tanker in a swimming pool.” There is zero-margin for error as the displacement on her life would be dramatic.

Irina’s quest to turnaround her professional life led to her working full-time while completing her undergraduate degree at night over 2 years, ultimately graduating with a 3.90 GPA – a distinction. The day she wrote her final undergraduate exam, Irina went home and signed up for the GMAT. Over the next 6 months Irina wrote her GMAT, prepared her MBA applications and entered a ranked MBA program.

Though, there were many stops, starts, mistakes and stumbles along the way, Irina’s bold determination and fear of failure ensured that she stayed the course – a very challenging course.

Just over 3 years after she began her personal turnaround Irina was hired by a Big-3 consulting firm.

Given the accelerated pace of events over the last 3 years, it is not altogether surprising that Irina has only recently had time to reflect on her multi-year journey and understand the significance of what she accomplished.

How did she change the trajectory of her life 180 degrees when conventional wisdom said it was impossible to do so?

It was largely due to having a truthful view on the critical path she needed to follow to recreate the foundation for management consulting missing in her profile, and her unprecedented stamina in following through on this critical path of her plan.

Irina’s experiences, common to less than 3% of clients, shows why such personal turnarounds are possible but require an unusual set of skills and sustained determination to execute the plan. It also illustrates the importance of focusing on the basics and not lowering ambition when the journey becomes tougher. This article examines the three phases of Irina’s journey.

## Are you a personal turnaround candidate?

It is important to understand whom we classify as personal turnaround clients. In its simplest definition, these are clients who, through no fault of their own, need to have their professional lives rebuilt from the ground up. These are clients who do not *initially* fit the McKinsey profile because they have *material gaps* in their skills and education.

They tend to lack the necessary degree/s, are usually older than their peer group, overwhelmingly female and/or are usually, though not always, from emerging economies. A very important element for personal turnaround clients discussed in this article is that they *should* possess an undergraduate degree and/or MBA, which they typically do not. The implication is that the process of fixing these gaps occurs over 2 to 5 years, through obtaining these degrees. Personal turnarounds never occur in less than 2 years.

The obvious dilemma when meeting such applicants who loosely fit the profile for a personal turnaround is trying to identify if they are indeed a victim of their circumstance.

This is *the* crucial distinction.

If they are not a victim of their circumstances, then to what extent did they make decisions knowing it would harm their career chances? If they had made harmful career decisions in the past, how likely are they to repeat this harmful pattern in the future?

Candidates who struggled despite their best efforts are the ideal candidates, versus candidates who struggled in spite of appropriate support. Our experience indicates that asking three questions about past decisions can help us isolate the ideal candidate.

*(1) Did they actively seek out the best advice they could find?*

Drive is innate. It is fundamentally difficult to transplant this human characteristic into a candidate. It is different from hope, which is the desire for something better or ambition, which is also the desire for something better. Drive refers to the willingness to act on hope and ambition. We find that ideal candidates for a personal turnaround push and tug at every morsel of information, support and advice they can find. They leverage every basis of advantage available to them and do not hesitate to ask for help. The crucial point is that they had access to poor, or insufficient, information rather than failing to adequately use the material available to them.

One client, we will call Ang, was such a person. She was studying in an unranked school in South East Asia and did not allow disinterest from her career counsellor to stop her. Despite her counsellor having never heard of McKinsey and his repeated attempts to talk her out of applying to consulting firms, Ang went all the way to the Dean's office to encourage the school to at least contact the firm and determine her degree eligibility to apply. Ang could have easily accepted the career counsellor's selfish desire to not help her. Yet she chose to push through. She was active in finding the best information to guide her.

*(2) Did they use this information to the best of their abilities?*

Once a candidate obtains advice, they need to act on it. This is another manifestation of drive. In one case, we spent 40 crucial minutes in a screening interview understanding why an applicant, we will call Ina, at a Latvian uni-

versity, performed so poorly in her final economics paper, which took her GPA equivalency below 3.5. By her admission, Ina had been told grades were important so it was vital we understood why she did not appropriately act on that advice.

Was it her choice or was she a victim of circumstances?

In probing Ina's decision, we learned her final econometrics paper was based on material taught in a recommended text book that was never discussed in class. Her course professor had repeatedly warned the class beforehand that access to the textbook would be vital to understand the economic theories required for the paper. Ina made the conscious decision to not buy the textbook which retailed for approximately US\$20. The month over which she should have worked on the paper, Ina went on a weeklong vacation with friends and spent approximately \$500 on the trip for food, room and travel. It was apparent that she was consciously prioritizing her personal happiness versus focusing on her grades.

Given Ina's situation, she needed strong grades, she could not afford to do both.

Ina's decision should not be judged since it is a personal choice.

Yet, it does indicate that in the face of the evidence provided that grades matter, Ina made choices which led to actions deprioritizing her studies. Candidates who consciously make decisions not to maximise the advice provided lack internal drive. They are pursuing short-term utility over long-term value creation. For many students this may very well be fine, but for clients like Irina, there is no room to do this. That is why the situation is unique for

personal turnaround clients.

Given that a turnaround lasts approximately 2-5 years and requires stamina, discipline and motivation, applicants like Ina have exhibited past behaviour which indicates they are unlikely to succeed, even with the best advice.

*(3) Can they follow the career strategy developed for them?*

The previous two questions assume the advice the candidate is receiving may or may not be appropriate. This uncertainty naturally impacts a candidate's drive. Many candidates are unwilling to invest the time required since they are unsure of the quality of the advice they are receiving. In the third question we must strip away this uncertainty by analysing the candidate's profile and briefly discussing a significant initiative they would likely need to undertake to improve their profile. We, thereafter analyse their response.

We once interviewed a candidate whom we will call, Nelda. She did and said all the right things until we pointed out the initiatives she would need to undertake. We discussed the requirement for her to either launch a publication during her studies or launch a start-up. Nelda's resume lacked leadership and needed such an initiative to increase her profile's attractiveness. Nelda's response was indicative of her likely future trajectory in the program. Rather than understanding the rationale for the suggestion, Nelda spent 35 minutes explaining why it would be too much work, why other students do not do the same things and why it could not be done.

We openly admit that effort and time must be invested to

explain suggestions to candidates, and the ideas may very well not be the best in these early screening sessions. Yet that was not the focal point for our concern. The focal point was Nelda's *default* view that everything was impossible to do. She did not have an open mind and was mentally unwilling to even explore such a possibility.

A personal turnaround is very challenging. The hours are intense over years, stamina becomes a major problem and there will be major bumps. A candidate who is unwilling to open her mind at the beginning of the program will maintain a defensive posture throughout the program. In other words, the candidate does not do anything unless they are forced to do it.

Irina recalls her own experiences:

*"I pursued a 2 year MBA but it felt more like a 1-year program. I was very tired having worked minimum 18 hour days to focus on my career and studies and then jumping straight into my MBA without a break. My friends would talk about the vacations they took before the MBA and I had nothing to say – because I was reading and catching up. I lied about having a social life. My MBA was hard because I did not have a strong business background and needed to translate everything from English to Russian and back into English. I was networking and building my understanding of consulting. I was trying to compress, into a very short time period, things all my peers took for granted. The first time someone mentioned the Harvard Business Review, I had to Google it! I had no choice to follow the advice I was receiving – there was no time to argue about it. All my questions were about executing the ideas. I had to trust the advice.*

### Phase I: Seeing the truth for what it is

*Building confidence without pressure:* Clients going through a personal turnaround suffer from an almost paralyzing lack of confidence – though they demonstrate an astonishingly overwhelming outward display of confidence. While their actions appear to be stridently confident to peers, *what* they do is far less important than *why* they do it. They engage in seemingly confident behaviour due to the need to not fail, rather than a natural ability to respond in a confident way. In other words, it is a significant act of will power, concentration, sacrifices and determination for them to present this image.

One client would spend all night preparing all her MBA cases, reading *all* the exhibits, preparing her notes, going through all assigned readings and challenging her colleagues in class – even when she was the lone voice of dissent in a class of mostly males. When asked why she did this, she recounted that she did not want to be average in life – she would rather die. What made her look confident to outsiders was an inherent belief she was average and needed to break free from this.

A common mistake typically occurs when these candidates are mentored by career counsellors, friends or peers. The client's relative lack of early success may erroneously lead many to conclude that they lack ambition, intelligence or the capacity to work diligently. They are routinely admonished for their lack of success and told to work harder. This is extremely damaging advice which causes far more harm than good. These clients are very receptive to criticism and respond by working even longer hours, yet without a clear idea of what needs to change. The end result is a fatigued candidate who will have little to show for the additional work because they simply worked harder, hoping to improve, but having no plan to do so.

The insight is that these candidates

underperform not because they lack ability, but because they lack direction. It is myth that exposing them to greater pressure will force them to magically reinvent themselves. They lack confidence since they are far more critical of their actions than any outside review could ever be. Therefore, more pressure or criticism is pointless and damaging. These clients respond best to inspiration and motivation. In a sense, they need to be cocooned from pressure and given a very clear roadmap.

The important preparation strategy for these candidates is to find a strong mentor who can reduce the pressure points and work on building their confidence. One simple way to do this is to simply point out what they need to do to improve. They need to be *gently* given information on how to prepare. In our experience, the environment must be created where it is *expected* the client will be successful in obtaining an offer, and therefore, no attention should be drawn to the issue. If the client notices any concerns, their internal criticism goes into overdrive which hurts their performance.

Irina remembers this part of the process:

*"I would spend hours on the internet finding forums and articles about strategy and finance. I was very excited about my findings and shared them all the time with my coach. I was once asked why I read the blog of person so and so, and why I did not read the Harvard Business Review, Capital Ideas or the McKinsey Quarterly. My answer was that I did not know these were the best publications to read. I was encouraged to read the work of the best thinkers who were at the frontier of their fields. On another occasion I forwarded Economist articles on new finance and strategy studies. I was gently corrected and asked why I trusted the Economist so much that I read their opinions on someone else's research - I should have read the original studies and formed my own opinions. These were obvious things but I never before would have considered doing them. The low stress environment helped me because*

*I don't think I could handle any more stress. My heart was hurting and my hands were shaking after some classes so anything more would tip me over."*

An alternative, though rare, response to a lack of confidence is a yearning to fit in. Turnaround clients may appear too eager at times and are predisposed to volunteer for as many activities as possible in the hope of creating friends. While this is not a significant problem, carefully managing it is important to limit excessive commitments which could hurt their grades.

*Benchmarking against the best:* Suffering from such low levels of confidence, these clients tend to consider themselves unworthy of comparisons to peers in schools like Harvard etc., assuming they are MBA clients. They tend to believe they need to acquire more skills and/or credentials before they can compare themselves.

One client refused to consider her non-Ivy league MBA comparable to that of her friends at Wharton despite having a better resume and performing better at consulting cases. During her interviews, she was unable to explain the value of her profile relative to that of her friends, because in her mind, there was no additional value – despite all evidence to the contrary.

Without careful guidance these clients get trapped in a dangerous arms race to build credentials since it gives them comfort and feeds their yearning for respect. They incorrectly assume more degrees will change their perception of *themselves*. Many clients refer to a lack of unconditional support from family, during the developmental years of their life before the age of 15, as a reason for their low confidence levels.

The tangible value of proper benchmarking is very important. Only by knowing their real competitors' strengths, can a candidate adequately prepare. This benchmarking process will, gently, introduce realism to the journey.

Many clients do not take the time to analyse their peers' resumes to extract their real versus perceived strengths.

An interesting experiment we run for these clients is to take the resumes of 10 clients – sanitize them – and remove the name of the school and ask the client to select who joined McKinsey. They are surprised when we point out that the resumes which were successful originated from schools with a perceived lower standing in rankings. This exercise helps personal turnaround clients critically evaluate their biases for brand names. This is important for building confidence because they now can see proof that they have attractive profiles.

*Parity is insufficient:* Clients in this segment have, for lack of a better word, wasted large periods of their lives. Therefore, merely being as good as their competitors in *this* stage of their lives is almost certainly insufficient to compensate for past weaknesses. Some of these gaps are significant. Irina, for example, had three years of basic office administrative experience and possessed an undergraduate degree completed via night classes. These are hardly credentials to impress a consulting firm or consulting client.

Candidates who succeed with their personal turnarounds *must* reach parity on grades against the top students. Grades are vital since these candidates are typically graduating from a relatively weaker school for their undergraduate degree and will need to focus on grades and exceptional leadership in their MBA programs. For reasons mentioned earlier, it is difficult for these clients to enter elite schools for their MBA. Irina, for example, studied at a top twenty school in the USA but was declined at Stanford, Harvard and Wharton.

Exceptional leadership never means being the vice-president, leading any prescribed studies/courses, *planning* a start-up, or leading a case competition team. For these clients, it means creating something which is guaranteed to impress a recruiter. For example, Irina planned, wrote the code, built and sold her start-up while completing her MBA.

Irina recalls this accomplishment:

*"I was content to be VP of the Consulting Club, join a social organization and maybe lead one of the leadership tours around the inner city – travelling abroad like everyone else was out on my budget and strict agenda. Everyone was doing these kinds of things and I assumed it was normal. I simply never considered pursuing anything else. I found my advice was different from everyone else but followed it since we were so far into the journey. I asked for lots of advice on what I needed to do and pushed really hard to execute it – I wanted to quit many, many times because it was so hard to do everything. And not a single person in my class had such a crazy agenda. Selling the start-up was not part of the plan – we had never planned for this to happen since it was not possible to build a roadmap into that – but the unexpected cherry on the top. It was a small sum, but enough to help pay for my MBA and differentiated me from my peers."*

In another example, a client, Dinara, worked with a professor in the school of law to launch a peer-reviewed periodical on M&A law focused on start-ups in the region. She served as the editor and this successful periodical has now become an on-going publication at the business school.

These are not parity leadership roles. They are knock-out punches when it comes to leadership. They compensate for past mistakes and gaps.

This is where benchmarking is vital. If Irina and Dinara had benchmarked themselves against mediocre schools or mediocre students at good schools, Irina may have settled at *merely* writing a winning business plan and

### View the photo-essay

Two photo-essays capture a typical day-in-the-life of Irina in Donetsk, Ukraine. The photos depict her old apartment, daily routine, family milestones, employment history and schooling. All photos can be viewed in the online version of this article

Dinara could have settled at launching an email newsletter. They did not, because they benchmarked themselves against their leading peers at the best schools and saw what good looks like at these schools.

Given the effort required by personal turnaround clients, the primary objective is for them to build sustainable assets on their resume. To determine if an initiative is worth undertaking, they need to ask one question only:

Will this enhance my resume in 10 or 15 years?

If the answer is “no”, they should never do it. Any effort requires discipline, stamina, planning and focus to do just a few things which matter. It is better to have led one meaningful initiative of significance than multiple mediocre efforts which take up space in a resume, for the sake of meeting a resume submission sample. In a well-known example of undertaking roles of significance, President Barack Obama’s abbreviated resume continues

successful crowd-funding website<sup>2</sup> which delivered the US mayor of a medium-sized town back to the mayor’s mansion despite predictions he would be crushed by well-funded oppositions. She was the “government girl.”

These types of goals look intimidating and tough to accomplish because they are. They require significant effort, time, planning, stamina and ingenuity to execute. That is why this is called a turnaround. All clients in Irina’s position who successfully managed a personal turnaround were able to develop clear points of differentiation during their studies.

*Setting a clear strategy:* In Irina’s case, while completing her undergraduate degree, she worked in the field as needed and typically more than 15 hours a day. She would thereafter go home and study for her exams to complete her undergraduate degree. Given her background, she had to finish with excellent grades. Irina, therefore, had no free time and was juggling multiple priorities.

## Strategy is a matter of choice and a career strategy is no different. Not being seduced by common misconceptions is essential.

to list his role as editor of the Harvard Law Review: one asset of significance which is sustainable in adding value to his personal brand even after he took the highest office in the land.

None of the personal turnaround clients studied at the Ivy Leagues but they built resume assets of greater significance.

*Set a clear point of differentiation:* Clients in this segment typically have no basis of differentiation which is memorable. They lack a spike. The activities they undertake, usually in their studies, must provide this point of differentiation. In Irina’s case she was the oil and gas lady who built an oil analyses start-up and sold it. In Dinara’s case she was simply the editor of a law review, which she founded. For another client, she developed the wholly suc-

cessful crowd-funding website<sup>2</sup> which delivered the US mayor of a medium-sized town back to the mayor’s mansion despite predictions he would be crushed by well-funded oppositions. She was the “government girl.”

*Irina recalls her Christmas vacations: “I had no time to travel anywhere, and not a lot of money even if I wanted to. Once I started this journey I spent every weekend and holiday studying. I had friends but did not want to impose on their families and felt if I visited, it would be rude to spend just an hour or two and leave. My Christmas dinner was taking a 2 hour break to eat canned turkey slices while watching TV. What gave me a lot of hope was that the strategy we had developed was working. I was able to finish my undergraduate degree with a high GPA and get into a very good MBA program. My resume was getting attention from the consulting firms and*

<sup>2</sup> We have used more start-up examples since the other examples are difficult to describe without divulging the identity of the client.

*I was killing myself closing out the last parts of the plan.”*

We asked clients in this segment what they *would* have done if they did not have access to a clear strategy: in other words, if they were working independently. Unanimously, they indicated they would be forced to seek out as much information as possible, constantly evaluate their plans and make adjustments which they were not sure would be of any use. In other words, they would waste precious time they did not have, analysing information of questionable value.

We find the clients who perform best follow a disciplined strategy set at the beginning. This allows them to give all their energy to the critical items and ignore the significant time commitment required to filter new rumours and suggestions from friends and colleagues.

Strategy is a matter of choice and a career strategy is no different. Not being seduced by common misconceptions is essential.

## Phase 2: Execution of the plan is essential

*Grades matter:* Grades are important, especially for personal turnarounds. Given all the gaps in the resume, the client cannot show any further deficiencies. Weaker grades will make the process of exceeding parity that much more difficult. Across the clients in this segment, we find they all obtained exceptional grades of 3.7 to 4.0 GPAs for their undergraduate degrees and 3.7 to 4.0 GPAs for their MBAs. Though none of them graduated from recognized schools for their undergraduate degrees or completed their MBAs at the Ivy league schools, they all graduated with distinctions.

Attending a lesser known school is fine provided clients graduate with high GPAs. A weak GPA from a weaker school raises concerns about the quality of the candidate. These are question marks turnaround clients can ill afford.

Grades are so important that our



clients go to extraordinary lengths to secure them. One client would drive to work 2 hours earlier than needed, to avoid traffic, and study in her car before she was scheduled to start her shift. She would allocate at least 1 hour each night to prepare even though she only returned home from the office at 10pm each night.

*Separate fun from the equation:* The social element of studying is important, but the degree and necessity is different for every student. Candidates going through a personal turnaround do not study to have fun or socialize. They are trying to wipe out a career deficit they had built up over many years, lack the formative experiences of colleagues and are typically older. They do not have the time to socialize as much since they have higher priority assets/skills to acquire versus the skills/assets gained from socializing. In other words, the gap to close is so large that socializing is only possible if they decide to give up on the targets set at the beginning. Given how far they have come and how close they are to their objectives, no client is willing to do this. If they did, they would almost certainly not complete the turnaround.

Clients who underwent a personal turnaround *unanimously* agreed that they never enjoyed any part of their studies. It was a horrible experience for them. Most were compressing their undergraduate degrees and MBAs so they had no rest period nor they did have much time to apply their undergraduate study material before pursuing an MBA. English is typically a second language and one client had to spend 3 hours *every* night translating her cases before she could even begin her class preparation.

Irina recalls her experiences:

*“Word quickly spread through the class that I would not attend any parties so I never received many invites. I attended one birthday party for a friend and that was it. I only stayed for 1 hour. I received great advice to focus on the second half of the first year, since many students give up trying to go for grades after trying and*

*failing to get good grades in the first half of the year. They realize it is too hard and just stop. I tried to pace myself but suffered a little even though I met the tough grades bar set. I was always sleepy, hungry, tired and my hands would shake in class. Yet, I kept going because we were so close. I received promising responses from every consulting firm and that inspired me to push through.”*

*Poorly managing fatigue:* Personal turnaround clients almost always pursue their goals at the expense of their health. Having grown up in typically poor countries, with limited opportunities and having struggled for a long time, they are unwilling to allow anything to derail their single remaining avenue to a different life. This leads to the dark side of ambition.

One client's, who we will call Alana, lack of sleep, intense self-generated pressure and lack of confidence slowly caught up with her during her spring break. While her peers were away with family and friends, vacationing and recuperating, Alana holed herself away in a meeting room for eleven straight days and began practising the cases we had taught her. She would arrive at 8am every morning, usually the only person in the building, work until 1pm EST, eat greasy food for lunch, and continue working until 11pm before heading back to her shared apartment. In the prior 2 years, Alana had not taken a *single* day off – including weekends. She soon started experiencing heart pains and was diagnosed with palpitations. Her excessive work load and poor diet had clearly exacerbated the problem. Things came to a head when Alana soon thereafter started fainting repeatedly. Turnaround clients like Alana rationalize that they cannot go to a doctor due to a lack of time. Although Alana met her goal of obtaining an offer from an elite strategy firm, she did so at great cost to her health: the real impact of which she is yet to experience.

We find that even in the face of such medical diagnoses, personal turnaround clients are unwilling to step

off the accelerator. That is the danger of candidates who have too much internal drive. Having been given a clear strategy to the top with a defined expiry date, they are unwilling to back down until they literally drop.

### Learn from Alana's experiences

Alana has created a group on the Firmsconsulting website called “The Women Premium” where she has uploaded all the case notes she used to prepare for her case interviews. Readers are welcome to join her group, ask questions, post your own stories, share your notes and download her notes.

Clients in this position must redesign their plan and re-prioritize their initiatives. They tend to assume that working at every possible moment, even when they are extremely exhausted, generates an incremental benefit, even when the evidence points to the contrary. A good strategy is to understand the objectives for each initiative and stop working once it has been achieved.

Irina discussed her own experiences:

*“Working on my start-up was brutal on me because my team let me down. Five colleagues quickly signed up and that made me happy. I very quickly learned they were just interested in the idea of being in a start-up. They were not interested in the process of starting up. Nothing allocated to them was completed. After many delays and poorly written documents, I took over and started doing everything myself. My coach guided me through the process of taking back control and I pushed through. I fell into the trap of perfecting my code and building a complex business model while my coach pushed me into a lean model. I found this to be beneficial and the reason I could get a working version out by the time of the MBA hackathon. My version wanted to fix everything, while my coach decided on fixing just one simple problem in the oil data processing centres and doing it very well. That reduced*

*objective helped me. I only had so many hours in the day and my grades were a major priority.*

Irina's challenge is typical of these clients. They tend to focus on perfection, by defining perfection to be everything. Yet they quickly adjust when given good advice.

*Empresses of ethics:* Given what is at stake for personal turnaround clients, they could be forgiven for cutting corners, crossing ethical grey lines or even outright cheating. If ever there could be ideal candidates for having a convenient excuse to commit such acts, it would be them. Yet they do not, not even on little things.

One client, we will call her Sonja, once requested advice on a dilemma she faced. Sonja was the typically diligent turnaround client who wanted to extract everything from her experience. She had actually read her MBA ethics manual and understood what was permitted and was not permitted. The manual forbade students from using "any external material including internet sources" when preparing for case discussions. Sonja recounted that all students were using online sources to prepare for the class discussions, but she felt this was against the MBA code of ethics. Sonja correctly reasoned that, merely because the university was not currently prosecuting such behaviour, even though it was blatant and rampant, did not imply the university waived the right to prosecute such behaviour in the future.

She surmised that it was better to obtain a slightly lower grade than obtain a marginally higher grade while having to live with the slight risk of being investigated in the future and having her degree withdrawn.

The 2012 Harvard cheating scandal raises this dilemma and outlines the consequences. Merely because a dishonest act by students is rampant and condoned through lack of disciplinary action, does not imply such action may never occur. Turnaround candidates tend to have excessive values and believe anything which tarnishes their

hard earned reputation and achievements are not worth the risk.

Another client, who we will call Emma, was interviewed by McKinsey and asked how much she explicitly knew about the company. Rather than misrepresenting herself, she politely explained she had never met anyone in the firm before but had extensively read about the company on its website and in magazines, and could cite specific reasons why she believed she was a good fit. She also diplomatically reminded the firm, shrewdly, that the interview process was an opportunity for her to learn more about the organization and determine if a fit truly existed. This answer clearly resonated with the interviews since she was successful despite great odds.

Personal turnaround clients are not empresses of ethics. They do not go through life knowing what the correct decision is or, when they do know, calmly avoiding the less painful path. Knowing that an easy option exists is extremely seductive and they constantly debate the merits and risks of taking such action. Yet they almost always chose the ethical path because the potential cost to them is too high. Their peers may have fall back plans if their studies are not successful, but turnaround clients typically have none – they are the fall back plan for their entire family.

The honesty of personal turnaround clients is refreshing to most consulting firms who typically meet applicants confusing arrogance for confidence and who are predisposed to offering diluted answers rather than answering truthfully. This honesty, because it is sincere, allows them to build strong bonds with their interviewers and sometimes obtain new interviews where an initial attempt may prove unsuccessful.

*Networking helps, if done correctly:* Given the initial low levels of self-confidence, these clients are typically unwilling and unable to network with partners. Ironically, this occurs at the final stage of the personal turnaround

when they are merely two steps – interview invite and offer – away from achieving their objective. This inherent lack of confidence plays itself out in two ways.

First, they tend to place an excessive emphasis on tangible assets like grades. They would rather spend hours learning a concept which increases their GPA from 3.75 to 3.80 versus investing time in initiatives to obtain an interview. They believe grades can never be taken away from them while the value of a network can deteriorate in time.

Second, we find these clients tend to assume networking is simply the process of submitting their details to secure an interview. They do not appreciate that taking the time upfront to slowly build a relationship will lead to a higher probability of receiving an invite when the application is submitted.

We have found that the best way to manage this is to encourage starting the networking process during the first 2 months of classes, when the workload is less strenuous and most of their colleagues are not focused on recruitment.

Irina remembers her experience:

*"I was never able to get the point of networking until it was almost too late. It seemed obvious to me that good grades would get me the interview. It took a lot of energy from my coach to explain why I needed to network, why I needed to start networking so early and why grades, by themselves, were required, but insufficient to garner interviews.*

### Behind the feature

Irina and Michael discuss the article, the lessons and the objective for this feature piece. Both writers hold different opinions on the lessons. Michael takes a cautionary view on the lessons which can be applied for women in similar situations, while Irina offers a more expansive interpretation of her journey.

*When I look back this was the one part I should have done much better. I am still learning how to build relationships and not assume that people will like me because I am good at my job. It is my biggest weakness.”*

### Phase 3: Managing the interview process

*Accept you are now a new person:* During a McKinsey interview, a personal turnaround client whom we will call, Nargiz, was doing an exceptional job of structuring the case and communicating her recommendations. It was a difficult case and her performance was all the more striking. Impressed, the interviewer wanted to test her management skills and asked Nargiz how she would structure the work plan if she had a business analyst supporting her. Although an unusual McKinsey case request, it does occur and when it happens, should be treated like a standard case question.

Nargiz handled the question well. She drew on her personal discipline and work ethic to construct the correct work plan. In fact, she found some creative ways to reduce the overlap of work between the teams and could articulately explain how she would manage the team. The interviewer was very impressed with Nargiz’s intellect, commitment and intensity. He gave her the highest marks for her structuring skills, communication and analytic abilities.

Yet, Nargiz was declined because her work plan for her team ignored the time away from the office for weekends. By omitting this, Nargiz had indirectly assumed the teams would work on weekends; a practice frowned upon at McKinsey.

In Nargiz’s mind, she had made no mistakes and should be rewarded for her thinking. She had performed better than others and felt her commitment, dedication and intellect were sufficiently superior that such an oversight on planning could have been overlooked. She was bitterly disappointed to learn much weaker peers

received offers. To understand why McKinsey does not overlook such issues, we need to go back to Nargiz’s lack of confidence – a major stumbling block for clients involved in a personal transformation.

The issue comes down to the *difference* between what Nargiz *thinks* the interviewer sees when he looks at her and what he actually sees.

By the time of the interview Nargiz’s personal turnaround is almost complete. Her resume will be exceptional against 99% of all applicants. In fact, personal turnaround clients tend to have the best resumes, given the effort made to alter their career trajectories, and do not struggle obtaining interviews. Nargiz has also been carefully trained to handle all types of case interviews, speak with poise and communicate confidently. That is indeed what the interviewer sees. He sees a confident and articulate leader who is mature enough to be given the opportunity to mentor and guide younger analysts, and possibly her peers as well.

Yet that is not what Nargiz thinks the interviewer sees and Nargiz responds to what she *thinks* the interviewer sees.

Nargiz is still driven by an innate lack of confidence and *thinks* this lack of confidence is what the interviewer sees. She therefore, mistakenly, does things to try to placate the interviewer and compensate for artificial weaknesses.

First, she assumes she is still the pre-turnaround Nargiz who needs to constantly prove herself and is not worthy of leading others. Therefore, she constructs a work plan to demonstrate *her* stamina and *her* intellect when these are not in question. She is so focused on her self-generated inadequacies that she ignores her role of building a work plan to both manage and nurture her team of analysts. Her plan will ultimately lead to burn-out for her team. Nargiz fails to realize that not everything is about her.

Second, she is emotionally confused that she is even worthy of the role and is constantly wondering if the inter-

viewer is wondering the same thing: will he figure out she is a fraud and does not deserve his time? She tries to over compensate on *her* performance so that no one focuses on *her* lack of performance. She feels if her performance is investigated people will quickly realize she does not deserve to be there.

Nargiz’s action to overcompensate for her erroneous understanding of her self-worth is what sabotages her. It is that simple.

This affliction, the neurotic impostor,<sup>3</sup> afflicts many credible and highly capable executives, not to mention all personal turnaround clients.

To fix this problem positive and negative reinforcement must be provided by her coach.

The coach must encourage Nargiz to take the time to reflect on how far she has come in the last 2 years:

Completing her undergraduate degree with distinction.

Getting into a competitive MBA program.

Completing her MBA with distinction.

Launching a start-up successfully and securing funding.

She is *not* the same person who started this journey. Crucially, she must avoid comparing her reality to the projected image her peers always generate of themselves. Comparing her unflattering internal feelings with the carefully crafted projections of others is an unfair comparison. Nargiz will always feel like a failure if she does this.

Nargiz must *no longer* be praised for her hard work and ability to overachieve by burning up her time, energy and resources. The turnaround is over and she must now be treated like any other outstanding client. She must be encouraged to rest, focus on her personal interests and be encouraged to measure productivity and not output. During the turnaround clients focus

<sup>3</sup> *The Dangers of Feeling Like a Fake* by Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries, Harvard Business Review, September 2005

on output, even if productivity drops.

The shift from output to productivity is a vital shift to understand.

Personal turnaround clients tend to be so enamoured with their successes at the end of the program that they tend to forget how *unproductive* they had been in achieving their goals. During the turnaround, Nargiz would have poured resources – time, effort and even finances – to achieve her objectives. Even if Nargiz was taking 9 hours to study for an exam to generate a 90% grade, it would not matter if her peers were studying just 2 hours to generate the same grade. Nargiz's strategy was to achieve grade parity with the best students.

This is not a sustainable strategy and always leads to burnout. The essence of a personal turnaround is about deploying significant, usually excessive, input to get a fixed output. That fixed output is an offer at McKinsey. Once that objective is close to being achieved, Nargiz should focus on finding ways to reduce her inputs to simply maintain her achievements, while avoiding burnout.

The most significant way a coach or mentor can demonstrate that Nargiz is past the turnaround phase is to carefully listen to Nargiz's opinion and make a material change to the program based on *her* suggestion. This sends a clear signal that Nargiz is now considered a peer and does not have to burn up every resource to be heard.

### Ending a turnaround

*Dismantling the wartime controls:* A personal turnaround client, whom we shall call Samira, frequently referred to her journey as a war. Samira would use war analogies to describe various initiatives in the program.

Samira was correct. She was at war and we run personal turnarounds in such a manner.

Productivity is sacrificed. Personal liberties and luxuries are withheld for the greater good. Samira would count her money during lunch time during her MBA to ensure she could pay

**Take time each year to reflect on skills gaps, opportunities and limitations. Benchmark against the best peers in the firm and life, who are striving for the same objective with similar resources: context is important.**

for extra lessons. She was enormously proud of only spending 5 dollars over lunch. Over the three years of her turnaround, she never once visited her parents in Central Europe nor did she take a vacation. All her privileges were rationed, usually wholly eliminated, and Samira did not permit herself to take an evening away from her studies, reading or case preparation.

The unforeseen problem is that some clients forget these are special circumstances requiring special treatment. The intense approach deployed during a personal turnaround will hurt a client unless it is dismantled immediately thereafter. Clients who try to maintain the same strategy after leaving the program always suffer from burnout.

We find clients can adopt five best-practices to dismantle the personal turnaround “wartime” controls while still pursuing ambitious career agendas.

*Take a vacation.* Turnaround clients must realize they were successful since they had a coach mapping out their strategy. Going forward, they must develop the skills and creativity to self-generate their own career roadmaps. Taking a vacation forces them off the treadmill and allows self-reflection to start plotting their own careers versus merely being fast-followers of a coach's advice.

*Set one or two big goals.* Do not assume a career will magically blossom at McKinsey and thereafter. Have a clear objective for time at the firm and a clear objective of what will be extracted from the experience.

*Create a powerful network.* Actively cultivate and curate a network of influential and supportive mentors to guide development and provide direct feedback.

*You are your friends.* Develop superior judgment in evaluating others' potential, using demanding standards

for leadership and integrity. Surround yourself with the type of person you want to become.

*Periodically raise the bar.* Take time each year to reflect on skills gaps, opportunities and limitations. Benchmark against the best peers in the firm and life, who are striving for the same objective with similar resources: context is important.

This article is dedicated to clients like Emma, Irina, Nargiz, Samira, Ang and many others who prove that hard work and determination can be rewarded. By analyzing their journeys we hope their experiences continue to inspire others to achieve their greatest goals.

*Michael Boricki is a Principal at Firmsconsulting.*

### Emma's View

*Emma is a PhD candidate completing a doctorate in computer science in the North-Eastern USA.*

McKinsey, BCG *et al* are known for their highly regarded, and more importantly a unified culture, especially in McKinsey where Marvin Bower set a high bar. It seems to be true that behind these blue, green and red façades, there are homogenous profiles of consultants as well.

However, this article unveils the true stories behind a general misconception: that if consultants look and act the same, they must have followed the same paths.

The most intriguing part is not just the fact that all of them are female, but these females went through extraordinary adversities. When we think about female leaders, it's often the powerful women we read about from Fortune, or about the high-flyer's who are often in media, such as Sheryl Sandberg and Marissa Mayer.

What is the general impression we have of these female leaders? They are

glamorous overachievers with stunning backgrounds. We rarely see the tears and sweat they expended over the decades. So this is the first impression I had after reading this article, the painfully honest truth of how these females struggled to be successful.

The article honestly describes the side effects of experiencing, and overcoming, such adversities. Resilience is an emerging theme for developing new leaders. It is emphasized both by Roselinde Torres, a senior partner and leadership specialist at BCG, and Dominic Barton, the worldwide managing director of McKinsey. There are also numerous Harvard Business Review articles alluding that resilience is a must-have trait for leaders.

Moreover, many studies show that women tend to be more resilient. However, everyone is only focusing on the benefits of resiliency, and no one talks about the price of becoming resilient.

The article gave us a brutally honest picture that becoming resilient has both physical and mental costs. Alana was diagnosed with palpitations. Nargiz overcompensated for her erroneous understanding of her self-worth. These are just some examples of the prices women have to pay on the way to being resilient.

*While I enjoyed reading the stories from these amazing women, I am a little confused: why do they all sound like men?*

That is if their names were changed into male ones, I probably wouldn't notice anything unusual about the stories.

This raised additional questions:

*Do women have to act like men to fit in?*

*Can we have a female style of leadership?*

These questions are also pertinent having watched the recent interview with Sheryl Sandberg on McKinsey Quarterly. She seems to think that women should be like men and act aggressively.

I personally disagree with her.

I must clarify that I am not trying to

be sexist by associating certain behaviour with one gender only. However, I am acknowledging that men and women are inherently different. We have to broaden our definition of leadership to allow new styles to emerge, especially those which females are predisposed to practice.

In the interview, Sandberg suggests that women should be as aggressive as men, and the society should accept that. This is fine if some women are naturally born with that kind of character. Indeed we should provide a proper social environment to accept this style.

However, we should also think about why, in general, women are less self-assured and less aggressive? More importantly, are there any benefits at all to such characters?

If there are benefits, we should certainly think about how to bring out these benefits that result from women's natural leadership tendencies. It would be much easier to work with a woman's natural tendencies than to encourage women to be who they are not, as Sandberg suggested.

Being a female Ph.D. student in computer science, I am in debt to many people who influenced me. Because of these people, I was able to take a rare study direction: economics to logic to computer science.

The role these influencers played is heavily shaped by my formative years. Both my parents worked over 100 hours weekly for the the most part of my childhood. I, therefore, never had any Tiger-Mother experiences. While many typical Chinese students had their parents checking their homework daily and forcing them to have extra tutoring every weekend, my parents often didn't know which school year I was in.

As a result, I had extreme fluctuations in grades throughout my schooling. I had, therefore, considered myself somewhat lucky to get good grades and was always in doubt about my own intellectual ability.

Fortunately, because of my self-

doubt, I learned to listen.

I listen to different people, especially when they have suggestions for my personal development. For example, if it was not suggested to me by different people, I would never have thought of pursuing graduate level mathematical logic studies, especially since I had a bachelor's degree in economics.

At first, my economic's degree colleagues told me that I was especially good in math. Yet, I naturally assumed math proficiency was common for Chinese students and paid no heed to this.

My math professor thereafter told me the same. Later, my bachelor thesis supervisor made the same remark. Little by little, I started to think about it and eventually decided to give it a try.

I was admitted to the most selective and recognized graduate program in logic worldwide. I only later discovered that entry into the program was a feat in itself.

Such an evolution of events tends to occur quite frequently for me. As a result, I learned to filter guidance generated by my social network.

*What types of people give me objective feedback?*

*What types of people give me subjective feedback?*

To what degree should I take the information seriously?

Despite conventional wisdom, subjective suggestions from friends can be very informative. Occasionally they can actually make the impossible possible.

In 2008, as a first year masters student, I wanted to apply to a prestigious summer school, the Complex Systems Science Summer School at a prestigious institute. This is widely considered the birthplace of complex systems sciences. The summer school offered lectures by professors from Harvard, Princeton, the Brooking Institute, etc. widely considered to be at the edge of their fields. Admission is highly competitive with about 50 out of 1000 applicants accepted yearly. In addi-

tion, most of the applicants are Ph.D. students from the Ivy Leagues. Some are already postdoctoral fellows or even assistant professors.

Given these facts, one of my recommenders suggested I not apply. Of course, I insisted on applying, because I received implicit feedback through one of the people to whom I listen.

A friend, Helen, is an experienced curator in visual art, and known for her impressive intuition and chaotic documentation style. We had briefly talked about my interest in complex systems that people use in daily life. Shortly thereafter, she introduced me to a friend of hers, Arthur, who owns an organic restaurant near the institute.

I reached out to Arthur who told me about a group of “the most chaotic but intelligent customers in his restaurant.” Several days later, I also mentioned complex systems and chaos to another friend, Adam, who is a director of theatre dancing. He gave me a book, which he had never started but “felt” I should have.

There it was, “*Complexity - the emerging science at the edge of order and chaos*” by M. Mitchell Waldrop. I realized it is a book about the people who founded the institute, and the same group of chaotic yet intelligent customers in Arthurs’ restaurant.

At the end, I did get admitted as the younger of only two master students that year. To me, it was an example of leveraging the wisdom of the crowds to make the seemingly impossible possible.

Objectively speaking, my recommender, who is a specialist in the field of logic, should have had better information at judging whether I could get admitted. Yet, subjectively speaking, two of my friends, Helen and Adam have a stronger emotional motive to help me. Both of them implicitly identified me with the people from the institute.

I suspect that many female candidates also rely on their social network, probably because of their self-doubt. Such a mechanism, and process, gives us extra opportunities to develop our

social intelligence, which can be used not only in personal development but also in other decision-making processes.

Ultimately it should not only be about female or male styles of leadership. We should recognize all kinds of differences and provide an opportunity to develop leadership in various ways. It should be authentic to the person versus what is most popular at that point in time.

I am curious to see how these amazing women from the article lead their career in the future. More importantly, how their experiences will help them become better consultants in their own unique ways.

### Edward’s View

*Edward is an experienced-hire candidate with advanced degrees in engineering employed by the federal US government.*

A turnaround of any magnitude requires long-term thinking and dedication to pull off. In hindsight, my own took more than 5 years, although there were no material changes to my profile because I did not change jobs or add another degree. My objective was personal growth because I felt stuck and increasingly unhappy despite a satisfying, well-paid, and stable career. At first I had no professional ambitions, but after about 3 years in my role, I saw that I could leverage my personal development to realize a new career, and grew ambitious enough to try.

My approach was to focus on personal interests that built authentic confidence and mentoring relationships. I chose hiking, martial arts, and participated in Burning Man, an annual counter-cultural arts festival. Hobbies like photography and video games were fun to do but would not lead to growth, so they went onto the back-burner.

How did these activities lead to growth? Hiking taught me to face my fear of failure head-on and I learned how to challenge my limits to discover those which were self-imposed and how far they could be pushed. This led

me to question my supposed limits in other areas, and gave me the curiosity to push myself. Martial arts forced me to recognize my own ability and progress I had made as a leader, because I was teaching internationally recognized teachers within a few years of starting.

Though this was not because I was any better than my peers, but because I was exposed to the correct training earlier than most, and I subsequently became very good at teaching it.

The nature of the training also required me to express myself unconditionally, with mind and body fully synchronized with outward-facing intent. This impacted my ability to communicate and form relationships. Finally, the art festival parachuted me far from my comfort zone, for one week almost every year, and taught me to express myself without fear of social reprisal, which had crippled my ability to connect with people since childhood.

Along the way, I met people who encouraged me and some who took me under their wings, supported my development, and challenged me to grow in ways I did not understand at the start. I owe these friends and mentors more than I can repay; so it is my responsibility to essentially “pay-it-forward” and mentor others with the same care when I can.

Looking back, the common theme is confidence, and there are two aspects.

First, I had to develop the interior confidence to overcome my reluctance, avoid desperation, and recognize the extent of my strengths. Interior confidence stems from strong core values.

Hiking taught me determination, and built the stamina to continue when I wanted to quit.

Budo taught me leadership is a form of service, and power comes from the humility to honestly face my own weaknesses and work through blood, sweat, and tears until they are strengths.

Even Burning Man instilled useful values I still follow: self-reliance, community, and civic responsibility.

This oddball arts festival taught me that bringing people together based on

explicitly defined values is more likely to succeed than bringing them together based on a shared interest or goal.

The second aspect of confidence is its expression. In other words, the critical role it plays in building relationships. This can present steep barriers when trying to make a career leap.

For the final stage of my turnaround I was fortunate to work with Firmsconsulting. Without a foundation of authentic confidence and self-worth, I would not have survived the first, tough, screening call. I almost certainly could not have taken the direct feedback required to rewrite my profile or address my shortcomings honestly.

My training program - to the extent I understand what actually happened - was designed to teach me certain basic consulting skills, but also to teach me how to express my inner confidence to sound like the consultant I wanted to become.

This meant learning how to write resume bullets, how to send networking emails, how to conduct a call, and how to speak clearly and directly at all times.

One concept that changed my mind and catapulted my social and communication skills is the idea that confidence is attractive, networking is flirting, an interview is a date, and a position with a firm is a committed relationship.

This was eye opening, but it made sense and built on everything I had learned. Desperation, hesitancy, and neediness repel suitors, but confidence coupled with genuine interest in the other person and the requisite analytical and communication skills is very impressive and, hence, attractive.

People who are professionally impressed will offer to help, so despite having no recognizable brands on my resume, no MBA, no PhD, and a fair amount of experience with a single employer, I was able to secure an interview with a top firm based on the strength of my ability to connect with and impress consultants professionally.

### How we conducted this study

Between August 2010 and February 2013, Firmsconsulting trained 279 clients pursuing management consulting careers worldwide and successfully placed 64% at McKinsey, BCG and Bain. During the application and training period we constructed detailed data sets collecting extensive information on each candidate. All sessions with clients were recorded, transcribed and data analysed for trends and patterns.

We have also maintained regular formal and informal contact with our clients. In December 2012 we conducted a survey of our clients. We received 151 completed questionnaires consisting of 10 open-ended questions. Based on these responses, we grouped all clients into common clusters and followed-up the written questionnaire with 71 recorded telephone interviews to rate various parts of the training program, explore how clients managed their case training and, thereafter, their consulting careers. In some cases additional questionnaires were used to generate time-based (longitudinal) studies exploring a client's development since the program commenced or ended.

We have learned that successful clients are not uniformly similar and require strikingly different strategies to work around their development areas. They require strategies which are different to the learning styles and career planning they successfully applied in the past. In effect, they are forced to use customized strategies to fit the voids in their backgrounds and there is no standard set of guidelines for all applicants. At best, broad principles exist and even these require a wide range of interpretations to be applicable to all clients.

We identified unique client segments for further study, such as female management consultants and, in particular, those who faced unusual obstacles. The depth of the analyses in the female segment generated a theme about woman in management consulting. We have called this theme, The Women Premium.

The Women Premium presents unique ideas about women in management consulting. Based on 3 years of proprietary research, this Firmsconsulting theme challenges conventional views such as women must follow the same development path and preparation as males.

Through personal stories and working with female clients over a 3 year period, the study aims to establish the patterns and links between career success, career happiness and the distinctive career survival strategies women need to deploy if they are to thrive in a management consulting career.