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BEING A SPECIALIST IN THE WORLD OF RESEARCH CAN PAY DIVIDENDS. **ROXANNE ESCOBALES** REPORTS

Barbie Clarke never thought she would end up in prison when she started out in market research over 20 years ago. But that's exactly where her career path led her.

The one-time director for NOP Family, felt so passionately about her specialism in children's research that she trained as a therapeutic counsellor for young people. Before long she stepped out of the viewing room and into a young offender's

institute, counselling teenagers and young men.

That was seven years ago. Now Clarke runs her own specialist consultancy, Kids and Youth, doing research on children, youth and families throughout Europe. She's also editor of the journal *Young Consumers*.

Clarke says that rather than limiting her prospects, "I'm finding having a specialism is actually quite attractive these days for clients.

There are so many companies that do very general work and they do everything. In the children's market particularly it's kind of quite necessary because it's such a difficult audience."

She didn't set out to work with children. She just, in her own words, "fell into it".

It was the same for Carolyn Johnston, an independent who specialises in financial services. Her introduction into the world of money was just as unintentional.

"It's just come about by chance," Johnston says. "When you first start you do whatever comes along. It just so happens that I seem to end up doing quite a bit in the financial services sector. For me I enjoy it because it's a very interesting sector."

Her 30 years' experience started with media research at a television company and included a stint with management consultants McKinsey and five years in Japan doing consumer research with Marplan.

Yet while her background is diverse Johnston advocates a narrow focus when it comes to market sectors. "If you say you're a jack of all trades, then people will think you can't possibly know about everything, no matter how experienced you are," she warns. "I do think it's important to specialise."

ACROSS DIMENSIONS

As a market research recruiter Julian Hadfield, the director of Personnel Resources, occupies a unique position between employers and candidates. To find the right fit for each vacancy as well as the best career move for each candidate he has to see opportunities where others may not.

From this perspective he speaks of a well-observed theory on specialisms. Hadfield believes: "One could argue that there are three dimensions of specialisms. There's market sector, there's discipline and there's function."

When most people say "specialisation" they mean expertise in a market sector, such as FMCG or pharmaceuticals. But one can also be expert in one's discipline, for instance if you're a qualitative specialist. The third dimension is

your function, Hadfield explains, and this is your organisational role, such as being a manager or a client-facing individual. Most positions include a combination of all three aspects, with emphasis on one.

If you're looking to change any of these "dimensions" of your career it's often easier to move within one of the other two dimensions.

"Say you're an account manager in financial services with client development skills and your particular area of expertise is perhaps customer loyalty then it's much easier to move into another market sector playing on your experience in customer loyalty research and client servicing," says Hadfield.

Yet sometimes people are extremely naive about their offer to the market, says Clive Warren of CSA Recruitment. It would be quite difficult for someone to go from healthcare or pharmaceuticals into media, but it would be fairly straightforward to go into a business-to-business environment.

"They would probably have international experience of being in pharmaceuticals research anyway and the data-gathering techniques tend to be on a par or parallel to business-to-business where you tend to be dealing with health professionals rather than the consumer," Warren says.

If you are reading this and feel slight panic at the realisation that you are a generalist and have no expert knowledge in a particular market sector, do not despair.

"To be a generalist is your specialism," says Hadfield.

"Perhaps," says semiotician Rachel Lawes, when asked about her esoteric specialism, "it's the case that what we've come to recognise as the traditional commercially focused survey or focus group, maybe that's the specialist activity. As a research community we could usefully diversify our repertoire of approaches by acknowledging just how specialised the everyday, bread-and-butter type of MR activity actually is."

NATURAL FLOW

Even if one makes five-year plans, a career is an organic, natural

"I WAS A VERY MUCH IGNORED PERSON BY THE MARKETERS BUT YET I'VE GOT LOTS OF MONEY TO SPEND"

progression through experience. Opportunities beckon from unlikely sources. And when you find yourself becoming excited talking about a specific area, you know you're onto something hot.

That's how Janet Kiddle, the former MD of TRBI, found herself specialising in the over-50s market. Before leaving the agency she was thinking of ways of making herself stand out. "I decided I wanted to go for this audience because I felt very passionately that I was turning 50 then and I was a very much ignored person by the marketers but yet I've got lots of money to spend."

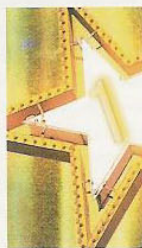
She now runs her own consultancy for 50-plus research, Steel Magnolia.

This enthusiasm for subject matter, she says, is essential: "It has to be something you can be passionate about. You've really got to have an empathy with that specialism. You have to become expert in that and that requires you to immerse yourself in that particular area."

Lawes speaks unequivocally of her driving force. "I love semiotics – I love that kind of analysis," she says. "It makes my working day worthwhile. I can't think of anything I'd rather do. I'm able to sell this stuff because it matters to me that much."

And so the spark becomes the fire. The researcher, Barbie Clarke, becomes the therapist because she needs to know more about children. The therapist goes into prison because she has the passion and she can't think of doing anything else.

Barbie Clarke became the country's foremost market researcher of children because, she says, "It just seemed absolutely the right thing to do."



NEXT MONTH

The research industry is awash with mergers and acquisitions. We take a look at how employees of those firms affected can survive the trials of change management