Moving on from the Square Mile

BY JACKY HYAMS

Skills picked up in the City are invaluable for changing career

MOST senior PAs agree there's much to be said for working in the City: you face pressure and responsibility, but the financial rewards are good and the high-powered working environment is a day-to-day challenge many relish. But what happens when you feel your City experience might serve you well elsewhere? Is a good City CV a springboard away from PA work into a stimulating new career?

"The City is a great stepping stone for anyone who is ambitious," says organisational psychologist Tammy Mindel. "City experience is very highly regarded in the workplace. You work under pressure, probably have a lot of responsibility and you understand the corporate environment. That means you have a lot of skills to offer."

But where do you take those skills? The options, says Mindel, are many, especially if you are prepared to undergo further training or study. "You'd be eligible for a very good admin role in the public sector, perhaps the Civil Service or within a local authority or health authority. Human Resources (HR) is another good career path. Many people who get into HR go via the PA route because they learn so much about an organisation in a support role.

"Or you might consider further training in the field you already work in, as a legal executive or accounting technician. You're in a much better position than most because you are able to multitask and have a variety of skills," agrees Simon Broomer, client director at Career Balance, an organisation specialising in career change.

High-powered environment: after honing your multi-tasking skills in the corporate world you'll be prepared for a new challenge

"In some cases, City PAs go off to run their own business. Or they move into a sales role in the recruitment sector. After all, you've been around good business people so something entrepreneurial is more likely to suit you. And you've probably gained persuasive interpersonal skills through watching and learning from others."

Lindsay Thompson, 36, is one such person. She now runs her own coaching business, Evolve Proactive, after working in the City for nearly six years as PA to the Global Head of HR at Deutsche Bank.

She says she started seriously thinking about leaving her City role — which paid £80,000 plus a substantial bonus — a year or so before she actually made the break.

"I couldn't see myself staying in the City for ever; you do get a bit of adrenaline burn-out after a while. And I knew quite a few people who'd moved out into something completely different. Once you see others doing it, you focus on your own situation."

"Eventually I realised I wanted a different sort of challenge, where I could build something up. I opted for coaching because it's about people; HR is about people, too — and I was always interested in someone's entire life, not just what they do at work."

So far it is early days for her coaching business: long-term, her plan is to concentrate on coaching PAs looking for career challenges. But there is one major downside to leaving the City — many PAs find it difficult to relinquish the status, and the best paid PA work around.

"I knew I wouldn't be able to earn the same kind of money straight away but luckily I did save quite a bit beforehand — and that has allowed me a bit of breathing space to build my business up gradually," explains Thompson.

The most important skills she acquired in the City were, she recalls, her people-management skills.

"Your understanding of people and the ability to deal with all types of personality, big characters working at a very high level, is the biggest transferable skill you take with you. Companies are crying out for good people who can hold their own in high-pressure situations."

She says that these days, when City friends talk about the day-to-day pressures they face, it confirms her belief that the move was the right one for her. "But I regret none of my time spent in the City. It meant very hard work and incredibly long hours at times. Yet it's still a fascinating place to work."

● *www.evolveproactive.com, www.careerbalance.co.uk*