Climbing to career success

A successful career is rarely a lucky coincidence. Over the next few pages, four UniSA alumni who have climbed to the top of their professions, share their experiences.

UniSA human resources management researcher and senior lecturer Gerry Treuren says application, hard work and ability are the ingredients needed to climb to career success. And if you want to shine, it seems practice really can help to make perfect, whether it’s in business, sport, or any other field.

“If you look at Ian Thorpe, he’s a remarkable talent,” Dr Treuren says. “He has the physical attributes to be a truly great swimmer, but in itself, that is not enough. He also possesses other attributes that are just as important. He’s got extraordinary self-discipline and he is, when he is in training, willing to put in hours and hours of training every day.

“It’s a combination of talent and hard work. I’m not sure there are many examples of pure talent alone that win out. Amazing talents like the great composers Bach and Mozart, or painters like Van Gogh or Rembrandt worked for years to develop their skills before their work was acknowledged by the world.”

Dr Treuren refers to the research of Ericson and Bloom, which suggests that you need to complete thousands of hours – at least 10,000 hours of work in your area of expertise – to get to a level of ‘stardom’.

“The Beatles were only able to leap onto the international music scene after they had developed their style by braving beer cans thrown by sometimes hostile audiences in seedy nightclubs in Hamburg, six hours a night, six nights a week for several years,” Dr Treuren says.

“Bill Gates spent his childhood days after school playing in a computer laboratory, so by the time he got to 25 he literally had tens of thousands of hours experience with computer technology behind him.

“These are examples where exceptional talent, coupled with experience, equalled success.

“But sometimes people only see the talent, and don’t appreciate the effort that was needed.

“Sometimes, but only sometimes, insight, luck and good positioning can also play a role. Malcolm Turnbull converted a $500,000 investment in a fledgling internet service provider in 1993 into $57 million when OzEmail was sold to Worldcom in 2003. In 1993 – a time of slow, clumsy, dial-up access – who could have imagined the extraordinary growth of the internet by the end of the 1990s?”

“And in some industries, barriers to entry have been lowered. Just look at the guy who set up Facebook. He essentially got together with other nerds, they holed themselves up in their dorm rooms at college, lived on pizza deliveries, and wrote a computer program that has transformed contemporary society.

“These cases are uncommon, however. The average over-achiever seems to have made their mark through a combination of effort, determination and ability, and sometimes a little luck.”

Dr Treuren says career success also involves ongoing learning and development.

“Some people assume that once you’ve finished your formal studies, you’ve finished with learning but the world is changing at a great rate,” he says. “The clever players know what is going on, and can act accordingly, using new knowledge, skills and techniques.

“Having spoken with hundreds of senior practitioners over the past few years, one characteristic of leading practitioners is their involvement with ongoing learning about their field and industry.”

For our four high profile alumni, their achievements were boosted by their UniSA degrees. See over for stories on television news presenter Rebecca Morse, Wendy’s CEO Rob McKay, gold medalist Wendy Schaeffer and BankSA Managing Director Jane Kittel.

Dr Treuren’s top five tips for success:

- Self-discipline: Senior positions are increasingly competitive and you need to work hard and be disciplined to get to the top.
- Perseverance: You need the ability to pick yourself up off the floor when things don’t work out.
- Ongoing development: Ongoing learning throughout your career is crucial.
- Relationships: Developing strong working relationships with your colleagues and superiors is important.
- Have a mentor: Find someone who can provide career guidance and help you develop political acumen.