

Headhunter f corporate kings

One of the world's top executive recruiters talks to **TAN SU YEN** about how she picks the people to fill positions in high places



PHOTO BY CHEN LOK

'You can try to have a career and a family and raise children, but you do end up juggling a lot, and that's fine. But not being able to deliver on anything is bad.'

Ms Yoon's advice to women who are working their way up the corporate ladder

EXPERTISE and experience may be abundant in corporate corridors worldwide but for top positions, employers can't seem to get enough of that elusive but all-important trait — leadership, says Kyung H Yoon, area managing partner, North Asia, executive search consultants, Heidrick & Struggles.

Speaking in her Suntec Tower office, Ms Yoon, who specialises in recruiting chief executives, boards of directors and senior-level managers, says: "The key thing that comes up again and again with the top jobs that we work with is leadership."

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Communication skills are all the more important now that the Internet revolution has made information instantaneously available. "We are in a world where things are very democratic; people can make their own assessment based on the information available to them. In that kind of world you have to have good persuasion skills, good communication skills — it's not just by the power of your position any more that you can make things happen." Such great communicators are often individuals who appreciate the changing mores of the work place, whether it is the move towards globalisation or greater specialisation, a situation which calls for being "up-to-speed" with developments in the sectors in which they operate.

Says Ms Yoon: "In terms of who we are looking for, we need people who are creative and quick on their feet. People who are able to respond to changing realities."

"It used to be that you could join a company like IBM and HP and have a

were fired or something," says Ms Yoon, whose clients include Dell, Philips and PricewaterhouseCoopers. "Nowadays you might find your division has been spun out and sold to an Internet company or your huge company may be subject to a takeover from a company in another part of the world that you didn't anticipate and so it's very difficult to make long-term projections. And for people who are trying to manage a career, it has become much more challenging." In such an

environment, the key to continued career success and survival is to "take functional skills that are transferable between industries and between jobs and finding the link". Ms Yoon, who divides her time between Heidrick & Struggles offices in Singapore and in Menlo Park, California, speaks from experience. The poised, articulate, daughter of a diplomat who was named as one of the top 500 executive recruiters in the world was educated in Korea, France and the US.

with Banque Nationale de Paris. A long and illustrious career in finance and financial management followed. Prior to Heidrick & Struggles, she turned entrepreneur. As president of Bente Investments Inc, she was responsible for the formulation and operation of the firm. At 40, Ms Yoon came to a crossroads in her career.

"I was thinking about doing something potentially different but something I could be passionate about. And I realised that throughout my career, it's the people who ultimately made an impact on me." As luck would

turn out, she found a lot of correspondence that is addressed to 'Mr Yoon' and a lot of the time I show up at the airport and the car that has come to pick me up has 'Mr Yoon' on it."

At the same time, Ms Yoon's advice to women who are working their way up the corporate ladder is to be gentle with them

oneselves. "Yes, you can try to have a career and a family and raise children, but you do end up juggling a lot, and that's fine. But not being able to deliver on anything is bad."

The problem with a lot of women is they underestimate how much time it takes to have a family and to have a career and to meet all of the demands that typically an Asian family makes. They don't incorporate that into their planning and they get overwhelmed and all of a sudden you can't meet your commitments and you

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Making a strong case for setting different priorities for different phases in life, Ms Yoon says: "You don't have to do all things well. Some things can slide for a while and other things can take priority. You've got to be a superhero." You've got attention, a lot of things have to go on the shelf, it's OK. I certainly don't do all the things that I do just doing it by

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