Steps for Developing a General Management Career

Introduction
The Ross Career Services (RCS) created the Career Path series to assist students with the career search process. Each Career Path handout examines a common business functional area in which Stephen M. Ross School of Business graduates pursue jobs each year. The first four steps of RCS’s recommended career search process are detailed for each specific business field.

General Management Careers

‘General Management’ is an admittedly vague term. It relates more to a type of responsibility than to a functional expertise. To clarify, a General Management position must include:

- profit/loss responsibility (results must be quantifiable)
- responsibility crosses multiple functions (finance, marketing, etc.)

Based on the above requirements, General Managers are typically executives in line roles. Executives in staff functions or within a single functional focus are not considered General Managers. Due to the level of responsibility expected, employers rarely hire a business school graduate immediately into a General Management position. Most employers, however, are hoping to hire potential General Managers.

There are two main ways for a student to search for a career in General Management, through a functional role and through a General Management development program. The first is to focus on a functional specialty for an initial position, and then segue into a General Management role as your experience develops. Any of the functions commonly sought by recruiters – finance, marketing, operations – can lead to a General Management career. If this is an interest of yours, begin with the handout on the specific function you are interested in initially. As you research potential employers, explore the amount of flexibility they offer for you to later manage in other functions. Many organizations are simply looking for talent – if you perform at your initial function, they are happy for you to move to other areas of the company as your level of responsibility grows. Here, you need to be particularly proactive throughout your career about defining the type of General Management position you seek.
The other way to embark toward a General Management career is by entering a General Management Development Program (GMDP), aka Leadership Development Program. GMDPs have been growing in popularity within firms and with students on campus. In this case, companies are looking to hire graduates with great potential, expose them to the company, and later promote them into a General Manager’s role.

This guide will focus on GMDPs. There is a common misconception that these development programs are primarily all very similar. On the contrary, these programs are not all alike and it is more accurate to say they are all different in some way.

**General Management Development Programs**

**Types of Programs**

People often refer to Management/Leadership Development Programs (MDPs/LDPs) as General Management (GM) programs. This is often not the case; although many definitions for General Management exist, GM is a specific career focus just as Finance, Marketing, and Operations. Many LDPs are not intended to build GM skills, but aim to develop high level managers with significant experience within a single function. Both functional and General Management development programs can be found in multiple industries, and are found on campus in telecommunications, pharmaceutical, retail, manufacturing, automotive, high tech, and banking environments to name just a few.

Most of the development programs are rotational in nature, last from one to three years, and can encompass several rotations of varying lengths. The rotations are designed to provide exposure to different functional and/or business units within the firm and to provide opportunities to build your transferable and functional skills.

**Why the Programs Exist**

Due to business growth and management turnover, many firms with GMDPs have realized the need to more rapidly develop specific skill sets to meet their staffing demands. They see the GMDPs as a concentrated effort to develop the talent needed to continue to meet the leadership demands of the firm. Additionally, some firms have only recently hired large volumes of MBAs to augment the traditionally technical background of the majority of management (e.g. telecom and manufacturing). These firms view MBAs as having a solid business foundation on which to build additional business and technical skills. The bottom line is that these programs are generally in place to help high potential MBAs quickly
develop those skills critical to the future success of the firm. General Management programs are usually focused on developing Executive (Officer) level talent within a short time period.

**Career Search Step #1: Conduct Self-Assessment**

Because there are so many paths a general management career can take, there are various skills and interests required. There are some commonalities that are explored in the CareerLeader program, including an interest in controlling an enterprise, managing people and quantitative analysis. Individuals must be well versed in a variety of functional areas. Some specific skills include:

- Leadership
- Interpersonal effectiveness
- Supervisory ability
- Initiative
- General business knowledge
- Strong analytical/problem solving abilities
- Communication
- Creativity

A career in general management may provide a career rich in variety, a certain level of autonomy and much influence. The lifestyle may be demanding, as leading large divisions or an organization requires many hours and a high level of dedication.

**Career Search Step #2: Investigate Possible Career Opportunities**

**Analyzing GMDPs**

Each person has their own criteria that are important to them. However, here are some basic questions to get your analysis of various programs started:

- Is the firm in an industry you like (service v. manufacturing)?
- Is the program General Management or functionally oriented?
- How long is the program (years)?
- Can you leave the program and enter a live job?
- Is it rotational? How many rotations? How long is each rotation?
- What is the objective of the program, to develop managers or officers?
- How much support exists for the program? Is it the CEO’s program or the Director of Operation’s?
- What resources ($, people, time) are devoted to the program?
- What systems are in place for development? (Development managers/teams, Executive sponsors, mentors, training, feedback, etc.)
• How does the program fit into the company’s overall staffing and personnel development plans?
• How much control do you have over rotation/job selection and timing?
• What is the success rate of the program (data/statistics)?
• How much credibility does the program have with the entire organization?
• How much exposure to key Executives will you have?
• Are the rotations real jobs or specifically designed for program participants?
• Do you develop a Career Development/ Skill Development Plan to guide your career?

These questions should help you understand the legitimacy of the program and the resources available to you as a participant. This is not an all encompassing list; you will probably want to add your own criteria to the analysis.

Career Search Step #3: Research and Conclude on Immediate Post-Graduate Employers

Interviews/Skills
The interview styles for the firms with GMDPs are varied, including fit, behavioral (see handout), and mini-case questions. The GM programs will focus primarily on transferable skills, relying heavily on fit and behavioral questions. Some GM programs will utilize mini-cases (not full consulting type cases) to analyze additional skills, but these are more prevalent in the functionally aligned programs.

Due to the nature of General Management, the GMDPs will focus on your ability to lead and develop others more than other functions. However, this is only one of the many skills that the interviewer may choose to probe, others include:

• Leadership
• Supervisory (leading and developing others)
• Initiative
• Analytical/Problem-Solving
• Teamwork (ability to work effectively with others)
• Flexibility
• Communication
• Creativity
• Priority-setting
This may seem like a laundry list of transferable skills, but they are all important to General Managers, and you can therefore be asked to provide examples of any of these skills.

**Advantages/Disadvantages to General Management Development Programs**

**Advantages**
- Can provide a rapid progression through the lower levels of the organization.
- Can provide high levels of responsibility early in your career.
- May have significant resources devoted to your development – significant opportunities may exist for frequent feedback, training, and mentoring.
- Can allow you to develop a variety of functional skills through rotations.
- May provide greater exposure to senior management.
- Can provide a broader view of the company’s business units and functions.

**Disadvantages**
- A program may lack the flexibility you require, in terms of the timing and choice of assignments.
- Assignments may be created for program participants, rather than for a pressing business need.
- Generally, you do not develop a single functional expertise.
- Due to the special treatment you receive, some animosity may exist from non-participants.
- The program may lose organizational support in future management changes (i.e., mergers or departures of senior executives).

**Job Search**

Since LDPs can be found in multiple industries, you may want to determine your industry interests prior to researching a specific program. However, if you do not have an affinity for any particular industry, you will have a great number of programs to pursue. Here are some good places to start your search:

- **iM pact** - search by filling in only the function field as General Management. This will result in a large list of opportunities, all of which have been entered as GM in the system. Unfortunately, many of these are not accurately described by GM and may not be of interest. You will need to read through the job descriptions to determine which opportunities are development programs. Other function fields often flagged by GMDP employers are: strategic planning; consulting-internal; operations management; and finance-general.
Informational sessions - company presentations are a great way to learn about GMDPs. As there is so much variety in the way these programs are defined, there is often information which does not get conveyed through iMPact descriptions and promotional flyers. These are terrific opportunities to talk to recent graduates about their specific experiences within the programs. Often you will find individual experience differs from the written descriptions.

Other students and alumni - chances are that someone else has already gone through a similar search to what you are going through; the key is to find that person or people. You can meet other people by joining the GM Club. Identify some of the firms with GM programs, and then contact the alumni or interns that work(ed) there. They may have useful tips on how to approach the search.

Once you have completed the above steps, you can use corporate presentations, web sites, library files, alumni and other students to help narrow the field of interest.