How an ex-soldier learnt business toughness in civvy street

Chris Daniels did not begin his career behind a desk: after gaining a maths degree at Oxford he spent five years as an officer in the Parachute Regiment. By that point, even career progression in the Army would have meant spending some time pushing paper, so he decided to look for better-paid opportunities in the civilian world.

“My peer group was settling down, buying houses and going to parties with lots of champagne,” he says. “I was spending my Saturday nights dressed in green in a trench.”

Rather than rushing into a new career, Daniels, now 41, decided to take a two-year MBA at IESE Business School in Barcelona. “I thought I would probably end up doing operations or logistics at a large non-governmental organisation, but when I got to IESE everyone was talking about investment banking.”

By the time he finished his course investment banking had won out and he joined Barclays Capital, where he had done an internship. A keen runner, he took time off to go to Australia for a month to work as an athlete services manager at the Sydney Olympic Games.

Once the sport was out of the way, he settled down to setting up the bank’s equity derivatives business from scratch. “My boss said, ‘We don’t know if it’s going to work [but] you seem like a go-getter. If it works we have a nice business after a year, and if not I will fire you.’ He said it in a nice way,” Daniels adds.

Fortunately the venture did work. Other projects at several different banks followed before Daniels found himself working at Lloyds via its acquisition of HBOS. He was considering returning to university to study cognitive and decision sciences when a new job — head of London 2012 activation for the bank’s wholesale division — came up that allowed him to call on his MBA again. “What’s really fascinating about this job is that I need to know about all aspects of banking, from small scale right through to multinational level,” he says.

Once again he is focused on

“The rigour in my approach was instilled at business school

business development, including helping the bank’s business customers to benefit from the Olympics. “Business development has been the common thread through my MBA and all my banking jobs. It’s also reminding me of things that I had covered on the course and had almost forgotten.”

For example, he regularly finds himself quoting a professor from his MBA. “The professor kept saying ‘look at the numbers, show me the numbers’. Now, particularly in this new job, which is very marketing-focused, I bring that out. I say I’m hearing all these great things, but show me the numbers — what hits the bottom line?”

“That business rigour was instilled at business school and now I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Overall, however, he rates the alumni network as the most important thing to have come out of his time at business school. “It’s friendships, really, rather than a network,” he says.

“Every year a group of us called ‘the IESE lads’ abandon our wives, kids and so on to have dinner together in Barcelona. We fly in from wherever we are in the world — including one guy from Australia.”

CARLY CHYNOWETH