

THE YIN CROWD

Those of us who have spent our careers treating management as a science might find the application of methods such as astrology in business alarming, writes **Scott Payton**. But more and more firms are using them – even though few are ready to admit it.

Business leaders with a mystic side

Dawn Gibbins. The founder and chairman of international flooring business Flowcrete attributes much of her company's success to the ancient art of *feng shui* (see main article).

Hans Snook, the half-German, half-British founder and former chief executive of mobile phone network, Orange, is a fan of alternative medicine and *feng shui*. (Orange is seen as a strong colour in *feng shui*.) He is now the chairman and main shareholder of the Diagnostic Clinic, a London-based centre that mixes western medicine with complementary approaches.

Dame Anita Roddick. The founder of The Body Shop, who died in 2007, was a firm believer in astrology.

The corporate world has a reputation for being the realm of the strictly rational, governed by the black-and-white rules of profit and loss. But many business leaders, in both the west and the east, are tapping into less scientific, often far more mystical, sources to enhance their companies' prospects of success. In doing so, they are raising difficult questions about employment law, the use of shareholders' money and cultural attitudes towards decision-making.

Dawn Gibbins is the darling of the UK manufacturing industry. She was voted business woman of the year in the 2003 Veve Clicquot awards and named "most influential person in British manufacturing" by *The Manufacturer* magazine in 2006. In 2007 she received an MBE. The company that she founded and now chairs, commercial and industrial floor maker Flowcrete Group, has a presence in more than 20 countries and is set to generate a £2.9m profit in 2007 on sales of £42m.

What is the secret of her success? She puts much of it down to *feng shui*, a

discipline that originated in China 2,000 years ago. Gibbins doesn't simply practise *feng shui* herself. She has used it to redesign her company's logo, refurbish its offices, restructure workflows, streamline product lines and motivate her employees.

"In 2004 the business was getting a bit complicated – and we weren't really making the money we should have been making," Gibbins says. Profit margins were narrow, product lines were confusing and branding was fragmented.

It was at this point that she turned to *feng shui*. The first of its principles she adopted was to tidy things up. "We cleared the company's physical environment, electronic network and brands of clutter," she says.

The brands were the biggest task, because the company had acquired a number of different flooring firms around the world. They were all eventually moved to the Flowcrete brand. The product range was also reduced by about half. She then commissioned a design consultancy to come up with a new company logo that



“ Last year the Jilin Jiangshan Human Resources Development Company was reported to have advertised for recruits, specifying that it would consider only candidates born in the year of the dog ”

Mystical megabucks

Christeen Skinner offers corporate consultancy based on analysis of the solar system at a particular time, the cycles of known planets and the principles of *feng shui*. Her web site (www.christeenskinner.com) explains: “Our solar system is a busy place. The Sun itself is an extraordinary generator. Sun spots appear on its surface and over a period of time fall into a complex pattern. This rhythm offers some correlation with known business cycles.”

She offers a service compiling an astrological chart for your company based on its date and place of incorporation. “Accurate data is essential,” she says. “It is important to choose an astrologer as carefully as you would any professional you permit into your life.”

Consultations can be done by e-mail, web link and telephone.

Skinner is also the author of *The Financial Universe* (The Alpha Press, 2004). According to the blurb, this “deconstructs the future in clear masterful strokes”. It is “an absolute must-read text not only for professionals in financial services and related industries, but also for anyone who relies on the future for business and personal planning.” It highlights periods “to maximise investment returns and minimise portfolio losses through exposure to geopolitical events and circumstances and financial market hot spots.” It also presents “analysis of the financial astrology behind previous market events” and forecasts future ones up to 2020.

An extract from her newsletter reads: “Mercury’s return on Friday August 11 to the position held on July 5 may be significant and could be felt not just around

the negotiating tables of the world, but also in the stock market... August 11 could be a significant date in terms of US dollar and euro trading. Between this date and August 21 the dollar could slide against the euro. It could then recover some ground until the lunar eclipse of September 9 when the euro could gain again, setting a trend that is likely to continue for a few months.”

Henry Weingarten, fund director of the Astrologers Fund, is a well-known US astrologer who has been quoted on Fox News and in *USA Today*. His web site lists past and present corporate clients including TNX Television, Nova Gold and Minco Mining.

In an example of how astrology can help high-tech companies, he lists “astrological decision support” and a “financial astrologer” as key factors for success.

“The use of financial astrology offers the benefit of foresight to help companies build a successful business by providing original and back-up confirmation decision-making assistance in four areas: when (timing); who (personnel); what (mission definition); and how (strategic planning),” he writes, giving examples such as timing major press releases, currency hedges and property acquisitions/divestitures, locating new factories and agreeing joint venture partnerships or takeover bids.

Weingarten produces *Wall Street, Next Week* “the leading weekly e-mail market newsletter using financial astrology for market timing and global stock selection”. Subscriptions range from \$360 a year to an institutional rate for the trading edition of \$3,000 a month. Past issues are available at www.afund.com/afundwsnw.html.

followed *feng shui* principles. “Under *feng shui*, energy moves from left to right and from down to up,” Gibbins says. “The Nike logo, for example, is a *feng shui* designer’s dream come true.”

She showed the proposed design to staff and received an overwhelmingly positive response (although a senior business partner was a notable exception). “In the past there was an element of an ‘us and them’ attitude, but the new logo has helped to create a real team spirit across the world,” Gibbins claims.

Other de-cluttering activities included a clear-desk policy, throwing out old office furniture and generally getting organised. “When you invest in the environment, it makes your people feel good,” Gibbins says.

Whatever your view of her faith in *feng shui*, there is no doubt that her business has become more efficient and successful since it adopted its principles. A £20m turnover in 2004 increased to £26m in 2005. By 2006, turnover had reached £36m. Profit margins are improving, too.

Gibbins’ enthusiasm for the business application of *feng shui* is not as rare as you might think, according to Jon Sandifer, a UK-based *feng shui* consultant whose clients include a wide range of UK companies. But what is rare is her openness about it.

“I won’t name my clients for confidentiality reasons, because *feng shui* is still regarded as a bit ‘woo-woo’,” Sandifer says. “In larger companies, shareholders would not like it if they got wind that it was being practised.”

Most of Sandifer’s clients are smaller firms. “Here you’re dealing with the directors themselves,” he says. “On the corporate front, I’ve not always been that successful because of the politics of it all.”

Having said that, he does claim to work with a couple of “major players” in the business world, who pay him out of their own pockets for advice on their personal office space. “They value their position in the

physical structure of the office as being important,” Sandifer says.

In many parts of Asia, of course, *feng shui* is not regarded as “woo-woo”. The practice is widespread in territories with large Chinese communities: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. “Here, any big boss, whether they admit it or not, is likely to use *feng shui* in some shape or form,” Sandifer says.

On the Chinese mainland it is less prevalent as a result of Mao Zedong’s crackdown on ancient practices during the cultural revolution of the sixties and seventies.

HSBC is one large company that’s particularly open about its use of *feng shui*. The bank’s Hong Kong headquarters was built following strict *feng shui* principles, while HSBC Malaysia’s commercial banking web site even offers *feng shui* advice to clients (<http://snipurl.com/1tket>).

Even sceptics would agree that using *feng shui* to tidy up your office and design your buildings is, at worst, harmless. But many business people are going deeper – into the world of Chinese astrology.

“*Feng shui* is about time and space,” Sandifer says. “You’ve got to know the dates of birth of the key players in a business. This shows up two things: individuals’ strengths and how they relate to other people.”

According to *feng shui*’s astrological principles, some dates are better for making business decisions than others, he adds. “In Hong Kong, for example, the date to cut a deal or start a new company is considered very important. There are dates in the Chinese calendar where it’s simply not worth doing anything. In fact, it is suggested that you are best off spending them drinking wine and fishing.”

Other forms of astrology are in corporate use in mainland China. Last year the Jilin



Big ch’is: HSBC’s Hong Kong HQ has been designed according to *feng shui* principles.

Dressed for success

Beyond the exotic worlds of *feng shui* and astrology, companies the world over are using other unconventional methods to improve their performance. Image consultants such as House of Colour and Colour Me Beautiful, for example, are being used by a growing number of business people – and, sometimes, entire organisations.

“Ninety-three per cent of a first impression is based on non-verbal communication. Someone’s appearance and body language comprise 55 per cent of that,” says Audrey Hanna, business development manager at CMB Image, the corporate division of Colour Me Beautiful. “Because everything is more competitive these days, image is one way of differentiating yourself.”

CMB Image’s services range from graduate trainee programmes to bespoke advice for senior managers. “It’s something that people really enjoy doing, because everyone wants to look their best,” she claims. “The image rules that apply in a working environment also apply in your personal life.”

Corporate use of personal image consultancy has really taken off in the UK over the past four years, Hanna says. “We’re also getting more requests for workshops and seminars from the continent, too – especially from eastern Europe and Russia.”

The service is more popular with banks, law firms and blue-chip firms than with companies in the creative industries. This is because dress etiquette in the corporate world is getting more complicated, according to Hanna. “There are so many dress codes out there now: business casual, smart casual, business formal. A lot of people are getting it wrong, often by dressing too casually.”

CMB Image also helps companies to develop their own dress guidelines. Spending money on ensuring that employees look smart is not something that firms are shy about. Indeed, CMB Image’s web site (www.cmbimage.co.uk) proudly displays the names of blue-chip clients including Barclays, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Procter & Gamble.

“Woo-woo” way to yes way

If you are a confirmed rationalist and base all important decisions on logic and empirical evidence, how would you deal with a boss or a board that's happy to follow a more mystical path? We offer some tips on maintaining a healthy relationship with the other side.

- Do not get drawn into debates about the value of astrological predictions etc. You are unlikely to convert someone who believes in it and the pointless argument could end up causing a permanent rift.
- Choose the right arguments. If the other party's beliefs don't make a significant difference to the business in practice, then rein in the scepticism and go along with them. Be polite and accept their beliefs with good grace.
- Keep it neutral. If you feel that a decision based on supernatural advice could lead to financial losses, damage investor relations or put you in a difficult position professionally, try to argue your point purely on the business case. State the risks clearly without using financial jargon. Point out potential negative effects on, say, PR without discussing your own beliefs. As with all disagreements, keep a record of discussions.
- Compromise. Search for a way to bypass the issue. For example, if your CEO won't do a deal on a certain day, ask for a list of days that he feels are more auspicious. If the board wants to spend vast sums on rearranging the office to suit *feng shui* principles, find out whether there are other changes that would be beneficial that could be done at the same time.
- Stay involved. Do not opt out of a project just because you disagree with it. You are more likely to limit risks and maintain strategic focus from the inside.
- Do not put yourself at risk. If you're unhappy with the ethos of the firm, it is probably time to look for a new job. If you feel there are ethical issues, visit www.cimaglobal.com/helplines.



Jiangshan Human Resources Development Company was reported to have advertised for recruits, specifying that it would consider only candidates born in the year of the dog. A group of students from Shanghai's Fudan University complained that the move was discriminatory, although Chinese law is ambiguous in this area.

The use of astrology in recruitment also occurs in the UK, raising further questions of legality. One CEO of a UK firm, speaking on condition of anonymity, admits to using astrological studies of candidates' birth dates as a substitute for psychometric testing.

"If you're recruiting someone whom you want to launch a project, you want to make sure that their sequence is good," he says.

The CEO keeps this practice quiet for two reasons: first, because it is a potential breach of employment law; second, because he fears that it will scare off potential recruits who may find the use of astrology unnerving – or just plain mad.

Corporate astrology is widespread in India. And, thanks to the internet, many of the country's astrologers are serving companies around the world. Kamal Kapoor runs a sophisticated "vedic astrology" web site from Delhi (www.kamalkapoor.com). His services focus on recruiting the right people.

"For example, the head of finance and accounts should have good Mercury and Jupiter," he writes on his web site. "Similarly, the quality-control head should have good Mercury and Venus."

The biggest market for corporate astrology services is in the US, according to Kapoor, "although we've also got clients in the UK, South Africa, Dubai – everywhere".

Kapoor and his team base their predictions on individuals' times and places of birth. "We then tell our clients whether they are suitable for a particular job," he says.

How many big companies use astrology in this way? It's hard to say, as most are understandably wary of publicising such activities. Even in parts of East Asia, where astrology is widely accepted, many business leaders are reluctant to say that they use it for fear of scaring off western customers, partners and investors, according to Sandifer.

Back in the UK, Gibbins plans to improve the reputation of *feng shui* through her work with the British Feng Shui Society. "I'm coming at it from a corporate angle and saying that we do need to change the language a bit, because it does frighten people sometimes," she admits. "There are many mystical elements, but a lot of the basics are really only common sense."

Sandifer believes that business leaders are ready to listen. "If you look at *feng shui* going back in time, it was used primarily by emperors in the Imperial Courts of China rather than by the layman. Today, the new empires are corporations – and their leaders are the new emperors."

Scott Payton is a freelance business journalist and editor.

Further reading

R Rigby, "When stargazers can see corporate troubles coming", *Financial Times*, October 9, 2007 (<http://snipurl.com/1tkg6>).