Lucy Kellaway: Need career guidance? I can help

By Lucy Kellaway
Published: March 5 2006 17:35 | Last updated: March 5 2006 17:35

Half way through next week I am going to fulfill an ambition I have been harbouring for more than 30 years. I am becoming an agony aunt. Next Wednesday in the FT I will start telling people what they should do about their careers and their progress – or lack of it – up the greasy poles. I will be dispensing advice on ambitions, on mid-life meltdowns and on workplace etiquette. I will instruct people on what to do about bosses they hate (and ones they love). In short, I will be advising on the whole troublesome shooting match of working life.

My appetite for agony started when I was about 13. Then my reading matter of choice was Jackie, a teen magazine all about Donny Osmond and midi skirts. My favourite part was a problem page where Cathy & Claire meted out straight-talking advice to tortured adolescents. When readers wrote in moaning about their two-timing boyfriends, Cathy & Claire would briskly tell them to stop being doormats.

As I got older I started to become the sort of person that people came to for direction. Soon after I joined the FT 20 years ago, my colleague Dominic Lawson (son of the former chancellor of the exchequer, he went on to edit The Spectator and The Sunday Telegraph) one day matter-of-factly informed me that I had a "lavratory face".

This did not sound terribly nice, but then Dominic often said things that were not nice. He went on to explain that I, like his mother, had the sort of face someone coming into an office full of strangers would instinctively turn to for directions to the lavatory.

Now that I am older still, I am confident enough to take on more advanced questions than the most direct route to the office toilet. I realise I am joining a crowded field of life coaches, trainers and consultants who do this for a living. A lot of this advice is maddeningly over-complicated and full of humbug. True, I have had no training, but I have worked in offices for a quarter of a century. I have written and read about the problems of office life for nearly as long (as well as experienced a good few difficulties myself). My unique selling point will be a humbug-free service, and I will attempt to offer solutions to all workplace problems in a few easy-to-understand words.

Most of the agony aunt in other papers now refer to their problems as "dilemmas", as the word sounds less negative and, in this self-improving world, we all have to be positive. But my problems will be called that: problems, and they can be as negative as you like.

All of them will be real, though published anonymously. Two weeks ago I put a little invitation into this column soliciting for agony, and I got a great many responses – which was good. What was less good was that some readers did not understand quite what sort of problem I was after.

One man wrote asking if I could help him with off-street parking in the Essex village where he lives. The answer to this is no, I cannot. Another person sent in a problem about why he charge for access to a lot of FT.com material. I can answer this, although I do not consider it a problem, as such. The reason we charge is that the FT is a business, and therefore we are trying to make money.

Another feature of this column is that problems will not just be answered by me but by other readers. I will print a selection of your solutions, as well as the following column's. My advice may be equally wide of the mark: either dodgy, or simply not what the person wants to hear. So I am offering all readers the chance to act out their own agony aunt.

My advice may be equally wide of the mark: either dodgy, or simply not what the person wants to hear. So I am offering all readers the chance to act out their own agony aunt fashions and supply answers too.

Every fortnight I will print a selection of your solutions, as well as the following column's problem. I want solutions short (200 words maximum, better still 60-100). It would be nice to hear from readers who have had a similar problem themselves and either sorted it out or got themselves into even hotter water by not doing so.

Below is the first problem. I am in the market for solutions to this as well as more problems to be e-mailed to me at problems@ft.com.

I should also say that although I am starting this new line of business, I am not giving up the old one. Existing columns will continue. I did not grow up wanting to be a lawyer. I should also say that although I am starting this new line of business, I am not giving up the old one. Existing columns will continue. I did not grow up wanting to be a lawyer. I spent six years, some excellent, some less so, writing prospectuses and negotiating deals. I have written and read about the problems of office life for nearly as long (as well as experienced a good few difficulties myself). My unique selling point will be a humbug-free service, and I will attempt to offer solutions to all workplace problems in a few easy-to-understand words.