

# Get a career mentor, online

**Margaret Harris** gives coaching website a test-drive to extract revealing feedback on her mission and skills

GOOD management is a critical — and scarce — resource in South Africa, so any system that addresses this is worth a try.

Enter Next ([next.gibs.co.za](http://next.gibs.co.za)), an online career mentor developed by Jonathan Cook, academic director at the Gordon Institute of Business Science (Gibs). The website is aimed at managers, helping them to work out what skills they need to progress.

I took a test-drive of the system to assess its user-friendliness and whether it performs the functions of a mentor. Registration is free and painless because the site is well designed and the steps, grouped into four main areas — self-reflection, feedback, next steps and management levels — are easy to follow.

It makes sense to begin with self-reflection, as the exercise helps to focus the mind, clarifying who you are, in and out of the office. To keep you involved, there is immediate feedback on every exercise.

I found this part of the exercise rewarding as I discovered my learning type, or the style of course best suited to my personality, and was encouraged to do courses that mixed practical and bookwork assignments to maintain my interest.

Next is a Gibs initiative, so the site directs you, through click-throughs, to the institute's courses, but you are under no obligation to attend only Gibs courses. You can just as easily source the same type of training from other institutions.

My personality type, discovered by choosing one set of statements about my preferences over another, was also fairly on the button. As Cook



**MOVING ON UP:** Jonathan Cook helps managers with career advancement

points out, this is not a definitive personality test because we act as both subject and examiner, though it is based on the Myers Briggs test — a questionnaire designed to identify certain personality types.

The self-reflective section also assesses "what anchors my career", "my mission statement" and emotional intelligence. These exercises require complete honesty — the more you put in, the more you get out.

I found my career anchor especially revealing. My feedback was: "You're excited by using your talents and being an expert in your field ... whenever you are pulled away from exercising your professional competence, you get frustrated and want to get back to your specialisation."

The other anchor, which has become more apparent since having

children, is my "lifestyle". "You are not prepared to allow your job to take over your life. You value family ... as highly as your commitment to your employer ... For this reason, you value flexibility in work arrangements, like flexitime or a home office."

The feedback section involves a somewhat scary 360° assessment by your colleagues, managers and subordinates. An e-mail questionnaire, evaluating your skills and abilities, is sent to people you select to provide you with an objective evaluation of your ability as a manager.

As part of the feedback, you can also benchmark your salary with other people from your industry and management level who have registered on Next. Cook once again stresses that this is not a definitive study, but it does give a sense of what people are earning.

The next section takes everything you have worked on thus far and helps you to decide how to meet your career advancement goals, and even whether those goals match your mission statement and career anchor. There is also a CV-generating facility and a journal.

In the final section, management levels, your management skills are assessed in terms of where you are today and where you would like to be.

Simon Davies, principal in Partners in Performance International, says he doesn't know Next but knows of similar sites. "It's a great idea," he says.

He says the tool is especially useful in South Africa, where many people do not have access to a coach.

"These are the things that coaches do. Helping people understand them-



**DIGITAL AID:** A computer is all you need to hook up with a coach Picture: EPA

selves, who they are and what their strengths are," he says.

One of the most useful aspects of the tool is that you can save your work and continue later. Davies says this is vital because people can be intimidated by the thought of having to spend countless hours at the com-

puter before getting feedback.

I completed the exercises over a few days, about half an hour at a time, and remained focused and interested. It is also not a one-off exercise. Ideally, it should be done regularly to keep you up to date with your progress and goals.

