

## **My search for work and my gaining university education several times that didn't help when really it should have**

This is going to be difficult to articulate as for some reason I find it very difficult to explain even to myself.

I have never had much luck in work, by that I mean I have never had work that paid me enough for a house or decent car but I have had many years of study and employment as an adult.

My problems originate from leaving school at sixteen without formal qualifications which actually was quite common in the mid 1980s

I had work through the mid eighties and early nineties. I worked in a supermarket from the age of sixteen to nineteen then at my father's small business until I was 24. I studied in 1992 aged 23 to 24 with the Open University. I did T102 Living with technology, which taught you how to use a computer amongst other things. There were about six modules all with about 700 word essays and multiple choice tests, there was also a 3,000 essay and a 3 hour exam at the end. I felt it was all the studying most people would ever need including the equivalency of GCSE maths, which just as a matter of record is something that about 75% of the adult population doesn't have.

I gained nothing from T102 but I still think it was enough education to get me a good job but in actuality sadly for me it had no real value other than to move you on to the next level of education which is what I did by studying information science at university but I found the maths and statistics too difficult and I dropped out the following summer aged 25 years. I searched for work for the first time in my life and

found no opportunities so I signed on unemployment benefit for the first time. I took unemployment benefit for a year before going to a college of higher education to study business information technology, which I found much easier this time around.

As a mature student I graduated with an HND when I was 27 and a science degree when I was 28. I then moved to Hong Kong, I immediately started looking for work but found no opportunities but luckily I did find English teaching and taught there for the next three years but it was only part time and wouldn't have earned me enough to live on. I also studied an MBA with a good UK university by distance learning I passed the post graduate diploma in business administration in 2001 when I was 32 years old but I failed some of the modules and so didn't gain the full MBA.

I have recently found out that as a post graduate diploma holder in 2001 I would have been qualified in the top 5% of the working population of England and Wales which is quite impressive and I was only 32 years old at the time. I was working as a university teacher in Thailand at the time but when I left that job after a year in 2001 I firstly, couldn't find another job in Thailand and then returning to England in May 2002 at the age of 34 I couldn't find any job doing anything in England so I lived off savings during the summer of 2002 and applied to study a further education PGCE in the Autumn, I was accepted and was given a bursary to live on which was a real relief. I passed the PGCE in 2003 at the age of 35 and got a job teaching in West London which I did for the next two years until July 2005 when I was 37 years old.

I earned quite good money as a teacher but the cost of housing was so high even then that it cost about 75% of my take home pay for the rent of a very modest studio flat near the college where I worked. I was working really hard and with great efficiency but I knew at the back of my mind the whole time that I couldn't afford more than a small badly furnished studio flat, that I couldn't even afford a car. So in the summer of 2005 I decided to resign and live with my wife and child in France full time.

We lived in France until early 2007, me as a stay at home dad also learning French. We moved to Thailand where my wife is from in early 2007 and I managed to get a job teaching from February 2007 to August 2007 when I resigned because I felt really pressured and I was having problems with my health. I was now 39 years old and was still qualified in the top 10% of the British working population but had no house, no car and had just resigned from a very stressful job that paid about the same as welfare in the UK.

Again, I can back to England in the summer of 2007 and immediately sought medical advice in the hope of quick treatment and a return to work, in reality I had to wait for three months for my first consultation and a further three months for a second opinion followed by two months for some treatment which wasn't very effective. All this time I was on contribution based incapacity benefit. I had to wait until the spring of 2009 for an operation which helped alleviate my medical condition, by which time I was 41 years old and my wife and children were now living in London.

One thing I'd like to add here is not finding work and feeling frustrated it occurred to me the one thing I could do is make a website of my English teaching experience and in a way see if it was used by anyone to somehow vindicate my

feelings of being left on the shelf unfairly. I started <http://third-conditional.net> in April 2008 with some IELTS Powerpoints and various other things, bearing in mind that according to the Rowntree Foundation (JRF) about 12 million adults have such poor computing ability they struggle with emails and online application forms I was showing some ability that would be measurable here and also had many qualities that should be useful in the workplace. I found that over the last ten years a total of about 120,000 people have been to my website. I haven't made a single penny in fact, it costs me money but in a way it has proved to be somewhat successful which I'm pleased about.

I sincerely looked for work from 2008 and had two interviews through the graduate teacher training registry to do another PGCE this one in secondary education. I was made one offer and the other course was full. The offer I was made depended on me gaining GCSE maths and English as they didn't accept my equivalency, which I ended up declining. I did however successfully volunteer at one of London's top museums for nearly three years from May 2009 to March 2012 and I was offered a master's degree in intercultural communication, which I declined. All this time I was still on incapacity benefit, which was lucky and I also had assistance from my family.

My wife and children returned to Thailand in early 2013 and I remained in England because I needed the health service but I was still eager to find work if possible. I started to collate my job applications in a folder in my email account, I recently did a total and there were 818 emails most of which were unanswered job applications from 2009 to 2017.

I have been lucky in a way because I was on incapacity benefit and that changed to employment support allowance

so my essentials have always been met plus I've been lucky with some family support but as I mentioned I have also tried very hard to get reasonable employment. When you consider that 1.2 million adults in London don't have any qualifications but that nearly 2.5 million more have level 4 qualifications or above there is increasing competition for anything that takes an education but no consideration of the clear water between all the level 4s and the 1.2 million people with no qualifications or the huge amount you have to pay for basic housing even if you're lucky enough to get a job both of which I think severely affected my mental health.

The statistics used for assessing education levels in England and Wales have become increasingly murky over the last decade and the system has in recent years resorted to level 4+ to include anyone who is educated above A Level standard which simply isn't fair and shows a rather deceitful and underhanded strategy for dealing with the increasing numbers of highly educated people like myself who simply don't get the opportunities they've studied so hard for and many like myself are left applying for work with the 1.2 million people who have no qualifications because try as they might they are not getting chosen for work and although starting your own business sounds like a good idea it can be very difficult to find a niche.

Filling in a ten page application form for a job you're qualified to do at face value is just part of the job application process as is giving addresses for two referees one of which is your most recent employer but the reality of work is that apparently you're applying for a job with as many as 200 other people so the odds that you're successful are quite small whether you like it or not even if you have recent experience, current referees and present everything that is asked for in the job and personal specification which can be

very good at weeding out people with questions like 'show how you have determinedly enforced equal opportunities in the recent past' which lets be honest is a question that may be used to make a short list of people who don't have that recent experience but who also are very well intentioned and very well educated and only through lack of opportunity are unable to meet that criteria which is going to become increasingly like a vicious circle where as time goes by they are increasingly less likely to meet some of these job criteria and their referees are going to become stale which could render them unemployable yet highly educated, motivated and well intentioned in a very short period of time.

The question I have had for the past five years are 'then what do I do now?' Any job? Would you like to do some further training?

It's all very unfair to an educated family man.

Mark Benniman September 2018