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Introduction

I grew up in a house where work was a dirty word. It meant something you'd rather not be doing. It was just a distraction from the better business of living.

My parents were unambitious and unconnected, my dad didn't know anyone else's influential dad, my mum didn't aspire to earn a certain salary or to own a specific kind of car. For them, the concept of aspiration made very little sense because they already had everything they could possibly want: love, comedy, comfort and time to enjoy those things.

But they were grafters.

They knew that if you wanted to protect the stuff that mattered at home, you needed to put the hours in elsewhere. To fund fun time. One of my first life lessons was that if you want treats you have to work for them: those KFC family bucket feasts don't pay for themselves. I really love KFC.

But work is so much a part of how we all live that it doesn't make sense to think of it as just a distraction. Even if you are in the rare situation of working 9 to 5, five days a week, and getting eight hours' sleep a night, you're spending well over a third of your waking hours at work. It takes up too much of your day-to-day to be an afterthought.

How we spend those hours has a fundamental impact on the quality of our lives. The UN's wonderfully

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titled *World Happiness Report*, which surveys thousands of people around the globe, shows that not only are people who are employed much happier than those who are not, but that managers, executives and officials feel much more satisfied with their lives than people in other roles.¹ The balance between the variety of tasks, our opportunities to choose what we do and the support we get from our colleagues contributes greatly to our happiness.

Our social status and relationships are tied up in what we do for a living. You've probably been asked 'Where do you want to be in ten years' time?' If you're anything like me, the weight of expectation in that question can make you feel pretty inadequate as you trawl through the sudden, alarming void of your mind to come up with something that sounds impressive. Or at least feasible. But remember, anyone who's able to answer that question with total clarity isn't allowing for the fact that our working lives, our adult lives, don't follow a perfect linear pathway from school to retirement. Career is a verb as well as a noun. And actually, it's OK not to have a plan. As this book will demonstrate, many magnificent experiences can come from accidental careers, from unexpected opportunities. Who knows what might happen?

There are around 8 million young people in the UK between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, and at some point in any given year, many of them will be going to work for the first time. In the US that number is 38 million. But our education systems are doing a terrible job of preparing young people for the realities of the working world. A British Chambers of Commerce survey of 3,000

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firms found that nine out of ten thought school leavers were not ready for employment.² So often the advice you will be given is based on flimsy or irrelevant examples, like sixth-form uniform policies which insist you wear ‘business casual’ – ignoring the fact that business casual hasn’t been a dress code anywhere since nineteen eighty-something. School careers advisers are over-stretched and under-resourced and at best they can only know a few industries superficially well.

Going to work is an enormous, life-changing thing. You’ll never be the same again. You begin knowing nothing and then, very quickly, you can never unknow what it’s like to be bone tired from a fourteen-hour shift or the exhilaration of receiving your first pay slip. The experiences you are about to have will change you forever. And yet, no one is really preparing you for them. Or even really talking about it. Beyond the perfunctory ‘congratulations’ when you get hired, people just expect you to get on with it. There are no manuals to help manage your expectations or to reassure you. Compare that with other life-changing moments such as starting a family – all prospective first-time parents read *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. It’s culturally compulsory and deeply comforting because it charts all the approaching unknown territory for you. You begin knowing nothing and then, very quickly, you can never unknow what it’s like to be bone tired from a fourteen-hour shift or the exhilaration of your baby’s first smile. That book demystifies the otherwise terrifyingly mysterious.

This book will do exactly that for your transition into work – a truly transformational time; moving from

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student to worker, from childhood, dependency and security to fully fledged, responsible, tax-paying adulthood. Do not underestimate the scale of this change. Work is, for most of us, central to independence, but so is learning to live away from the structures of home and education, integrating into new cities and discovering how you want to live in a world no longer defined by other people's house rules. It's a big deal. And you have to do it all at the same time. It's exciting, exhausting and nerve-wracking as hell.

There are other books that will tell you how to achieve greatness (and there's nothing wrong either with greatness or with wanting it), how to lead or how to win. But there are so many of these books about that we often forget that there is also greatness in simply going to work. In doing a good job and being paid fairly for it. In being keen and challenged and not bored out of your mind. In having something sparky to say when someone says, 'How was your day?'

I've been mentoring young people for a long time and I'm writing this book because there's so much simple stuff that isn't being said. I don't claim to be an expert at working; if anything, my CV is patchy, strangely shaped and features moments of sheer idleness. But I have helped hundreds of people at the start of their professional lives, and talked with many who have made what they do for work a hugely positive part of their lives. I want to share what we've learnt together. This isn't me saying, 'Let me show you how it's done.' This is more a collection of tips whispered in your ear. It's also a healthy dose of perspective, not just from me but also

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from a diverse collective of people who have been there and done that.

The truth is, whether you're interested in being an apprentice, a novelist or a surgeon, some of the basics stay the same, so we've gathered together knowledge from people with dream jobs, important lifesaving jobs, colouring-in jobs and some rock-solid sensible ways to earn hard cash: the kind of work you really want to do. And we've mixed it together with highlights from some of the most important and useful research about how to perform in the workplace, from leadership theory to project management principles, so that you don't have to wade through those detailed and often contextless tomes yourself.

This book is a guide to how to go to work: the mechanics of turning up, clocking in and contributing. It's what you need to know that no one ever tells you. From what to do before you start your new job, to the questions to ask on day one, to the sticky subject of how to resign – this book will help you navigate the early days of workplace politics, expectations and frustrations.

Whether you want to make millions, make beautiful things or make the world a better place (or, if you're lucky, all three), there are aspects that feature in the daily life of every job, like meetings, presentations and conference calls. To achieve what you want you'll need to understand how to get dressed, build great teams and know where the loos are.

Across your working life, from interning to CEOing, you'll experience moments of revelation and epiphany that range from the mundane through to the game

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changing. This book gives you a shortcut, taking the collective wisdom from those who have gone before you. But instead of showing off about how we got there, we're giving you honest insights and unfiltered advice.

I wanted to write a book designed to help you show up and do a decent turn. It's not about success, or striving for the top or killing it. This is about going to work and grafting to make that a foundation for a life full of love, comedy and comfort.

This book can't give you the coordinates to every loo in the land, but it can help with pretty much everything else.

Good Luck.



Why We Wrote This Book

This book is for anyone ambitious but apprehensive, tenacious but tentative, overexcited and underprepared. In anticipation of all your fledgling careers, the things you will make, the problems you'll solve and the people you'll become.

We wrote it because we felt that young adults were being set up to fail by a system that was out of touch and old fashioned. Through our work with and alongside excellent people who happened to be younger than us, we've noticed the same things going unsaid, the same misconceptions being perpetuated, and the same strange

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directions being pointed in. People arrive at work with an awful lot of wonky baggage, which makes them anxious and uncertain, and contributes to their feeling unprepared. Sometimes it's the result of inadequate resources (in careers centres, for example) or a piece of misguided advice (thank you, parents) or just plain gaps in experience and expertise from the people who were trying to help – but so much of our mentoring seemed to be about undoing a lot of unhelpful assumptions. We spent a lot of time recalibrating expectations – raising them up or pushing them further – or challenging notions about careers that seemed to belong to a much older generation or an employment landscape that no longer exists.

So, rather than trying to redress all this one individual at a time, we thought we'd write it down and share. This is a manifesto for your first years at work. It will take you from your Saturday job to fully functioning, proper professional players. Don't feel you need to read it cover to cover or section by section; use the contents pages to match its advice to your experience. It's designed to be your guide for all the basics as well as for some of the bigger questions about who you are at work and where you're going. It's here to support your decision making and offer a different perspective from the official one you're so familiar with (the one we think is failing you).

How We Wrote This Book

This book has two authors and one narrative voice. We wrote it together because we have very different,

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complementary talents and a shared passion for bringing this idea to life. It's a demonstration of one of the most important pieces of advice in this book (spoiler alert) – that you should work with people who compensate for your shortcomings and allow you to focus on your strengths. That's what we have tried to do in this process. (We hope you think it's full of strengths, or that would be embarrassing, but if you think we've missed things or have a question you wish we'd addressed you can contact us at howtogotowork@gmail.com.)

The spirit of this book is very much unified, but although we wrote it together, we have radically different skills. The 'I' in the pages that follow is Lucy's – it's full of her stories, recollections and observations (they are all real and true) but they are underpinned by hard-core facts and researched insights that are Steven's (they are also real and true).

Beyond our voices, included throughout this text are the contributions of so many brilliant people who all gave us a resounding 'YES!' when we asked to include their wisdom for your benefit. We'll thank them at the end, but this book is a kaleidoscopic, clarion combination of so many conversations between people who share our optimism about your future and who want to help equip you for it (even if *we* will all be dead by then).

Section 1

Starting Out

Where I grew up and how I grew up really affected the way I saw the world. This may be a bit of a generalisation, but I think for most people, having particular dreams, and seeing a way to realise them is a normal thing. It might be something as simple as a dream job, for example, and recognising the steps that need to be taken to get that job. We didn't have that. Where I'm from that doesn't really happen. People might have the skills they need to get their dream job, but they can't see a way to get there.

STORMZY IN RISE UP: THE #MERKY STORY SO FAR

Even if you've had good support at home and in education there are going to be lots of things no one has told you about making the transition into the workplace. It's an almost universal rite of passage and yet it's still shrouded in mystery. A lot of this is simply because people tend to forget about the very beginnings of their career once they reach the apex of it – so you hear about Microsoft starting in a garage but you don't necessarily know how they got the garage in the first place. Stellar

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career success stories rarely mention the Saturday job on the shop floor or the five years of babysitting that paid for the first laptop. But everyone starts somewhere, so consider this section your guide to getting started . . .

Some Myths About Careers Advice

It's not what you know, it's who you know

My grandmother was a dinner lady. She had to be a dinner lady because she was a single mother (my grandfather died young) with three small children. She could only work during school hours. So that meant working in a school. And since she had few formal qualifications, it meant being a dinner lady. It also meant that those three children often ate the same for lunch as for supper, because when money is tight, a school's worth of leftovers are a lifesaver.

'It's not what you know, it's who you know,' was one of her favourite catchphrases. She said it in a doomed tone, with a slow head shake designed to remind you of your place and its fundamental unfairness in a class war she was too weary to fight.

Even as a child I knew this was nonsense.

My grandmother believed that opportunity was something dished out to the privileged and denied to everyone else. She was pleased when my father went to work in the Ford factory in Eastleigh because it was an honest job with a steady wage, although she would have preferred it if he worked in an office. In a suit. My father

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is as unsuited in skills and temperament to factory work as any human is likely to be. He is good at photography and cooking. He can't fix anything, isn't at all practical and he doesn't understand cars.

Her situation was challenging and very hard work. And I think she truly believed that there was an alternative version for people from a different background who could be hooked up and sorted out in glittering, effortless but lucrative careers with just a few phone calls from Daddy, while the rest of us were destined to settle for a lifetime of double cabbage and drudge.

There is, of course, some truth in her oft-repeated statement. It's not just that young people from well-off backgrounds get a helpful push up the career ladder, they are also less likely to fall too many rungs down.¹ So I don't dispute that parents making connections or leveraging influence happens all the time and benefits those kids who are best placed to exploit all that.

BUT there was always a fundamental flaw in her logic, namely that it is possible to change 'who you know' simply by meeting new people. Interesting people, who do the kind of work you would like to do. You can introduce yourself. And even if the idea of 'networking' fills you with dread, it's worth remembering that you're already meeting new people all the time. Whatever job you choose, you're going to encounter new warm bodies. And some of the people you meet when you're starting work are going to become some of your greatest and most trusted friends. So if you know all the 'what' and none of the 'who', then get busy with the 'who' and you'll suddenly find that opportunity is everywhere.

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I've tested this theory. In my career I've had at least three transformative moments when I sought out someone I had zero connections to and ended up with a job. Specifically, a job at the BBC, a magazine column and a fashion CEO role. You've got to get out there.

It's tempting sometimes to imagine that the limits of our immediate experience are hard lines, impossible to cross without a sponsor for safe passage into your dream job. Even if you do have a fairy godmother who is conveniently able to get you work experience at your favourite record label or bankroll the first investment round for your tech start-up, remember that the safe route isn't always the most exciting. And if you don't have parents with connections then please don't ever think that disqualifies you from making them yourself. In my experience, all the best people do.

All you need to do is believe in yourself

People love me. And you know what? I have always been very successful. Everybody loves me.

DONALD TRUMP²

You know what? Total self-belief can be a dangerous thing.

Social media bombards us daily with supposedly inspirational messages urging us to find our inner goddess, or to wake up, kick ass and repeat. We're told that everybody is always #nailingit. Personally, this makes me want to nail myself to the floor and bleed out all over

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the carpet. But of all the dodgy tropes, the idea that all you need is total self-belief is the absolute worst.

It's really possible to stay at home believing in yourself all day while binge watching Netflix and eating Pringles. In fact, I am *most* myself in this exact situation. It's glorious. But doing that isn't going to get you a good job and it certainly isn't going to mean you keep that job.

Self-belief is as important a skill for doing well in the workplace as breathing. If you don't believe you're able to deliver, you'll never get going, let alone see it through.

But self-belief isn't enough on its own. As Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter puts it, 'it's not enough just to *feel* confident. You have to do the work.'³

And sometimes, it can even get in the way. The idea that we have an unwavering, steely core of self-belief that will see us through come what may is unattainable and often damaging. It's also often seen in Donald Trump personality types. Not something to aspire to.

It's perfectly normal to want what you don't have, to wobble when you're tested, to think you might not be good enough, to be intimidated by the polished person next to you, to falter when you're out of your depth or to panic that you are in the wrong place at the wrong time. All of this is healthier than bullet proof self-belief. Because it means that you are paying attention and that you are trying. And I would hire for those qualities over pure confidence every single time.

By all means believe in yourself, but always do so in context. Start by believing that you can get the job done, but know that if you're not good at something initially,

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you'll work at it. If something makes you nervous, you'll practise until it's comfortable. If you get knocked back, you'll give it another whirl tomorrow.

As Kanter says, 'Confidence grows when you look at what can go wrong, think through alternatives, and feel you are prepared for whatever might happen.' Self-belief means knowing you can improve. It's about honouring your potential. So it's a useless quality without a work ethic to accompany it.

Why not become a funeral director?

When you start to think about your career options, you'll already have lots of ideas and influences in mind. They might feel fragmented or contradictory. You might have long harboured fantasies of a job that's half-astronaut, half-vet, or perhaps you want to become a ballet-dancing firefighter? The good news is that hybrid jobs are everywhere these days (OK, maybe not those exact ones), so there's usually a way of blending your interests to fit your ambitions. (For more about hybrid jobs, see Section 8). Or you might have no idea what path you fancy pursuing. And that's fine too (as long as you're making reasonable efforts to discover something). We'll suggest ways to do that later on . . .

In this book we'll help you find direction, but first it's important to suss out where those first sparks of interest come from and to determine if it's a credible source.

When I was at school we had to do a career-determination test that came on a CD-ROM (yes, I know,

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I'm ancient), with snappy, simple questions like 'Do you prefer to work indoors or outside?' or 'Are you happiest in a team or working alone?' Once this pathetic little quiz had finished, the computer would spit out its firm recommendation for the job you were most suited to. Then the careers adviser would turn the lights off in the Portakabin library and go home.

My sister Charlotte is today a successful, inspiring and dedicated teacher of primary-aged children. The CD-ROM quiz told her to be a funeral director. Not everything we are told is helpful. Or worth listening to. Even if it comes rubber stamped from the curriculum.

It's no secret that careers advice can be pretty patchy and the careers advisers you're likely to come across don't always have the widest possible range of reference points to guide you in those early, exploratory conversations (especially if what you want to do is niche, or very new).⁴ The brutal reality is that they sometimes haven't had careers themselves beyond the school gates. In the worst cases, their agenda can be directly opposed to yours. As one college adviser confessed to me recently, 'I took this job because careers is the graveyard shift and that suits me fine.'

Nothing about that is fine. It's really, really depressing.

Although the technology we use to shortcut massive life decisions has improved immeasurably since the 1990s, it's still not smart enough to provide you with all the answers after a spot of multiple-choice questioning. If you're not going to do some soul searching and investigation yourself, you may as well put your faith in a fortune cookie. Because, let's be honest, apart from

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being a midwife, there is no job further from funeral director than teacher. Just remember, not all advice is equal.

Saturday Jobs

A Saturday job is worth more than you might think. I don't know a single successful, well-adjusted person who doesn't credit their Saturday job as an important influence on their lives, both at the time and decades later. What usually starts as a simple attempt to earn some money and gain some freedom can often prove the gateway drug to a whole load of more intense, interesting experiences.

The best place to start is at the beginning, which is usually the bottom. Restaurants, shop floors, behind bars (not like that) and supermarket checkouts – from time immemorial these have been the best places to earn your stripes. And that's still the case. Search online for local opportunities, get recommendations from friends and family and take a look on noticeboards and in the local paper.

Any role that requires human interaction with a business model behind it will teach you a ton of stuff you're not going to learn in college. A work experience placement, an employer talk or a careers fair will only go so far. No one sees the whole of a business like an entry-level employee. It's a view easily lost as you move up the ladder in an organization. It's not uncommon for business leaders like TESCO's turnaround CEO, Dave Lewis, who had senior staff join him at the tills in the

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run-up to Christmas, to get back to the shop floor to better understand their customers.⁵

Here are some of my favourite first jobs:

- **Me:** working in a doctor's surgery when I was fifteen (illegal, but an absolute eye-opener)
- **Beyoncé:** sweeping the floor in her mother's hair salon
- **Warren Buffett:** shop assistant, JCPenney
- **Kanye West:** GAP sales assistant
- **Mick Jagger:** hospital porter

Nothing is beneath you. Rod Stewart was a gravedigger . . . which is more like starting at the end than the beginning, but I digress . . .

Think of a Saturday job as a warm-up – it's not the beginning of a lifelong interest in flogging shoes, or serving ice cream. It's just a start. But it's also a baseline. Once you've been a waiter you can work anywhere in the world. And because your tasks are relatively straightforward in an entry-level job, you've got time to develop your skills without enormous pressure to be perfect.⁶ Those skills will be there whenever you might want to call upon them. On your gap year, in your students' association, founding your first business – who knows when?

Once you've done the Saturday job you'll always know what it's like to be on the other side of the table. Since Daniel Goleman's famous book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* was published, a lot of stock has been placed on the skills we need to relate to others, things like self-awareness, active listening,

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emotional vocabulary, showing empathy and managing emotions. These are vital qualities you'll need in work. They will help you form and lead teams, get the right product or service in the hands of your potential customers, fight ground-breaking legal cases, fill the dancefloor or lead the mission. Keep that in mind when you've got ten plates of food that need to be dispatched in the next five minutes before the next twenty orders arrive. For many people, their Saturday job is their first experience of being under pressure without a support network around them. No form room, no school nurse, no retakes. It's frightening and liberating. And the worst thing that can happen is you get fired. Which isn't terrible in this scenario.

Waiting on tables for a large catering company was how I spent one of the best summers of my life. We were poorly paid, and often tired, but we learnt how to work as a slick team, how to deal with grumpy chefs and drunk guests. How to apologize to customers, how to gauge the energy of the room and how to do a full night's work in a five-inch heel (more on dressing for work later). I swear, I've called upon elements of that experience every working week since.

Three reasons why giving up your Saturdays is a good idea

1. Earning

Instead of £10 it's X many minutes of your time. It buys you a portion of that pair of jeans or these many drinks. And if you save it, your

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summer will be immeasurably better than just sitting at home staring at a screen or going on holiday with your parents. If you really save hard you can protect yourself, push yourself or parade it about depending on your personal circumstances and lifestyle preferences.

As well as enjoying a taste of financial freedom, try to learn about money. How you handle your own finances is often shaped by your early experiences.⁷ The vast majority of young people don't learn enough about money management at school,⁸ so get to know how money works now and you'll thank yourself later in your career. See Section 3 for tips about how to manage your money in the early days of work.

2. Having too much spare time is a bad thing. Particularly when your weeks aren't jammed full of lessons

So many young people I mentor made themselves miserable at university because those famous humanities subjects with eight hours of contact time a week, plus weekends, leaves you with a lot of time to fill. And more importantly, it's solitary time. Library sessions, lie-ins, lazing around – it all sounds lovely but it's a lot of hanging about in your own head. And that isn't always a good thing. It's proven that the busier we are, the more we get done, because it increases our perception that we are using our time effectively.⁹ So don't always

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think of a part-time job as a distraction from your studies. Very often, despite it being a completely unrelated activity, working alongside formal education, up to a point, can make you better at your main focus (your studies) and happier overall. A US study found that college students who worked in a regular job up to ten hours a week had higher levels of satisfaction and better test scores,¹⁰ while a UK study found that in the longer term higher education students have better career outcomes if they combine paid work and work experience with their studies.¹¹

3. Doing something outside your immediate circle of home and friends gives you a connection to a bigger world

Simply by showing up you have improved your chances of doing well in the future. Simply by showing up you'll have more perspective.

There's always something revelatory and gratifying about your first job (if you want to know more about this then listen to the podcast that accompanies this book where we ask a host of people about their teenage Saturdays). From cleaning windows to babysitting, it all counts. The more interaction you have with work, the more you are developing those vital workplace skills that employers prize so highly. Getting paid is a bonus, but there are plenty of other compelling reasons to give up your Saturdays.

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A quick point on the law. Although in principle part-time jobs should give you many of the same rights in work as full-time jobs, the law varies considerably depending on country, age, terms and conditions and many other factors. It's worth looking into this through the information on government websites. At worst, contracts can be a bit murky and unscrupulous employers can take advantage, like the time a restaurant manager tried to make off with my sick pay to fund the staff Christmas party. Equally, many employers are understandably cautious about where your priorities will sit between essay deadlines and the evening shift, or they're worried about the legislation that allows them to employ you in the first place. If you equip yourself on these issues then you can make a case for being safely and honestly employed. Just make sure you're clear on the terms of your contract and get advice if you feel you need it from places such as ACAS, Citizens Advice or the US Department of Labor.

Now, if you live in total rural wilderness, or if you have commitments at home that make it hard to work conventional hours, or if for whatever legitimate reason a straightforward Saturday job isn't an option, don't worry. There are other ways to get involved, you just have to be creative. Think about:

- Podcasting
- Blogging, vlogging etc.
- Library assisting
- Charity work and volunteering (charity shops are a good place to start, as are foodbanks)
- Babysitting

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- Dog walking
- Making stuff to sell – Etsy and online marketplace platforms
- Remote working
- Teaching music to people younger than you

Don't imagine that any Saturday/starter job is too small or insignificant. It all contributes to your overall employability.

How to Get the Best Out of Work Experience

Experience of workplace cultures is essential. School work experience placements, Saturday and holiday jobs need to be the norm for all young people. Knowing how work environments operate, understanding workplace culture, decision making and hierarchies are key skills for life. This skill should be learnt as early as possible. So my advice is to get experience of workplaces, observe how things happen, how decisions are made, how people behave, the language used, the respect shown and experience being part of the team.

ELIZABETH TAYLOR, THIRD SECTOR CEO AND
FORMER HAIR WASHER AT A HAIRDRESSING SALON

Work experience, in all its forms, not only gives you the chance to gain insight into the realities of work but can also be an opportunity to try out an industry that you are interested in. It will help you make connections,

HOW TO GET THE BEST OUT OF WORK EXPERIENCE

gain perspectives and find out about possible future job opportunities.

Broadly, there are four types of work-related learning:

- Workplace visits (which are usually for the day)
- Job shadowing (which is usually a couple of days)
- Work experience placements (which can last one or two weeks)
- Internships (which can last several months)

The benefits include:

- Helping you develop some of the broader skills necessary for employment
- Giving you invaluable visibility into a particular company or industry
- The chance to try out a role in practice, either by observing the day-to-day of people who do that job or getting the chance to do some of the same tasks yourself¹²

Find out if your school or college arranges these opportunities. If not, you will need to organize it yourself by contacting companies you are interested in and finding out what they can offer. Don't underestimate the impact of getting in touch and expressing an interest.

To make the best of your placement you'll need to do some planning:

- Find a role that sounds like the kind of thing you'd want to do, but don't worry too much if you then discover it isn't

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- Make sure you're doing it for long enough – less than a week generally isn't enough to get your bearings, let alone gather any insight
- Find out about the company beforehand, read about what they do on their website and take a look at who runs the place
- Be clear on what the employer expects and make sure the placement has variety, a clear structure and purpose – this will ensure that you do more than just make the tea (although making the tea is important too)
- Remember that if you have a disability or require specific support, employers may not automatically know to make the reasonable adjustments you're used to having in school or college, so contact them in advance to put in place the support you'll need to do the job

Work experience opportunities vary depending on where you live and what your school or college is able to broker.¹³ It might not be that you can find your dream job locally, so it's worth doing some digging about jobs related to your wider interests.

And most importantly, when you are there, listen. Listen hard. Think of yourself as being undercover; gather intelligence. By listening, you can gain a sense of the way an organization works, what their hiring policy is, who their competitors are, what the future looks like. Keep a note of what you do and what you learn about the work and about yourself during your placement. It might not always seem like it, but the employers put a

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lot into offering up these opportunities, so use the time wisely. All of this will arm you for turning your initial interest in a job into a plan of action for a career.

If you're asked to work alongside someone, try to think about what it's like for the person you're shadowing. You are not the centre of their attention; they still have to do their normal work around you. So you might have moments of feeling ignored or invisible. Don't take it personally, I've always said that having a work experience person with you is a bit like having a toddler – you know you should teach them, but it's just so much faster to do it yourself. Having a work experience shadow can be frustrating. Some days deadlines get in the way of politeness, but if you find yourself without a task more often than not, or assigned to a filing cabinet for ten hours, do ask for more. The simple sentence 'I'd love a new challenge today' can get you out of all sorts of stationery cupboards.

Before you go, read Section 3 about starting out in your first job. It's all relevant and should give you confidence going in. Work experience placements are a good, safe place to test how you respond to new situations. The more you engage in all of it, the better equipped you'll be when you find yourself in a real-life version of going to work. Afterwards, talk to your peers about their time, glean as much as you can from the breadth of your year group's experience, and if there's something that sounds interesting, start investigating that as a future possibility.

Finally, *always* ask for feedback. Even if you sulked at Simon on reception and spilt your flat white on the CEO and accidentally swore at a customer – ask for feedback. Don't rely on the official system, this isn't about filling in a

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form and dutifully handing it to your tutor. What you need if you are to learn anything is to get proper, face-to-face honesty from someone you spent significant time with. Those conversations are really valuable; they're where you talk about the things that never make it on to the form.

Which means it might not always be things you want to hear. I once told someone that they consistently rolled their eyes at me whenever I briefed them. Her work was brilliant; it was considered, well researched and on time. But her attitude stunk. I would never have been able to write that down without it sounding like a character assassination, but over a cosy chat at the end of her tenure I was able to say, 'Watch your body language, it really undermines what you produce and it doesn't accurately represent who you are. You're better than that.' When I mentioned the eye rolls she was at first horrified and embarrassed and then very grateful that I had told her. I am certain her eyes have remained unwaveringly front and centre ever since.

So, the day before your last day, ask for a quick chat in confidence and put time in that person's diary. Fifteen minutes max. And prepare questions, for example:

- 'What was I good at and what could I improve upon?'
- 'Did I present myself and my work well or do I need to do it better?'
- 'What would I need to learn to be in a job like this one?'
- 'How did you begin your career and what advice would you give me for starting mine?'

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Don't forget to say thanks (in writing – a postcard will do) and, assuming it went well, ask for a reference. At this stage, even a couple of sentences from someone who knows you in a working environment can help you convert the next opportunity into a proper role.

The value of hating your work experience placement

Lots of people have a miserable time doing work experience. Having a miserable time is not the same as a waste of time. I'm a firm believer in the value of hating your work experience placement. Having to turn up on time every day at a place you loathe in order to perform tasks that feel meaningless to you is the best possible lesson in why it matters that you make informed choices about what to do for your career. If that fortnight feels long, imagine what decades look like.

When you're in full-time education, at whatever level, your days are carefully structured to be full of variety and stimulus, society and surprise. This is done by a team of professionals who are paid to expand your mind. That's a gift. But if you're in a job you hate, your days are structured only by doing things you don't care about, on projects that don't inspire you, for bosses you can't relate to. And lunch. And that's it.

So, if you hate your work experience placement, see it as a stark lesson in what to avoid. Analyse what it is that turns you off. And plan an alternative. You might not hate it wholesale, there might just be bits that bore you. Or you might dislike the environment, the uniform or

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the banter. This is *all* useful. Spend the time recognizing the things that excite you in an otherwise banal set-up. Talk to that person in the other department who's caught your attention, or the one who looks like they might be having a more interesting time than you. If you find yourself inputting data when you'd rather be on the building maintenance team, then ingratiate yourself and ask for a day shadowing them. For the staff who are supposed to look after you, having a work experience kid around when they are trying to get their work done can be a burden, so they're usually very happy to lend you out for a day.

Most importantly, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that a work experience placement does help you make decisions about what kind of job you might want to do long term.¹⁴ And that includes finding out what you definitely don't want to do – there are plenty of cases of people working harder to get good qualifications because they were desperate to avoid the job they glimpsed during work experience placement. I think I'm probably one of them.

I never want to go home

If you got the golden ticket and your work experience placement feels like heaven, then lucky you. Now all you have to do is behave like a sponge. Learn as much as you can about every aspect of the work – different roles, hierarchy, logistics, politics and strategy. You have a limited time with access to all the people in that workplace, so milk it. Talk to them. All of them. Don't hide behind your desk sending emails. Don't spend

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lunchtime looking at your phone. If you're shy, remember you will probably never see any of these people ever again, so what's the worst thing that can happen? And volunteer for stuff, get your hands dirty. If you show interest, enthusiasm and demonstrate that you have a pulse, you're likely to be remembered, which makes it a whole lot easier when/if you apply for a job later.

There are lots of things a work experience placement won't do. Like actually train you to do a particular job. Don't expect to become an expert in an industry just by hanging out there for a while – the best you can hope for is a broader perspective.

I feel absolutely nothing

This is the trickiest of categories. It's rare to have any kind of new experience and have no instinctive response at all. But if you really have a vacuum of feeling I'm afraid this is an alarm bell about being disengaged from the process.

So many educators and careers advisers have told me that the biggest problem they face is apathy. They worry that young people don't seem to be fired up by the idea of work. The fact is that early career choices matter. How much you earn, whether you are invested in by your employer with skills and training, and your ability to get a new job when the market changes, are all influenced by these early choices.¹⁵ Being in neither work nor education can be hard to escape, leading to many young people being stuck in an abyss between school and employment.

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If your work experience is like a prison sentence then view it as one: you have to do it anyway, you can't go home, so you may as well learn some new skills or it's a complete waste of your time.

Speaking of going home, it goes without saying that walking out on your placement is the kiss of death. You'll be judged by everyone around you – your temporary colleagues, your teachers and your peer group. You'll affect the chances of other students being given opportunities in future years. You will feel like you've failed, even if not turning up seems like the best possible option every morning. I don't care if you have to drag your sorry carcass there daily – do it. One day it will be a distant memory. Show up and see.

Interning

I've had interns come in, flop on to a chair and yawn at me, 'Ahhhhhh. Not sure I'm going to get much done today, I AM SO HUNGOVER.'

WILLIAM SMALLEY, RIBA ARCHITECT AND FORMER
NEWSPAPER DELIVERY BOY

In gaming terms, interning is a level up on work experience. Internships are usually longer than work experience placements, so they show a prospective employer that you have held down an almost real job for a decent amount of time. During an internship you'll learn vital skills and build your network. But it's also a less