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***The following two cautionary tales serve to illustrate the pitfalls open even to those of us who are conscientious and well intentioned. However, they are 100% true to life; none of this has been made up...***

## **The Tale of the Poorly Researched Graduate Job**

This article was originally written for my first website way back in 2002. It is more or less original, with only some minor changes due to the passage of time. However, it remains as pertinent to me today as it was back in 2002!

In October 2000, I graduated with my first degree. It was a lower second class honours degree in Electronics from Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. Indeed, I had been on course to gain a higher second, but as has been a reoccurring theme in my life, I had some misfortune late on which resulted in me narrowly missing out on an upper second (by less than 1%, in fact). These days employers practically insist on at least a good 2:1, or they will not even look at you. To be honest, far too many people now have degrees for them to be considered in any way special any more.

But not to be outdone so easily, I was determined to make the most of my hard work.

After a number of (mostly rejected) job applications, the managing director of a certain company began taking an interest in me. After a number of informal discussions on the telephone and by email, a formal interview was arranged. As fate would have it, this followed exactly a week after my graduation ceremony.

At around this time, things had begun to move elsewhere. I had also been offered the opportunity to take a masters degree (MSc Computer Science) at the same university. After pondering the question, I decided that it might offer good future prospects, after all, many consumer electronics items were becoming increasingly software or firmware controlled, so I decided to accept the offer. I applied formally and was accepted onto the MSc Computer Science programme. Life was good.

Meanwhile, the company at which I had the interview was in Chesham, Buckinghamshire, which would require a train journey into London and then out via the Metropolitan line. So an early start was called for.

Little did I know that fate was about to intervene. You see, the previous week the Hatfield railway accident had taken place, the consequences of which were packed trans, besides that trains were being re-routed via the Hertford Loop en route to Kings Cross, and in addition, draconian speed restrictions were in place. It was only once I was on the train did I realise what an impact this would have. It became clear that the early start would not be enough to allow me to arrive on time, so I phoned to explain. My interview was supposed to have been at 9:30 that morning; however I arrived after 12 noon. Hardly the start I had hoped for(!). And yet in spite of everything the 'impossible happened' - I got the job! My start date was on November 1st, 2000.

I was given the use of a company car and was able to attend my MSc course in the evening after work, as it was arranged for me to leave early on the two days each week on which I attended. What was a problem though, was that commuting was proving time consuming and stressful, but at least I wouldn't have to do it for ever.

What was more of a problem was that the job itself was proving much harder than I anticipated. Things change rapidly in the electronics industry and the knowledge you acquired at university becomes out of date in no time (at least that is how it feels). Indeed, to be fair to the lecturers, keeping the courses up to date can be somewhat akin to trying to steer an oil tanker, due to the fact that things move on quicker than you can keep abreast of the changes. For example, surface mounted printed circuit boards were only just appearing prior to my starting university in the mid 1990s, by my graduation date in 2000 it had taken over entirely. In the mid 1990s I had never heard of multilayered printed circuit boards (where tracks run inside the board itself, conserving space but making fault finding a nightmare as you can imagine!), yet this was what I was faced with. Besides, having to deal with irate customers who lost their temper on the phone at the drop of a hat and seemed to believe that I carried a magic wand or had a crystal ball at my disposal.

Were these teething problems? Well, at this point my confidence level was still high and I still had high hopes by the turn of the year. As yet, I had little idea of just what a Pyrrhic victory my achievements thus far would turn out to be.

However, it was early in 2001, albeit slowly at first, that things began to change. People seemed a little less amiable towards me, and meetings increasingly began to take place in my absence. The bad news finally came in early February; I was told that the job was not working out and I was given a month's notice. However, I made an excuse to leave early. I feel that once my will to persevere with something is broken, there is no point in prolonging the agony. I am not a believer in trying to close a stable door when the horse has already bolted. Or for that matter, trying to squeeze a quart out of a pint glass.

It was time to do some long hard thinking on where to go from here. After all I had been through, was the Electronics industry really for me? Well - for a time I did continue to apply for some more jobs, but without success - before finally losing interest. As for my MSc, I did intermit for a while as I was feeling depressed and disillusioned. I then returned and completed it successfully. In the time I spent out of work, it made sense to do so; although I did gain some temporary work at the Department for the Environment and later at Addenbrookes' Hospital. The latter I carried out part time until I handed my dissertation in.

By the time I graduated with my MSc in computer science, I had yet to decide what to do next. It always takes me a long time to recover from a disaster - if indeed I ever do. But this is a story I will tell in another article. The real moral of the story, however, is never to overreach yourself. A little ambition is a good thing. But too much can be a route to disaster, unless you just so happen to know the right people, who happen to be in just the right place, at just the right time.

### ***Si Quisquam can vado nefas , is mos***

Following my decision to abandon the electronics industry, I later decided I would like to go into research in the field of computer science. A PhD is virtually a prerequisite for this, so I undertook a mission to find out what opportunities there were at various universities in the field of computer science. Generally, to undertake a PhD (or other doctoral degree) you will need at least an upper second class honours degree (a lower second followed by a good masters' degree is also acceptable).

Indeed, I visited the University of Lincoln and on another occasion, the University of York. Indeed at Lincoln I was surprised to discover how much research was undertaken in association with the gaming industry. This seems odd at first sight - it says something about how public, as well as private, research money is spent, however, it is after all a multimillion pound industry which creates a lot of economic benefit. However, I was mainly interested in security issues in computing at that time, as reflected in the subject of my MSc dissertation.

I did gain an offer from Plymouth University in this field; however no offers of any funding to cover living expenses were made.

However it was Kings' College London that drew my attention. I had been in discussion with one senior lecturer regarding an anomaly detection project. I knew that he and others had been taking a great deal of interest in my dissertation.

In September 2005 I did indeed get accepted to undertake the project and moved from Cambridge where I had previously lived to Islington. I had indeed managed to secure funding to cover the fees.

However, securing funding to cover living expenses was proving well-nigh impossible. I did have a limited amount of money saved for the interim period but that was rapidly running out. Whereas working a few hours a week would have been feasible (this was after all what I had been doing whilst finishing my MSc); but working full time whilst undertaking a PhD was simply not viable (I know my limitations).

The real blow however was that jobs whether full time or not are very difficult and time consuming to come by, and neither myself nor my partner was having any luck whatsoever. She had been in work in Cambridge but it is not at all easy to start again afresh in a new place.

In the end I had no choice but to withdraw from the PhD (which I have been sad about ever since). I eventually ended up working at the Whittington Hospital in North London where fatefully met my abusive ex-wife. (Once or twice people have wanted to know if I am a 'real' graduate, but I treat such people with the contempt they deserve. I have no concern with such people. They live in their world and I live in mine).

I have been asked since by a number of people whether I intend to try again. However it is highly unlikely I will since I am now divorced, planning to emigrate to begin a new life and business overseas, and besides, I feel that the odds would still be against me securing the necessary funding to cover living expenses, since there is only a limited amount of funding available and competition for what funding there is is intense, and besides, I am not getting any younger. I also feel that it is advantageous and much better advised to undertake such a project early before family life intervenes.

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