

# work in progress

10 people's  
stories  
about finding employment



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Through our work at WorkDirections we meet many remarkable individuals. The paths they have travelled on their way to us are often difficult.

The steps they then have to take from the exclusion of unemployment to inclusion in society through employment can be intimidating and daunting. Throughout their time with us we witness these people finding the confidence and courage to effect such enormous changes. We then see how these changes impact on the people around them, on their families and friends, and on their communities.

It is a privilege to offer our respect and resources as these people create their own route to suitable, long-lasting employment. We gain enormous inspiration from the opportunity to play a part in their lives. This book reveals, in their own words, the experiences of just 10 of the thousands of individuals who enter our offices each year. We are extremely grateful to these unique people for wanting to share their frank, often emotional stories. I hope you too will draw inspiration from their extraordinary journeys.

**Richard Johnson**

Chief Executive, WorkDirections UK Ltd

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## Salah Hussein

Welfare Benefits Advisor, Birmingham

I am 37 years old. I came to the United Kingdom to study, from Somalia originally, in 1989. At that time there was disturbance at home. After studying I wanted to go back, but the disturbances just erupted and the civil war got worse. After 1989 hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps millions, came to the West.

When the civil war got worse I had to work to make money to send home to my family. I went to university eventually, after taking a couple of years off to work. I did history and literature, what they called African literature, but it was what I would call colonial or European literature: English, Arabian, French, Spanish. I think I did inject a little bit of my own African literature in there. I enjoyed it. That was in East Yorkshire.

I've worked in restaurants, in the back of restaurants, in kitchens as an assistant cook, as a dishwasher. I worked as a waiter in an Indian restaurant. I've even handled alcohol, which is against my Islamic religion, but I am assimilating.

During the time I was at university I was close to the Somali community. I was always working in the Somali community,

volunteering, because tens of thousands of people came here at once. Most of them couldn't speak English, most of them didn't even have an idea about what their rights were as refugees. Most of them became jobless at that time for a few years. I interpreted for them, I filled forms for them, I represented them, but not as a paid job. I did it voluntarily.

I started my BA Honours in 1994 and finished in 1998. Because I was always working in the community, I applied for lots of jobs for the council, as a community worker, as a housing officer. But the applications weren't successful. I thought, 'I'm never going to get a job.' The system, I felt, wasn't helping me well. It was difficult.

My working life was very low between 2001 and May of 2005. During that time I just did paid labouring jobs here and there. The worst thing that happened to me during the past 15 years was that I became estranged from my own family after the civil war. The whole country exploded, everyone just ran somewhere. One is in Australia, some are in Europe, some are in Canada, some are in the Middle East, some are in Scandinavian countries. I didn't know exactly where most of them were, so in this country, all these years, I was mostly alone. That was the fact of my life, and it demoralised me. Between 2001 and 2005 was the worst time. I would say that I was very depressed.

WorkDirections happened in the late months of 2004. Actually, I asked at the Jobcentre to be referred because I thought I couldn't find a job alone. I wasn't strong enough. I had been to another employment agency before, but I didn't get a good job, I didn't get good help, I wasn't treated very well.

When I came to WorkDirections I didn't think it was going to be much different, to be honest. For me I needed all the help that I could get. I thought, 'Whatever they can do to help me, I'll just take it and see what happens.' A few weeks passed. I applied for a lot of jobs. Sharon was my advisor. To me Sharon was the one doing all the work. I think all credit goes to Sharon. The way she helped me, she just persevered. She could see that I wasn't active most of the time, but she kept encouraging me. She kept doing most of the work. Sometimes she showed me jobs, and she'd say, 'I think you should apply for this.' Some I'd apply for, some of them I didn't, but she did the work. She'd always call me.

Eventually, she brought me an advertisement from the Evening Mail and said, 'Salah, this is your dream job.' The job was as a Welfare Benefits Advisor, and specifically funded for the Somali community. Sharon knew the kind of job I was looking for. We had talked about it a lot. I was looking for work in the community, in my own community here. They lack everything, and there isn't much support. I've been doing this kind of job for 10 years. I was happy to do it, and if I could get a job where I would get paid that would be a bonus as well.

When Sharon brought this ad, I said, 'Okay', but I didn't think I was going to get it. At that stage I didn't get excited. I wouldn't have just left it and not applied, but I had applied for a lot of jobs before.

Then I received a letter telling me that I was shortlisted for the interview. But I had been for so many interviews before, I didn't get excited much then either. I went to the interview. There were 10 people shortlisted. I had the interview. It went well.

A few days later I received a letter saying I was one of the last three people to be interviewed again. But then I received another letter which explained that the funding for the job was changing and it had to be advertised again. After I rang and talked about it they told me I was still on the list to be interviewed.

After a long time of waiting, I had the last interview. During the interview, I kind of sensed that the job was mine, the way that they were talking, the way they were asking questions, what they were asking. They said they would write to me, telling me what their decision was. That day I was really, really happy. It was the first time I felt that something was going to happen. Finally I was going to find the job I was good at, and get paid for it, and I kind of sensed that they had made the decision somehow.

The same day, in the afternoon, I had a phone call saying, 'I'd like to offer you the job.' I was at the community place with a lot of Somali people and I shouted aloud. I remember what he said. He said, 'You were the most qualified for the position, and I'd like to offer you the job.' And I was just screaming and dancing. He said, 'What I'd like to say now is, do you accept the offer?' I had forgotten to say that I accepted.

It's not the salary for me that's important. It's the work, and being recognised for doing the work. The salary is an extra bonus for me. It's something I enjoy doing. It's something that I get a lot of satisfaction from. Somali people come in, and they just keep blessing me, and praying to God for me, because I can help them.

For a lot of that I have to thank Sharon, and WorkDirections. As a Muslim I believe that everything that is supposed to happen

to you happens to you anyway. But WorkDirections, and the way Sharon pushed me, is what she should get credit for. It was the way she believed in me, the way she kept pushing me and pushing me, and kept that brilliant smile on and telling me that everything was going to be okay.

I have recommended WorkDirections to a lot of friends who have been at the Jobcentre for a while, especially people with qualifications, people wanting to set up a business or something. It really can help a lot.

Given the distance she has travelled and the impact on those around her, we and Rosie have chosen not to publish her photograph.

## **Rosie James**

Department Store Section Manager, Nottingham

I came from Lewisham in London. My dad was in the army, so we moved about to quite a few places. I went to school in Leicestershire, but I didn't get on very well at school and kept truanting because I had quite a few problems at home. My dad used to beat my mum up a lot and it was quite disjointed. Dad left, he was told to leave because basically we just couldn't function.

I stayed at school but I kept truanting. My mum was at her wits' end, so when I was about 14 she went to the educational welfare and basically we came to a decision that I'd go to boarding school and just come home in term breaks. I started to take drugs then. I was smoking a bit of cannabis and stuff when I was at Sleaford, and when I went to boarding school I carried on smoking it.

It was quite hard to be away from my mum, just to be on my own, and I did feel quite isolated there. I met someone who actually lived in the town, in a small village. He was actually on heroin. I didn't know at the time because I was very naïve. I was with him for four years. I started taking speed with him,

injecting it, and then went onto some heroin, and it just went from there, really. In the end I was on it for about nine years, just moving from place to place, just town to town, with different partners.

In the very beginning I was doing factory work and stuff, but you've got to get organised to go and get your stuff, sort things out just so you're okay to work. It just caused problems and it didn't work, basically. You don't really care about yourself; you don't really have any self-respect or anything.

If you don't know any different other than that life, then how can someone tell you, 'Just go get a job?' It might be so easy to say it, but for me it's like, 'Well, how do I do that?' I just didn't know. When you go to places like the Jobcentre they talk to you one-to-one but they can't really find out how you are and what kind of help you need.

At WorkDirections you get confidence-building, all the things that a person like me really does need. I was just so grateful to find this place. I was referred by the Jobcentre. The first time I came to WorkDirections didn't work out well because I was in a messy relationship and some people were after my partner, and me as well. My advisor Julie helped me get a safe house in Nottingham for the night and I went to see my mum to let things settle. I came back, I carried on using. It got to the point where WorkDirections had to send me back to the Jobcentre. They had to. I went on the sick.

But all through my using, I knew that I would get there. I've always looked for all the help that I possibly could get, to try to get myself off it. Even when I was using, I wasn't happy. You think you are, but you're not. Nothing's right. Nothing makes

you happy, even the drug doesn't make you happy any more.

It was like one big cycle, where I'd try and get as much help as I could, I'd get to the point where I could be on medication, start reducing, coming off. I'd only be able to stay clean for about two or three weeks. I don't think I was actually happy with myself. I've just never been comfortable with myself, I didn't really have any goals, nothing to look forward to, I couldn't make plans, I'd never been able to.

Eventually I took myself off the sick and went back to the Jobcentre to see if they could send me back here straight away. They said, of course. Julie talked to her colleagues and found me Tammy to work with. She's lovely. I love these people here, because they really get to know you, and you get to know a bit of them. It's more like a friend level, someone who's actually helping you. It just makes you relax, and be able to sort of work with them.

I've got another friend outside WorkDirections who has also been a great support. He's had the same kind of life as me but he's come out of it, and is a bit further on from where I am now. Before I came back to WorkDirections the second time, he was trying to get my confidence up. He was taking me into shops and making me talk to people like assistants and things, getting used to talking to other people who I don't know.

When I came back to WorkDirections they told me about a department store that was recruiting in Nottingham. It was such a brilliant opportunity; the company has stores all across Europe and offers good career opportunities.

To go for the job in sales I went in for a week of really intense training. We learnt all about the company, we had little

workshops, looking at all the questions that would be asked in the interview. I tended to be the one that was always putting her hand up, always asking the questions, and it got to the point where I thought, 'No-one else is saying anything. Should I just shut up and be quiet?' And I thought, 'Well no, because I really want this job, and if I'm going to get this job I need to know everything there is to know about it.' So I just carried on. I'm usually the quiet one, the really shy one, but the things that I'd been doing really brought my confidence up and I was really there with it.

When I went in to the interview, I tried to do the bit where you walk in, and look confident, and shake their hands and all that. But it turned out that there were four interviews going on in the room at the same time and I could hear everyone else talking. It was confusing. And the guy I was doing the interview with walked in with me. I couldn't do the bit where you walk in and meet the panel and shake their hand and all that, so it went a bit pear-shaped from the beginning. I thought, 'Oh God, that didn't go very well at all,' and I came out crying. And I was worrying because I'd written the letter, and I didn't know how they'd take it.

I had to write the letter, because I had to explain my background. I've got a conviction for supplying drugs. I went to prison and I knew I had to declare it, because I knew they'd check the criminal records and stuff. I explained what my conviction was for, that I was under duress at the time and that I deeply regretted it. Obviously it's better to be honest, and at the end of the day if they didn't want to accept me, then fair enough, I wouldn't want to work for them anyway. That's the way

Tammy encouraged me to look at it, which was quite right.

When I got the job I was over the moon. It was only 20 hours a week, but I thought that at least it was my foot in the door. I knew I had to work my arse off, just show them what I could do. I didn't even really know if I'd like it, but I loved it from the beginning. A week and a half after starting they offered me full-time work, and now I'm a section manager.

I like that feeling that they actually need me and I like the fact that I can help so many people. It's not so much being someone important, but knowing what to do. In the morning, you walk around the floor, work out what needs to be done, who are your key people, who's best to get it done quickly. I also love doing display features, making things look nice, because I did A' Level art when I was in prison, and that has helped me use my colours for the features.

When I'm at work I forget where I've come from and how far I've come. It's only been about six months. People that I work with don't know about my past, except for my manager, and I try not to think of what's happened because I don't want to dwell on it. People say to me, 'Rosie, you've come so far' and all this kind of stuff, but all I want to see is how far I can get. I'm just going and I don't want it to stop, I don't want to lose it.

WorkDirections really helps you. Say my claim started on the Tuesday but I didn't start work till the Wednesday after on the next week. You'd have to struggle for that bit of time with no money. But here, they help you with the money in between. They helped me when I moved to my new flat. That's the kind of support you need. They fill in the little cracks so it's all running smoothly.

I never had dreams or ambitions when I was taking drugs because they just weren't possible. I felt that I was less of a person, and I still do sometimes, but what I'm doing now is a big and important job. I love how I can get the job done just as much as everybody else and do things that everyone else is doing.

The other night we went out for a drink and something to eat. It was me, this other girl, and all the managers, and I just felt as if life couldn't get any better at that point. I was part of them, I was one of them. It's like the real world, and I've never actually been here.

My relationship with my family has never been so good. Before, my sister didn't want to know me. My mum stuck by me, but she probably didn't like me. My dad died when I was in prison and I had a lot of other knocks, but it's made me that much a stronger person. Now the world's my oyster really. I'm 24 and I just can't wait to get on and have kids. That is possible today. I'm just so grateful to these people for getting me to take these last few steps.



## Dean Leslie

Motor Mechanic, Shepherd's Bush

I left school when I was nearly 15. I worked at a garage in Scotland for about a year, but I left because we had complicated family problems and my mum threw me out of the house. I actually wanted to be in London anyway, so I just grabbed all my stuff and came here on my own and stayed with my nan. I couldn't get into mechanics straight away because I had no qualifications and it looked like I had no real background in it. The places that I worked at in Scotland were tiny little garages.

I like being a motor mechanic. When I was a kid I used to take things apart, to see how they work. It's like, 'Oh, that's how it works. What happens if this goes like that, and that does that?' There's always something to learn. I like cars; I don't mind getting dirty, all that sort of thing. It's a lark.

When I came to London I started looking for an apprenticeship. I started off in a college, but I didn't like that at all. It was just sitting in a classroom and it was all paperwork. You're not going to learn much with that. You need first-hand experience, that's what I think. I lasted two weeks and then decided it was not for

me at all. I don't want to go back to school; I want to be in a working environment. Then my mate who owns a garage said I could work with him at the weekend, so I was doing that and during the week I was doing a bit of graft, like labouring with my uncle just to earn a bit of extra cash.

Eventually I got a job at the garage. We did everything there: crash repairs, roadworthy certifications, performance cars. He had a lot of rally cars coming in. We used to fit roll cages on the cars. Welding, fabrication, that was my thing. You'd have something and you'd have to put it all together and build it, then you stand back and think, 'Wow, that's amazing, it's done, it looks like that. There's the paper that says how it should look, and it does look like that.' It's a lot of fun, learning and thinking and problem-solving, making things and changing the way things work. I was there for six years. I didn't end up doing an apprenticeship; it was all just straight off hands-on experience.

As kids do, I ended up getting into stupid things. I was going down a very rocky road, got caught, and went to prison for two and a half months for burglary. A day in there is like a week out here. You're in your cell for 23 hours of the day. There's nothing to do, all you've got is time.

When I was in prison, a lot of people were going out one day and three days later they were back in. You were like, 'What happened?' and they'd go, 'Well I done this and I got caught.' I saw all these people doing it and I thought that just wasn't for me at all. While I was in there I did so much thinking, so much sorting out of my whole life.

I came out a changed person. I got the whole bunch of friends I'd known and I just went, 'See you later.' I wanted to have

nothing more to do with them. Before, I used to have so many people that would ring me up and say, 'I can do this, can you do that? Can you get this? Can you get that? I've got this, can you sell that?' There's so much stuff that people nick now. I didn't want to be involved. I changed my phone number, I moved place, everything, just to get away from them. I had no-one. I had no friends, no nothing.

A few of my friends have been in prison too, and they ask me, 'How do you do it?' I say to them, 'Don't talk to no-one. Don't do it, don't do it. So what if you've got no money, if you know you can go and nick this and get that. So what? Just think of the time if you get caught.' And that's what I think. Say if I go inside for two months. That's time I could be working and the money that I'd make from working for those two months would be more than I'd get from nicking something. I haven't got a lot of money, but it's enough to get me through and have a good time, go up the pub, meet my mates, go about. It's enough. You don't need loads of money. You just need enough to get on.

When I got out I went back to the same job at my friend's garage. He actually gave me a pay rise. But I had to stop working there about two years ago when I lost my driving licence from drink-driving. It was fair enough, I couldn't do MOT testing any more. Also, I took it upon myself to take a car out to sell and ended up smashing it. I wasn't drunk or anything but it created all sorts of problems because I didn't have a licence. I had someone interested in buying the car and I was hoping to come back and say, 'I sold the car, there's the money,' but it all backfired. I was really heartbroken. It was all through drink-driving.

I signed on for about two months, then got myself a job at a garage in Bermondsey. After I'd been there about three months, I found out that the people who owned the garage were going to court for armed robbery, for drugs and things. After I found out, I was like, 'I just don't want to work here.' So I managed to just get myself out and look for another job. It just didn't happen so I had to sign on.

I couldn't put that place down as a reference for work. They lost the lease on their premises and went to a little lock-up kind of thing, so you couldn't put an address down for it. It really looked as if I hadn't worked for that year. Especially because I've not got qualifications, NVQs and all that, employers can only go on what I've got there on my CV and through phone conversations and things like that.

I went onto New Deal because I'd been out of work for a year. When I first went to WorkDirections I thought I'd be just sitting there, filling out forms, being bored. When they first told me I was going to have to go there every day, I was like, 'No way! What are you doing? I can't go there *every* day.' It was going to be just literally cold-calling, going on the internet, writing out forms, posting things. It felt like it would be such a dead end. I had already been sending off to so many places, I was just not getting anywhere.

But Gilly was really, really helpful. She helped me write out my CV, she was ringing up people when I wasn't there, she was sending off my CV. She rang me up one day and said, 'I just went into this garage I walk past on my way to work. They want to see you. Just go down.' I came down and I just got the job.

When Gilly and I rang up garages for jobs, they'd always ask,

'Has he got his own tools?' Luckily for this job I didn't need any. To help when I'm looking for my next job, WorkDirections gave me £100 at the end of each month for three months, and paid for warm clothes to wear under my overalls in winter.

When I was looking for work, I had a white boxer at my nan's, a lovely dog. He was deaf. He was a nightmare and when I went out he used to bark, bark, bark! I had the RSPCA round, I had the police round, I had problems with the neighbours. I was coming out of the house a lot of times to look for a job and it was a real problem. Gilly put me in contact with a man who trains deaf dogs using all hand signals, and organised to pay him. The transformation was just amazing. He calmed down a lot and I could take him out without a lead. Now that I'm working he's gone up north to a place where they specialise in training deaf boxers.

There's a lot of help from WorkDirections. I just thought I'd be sitting there with no-one helping, and people saying, 'You should do this,' and telling you what to do. It was more like, 'Well, what do *you* want to do? How do *you* want to go about it? I think we should do this, but what do *you* think?' It was a bit more communication, rather than, 'Right, we've got to do this, we've got to do that, and that's it. End of story.' It's a friendlier atmosphere. You feel more confident, you feel more relaxed. There's no pressure on you, they don't tell you what you have to do.

If a job came up and they were accepting me, it wasn't as if I had to commit to take it. It was more, 'Okay, there's plenty of jobs, let's look for another.' Gilly helped me all the time. It was the consistency. Her heart was in the right place, and it was like

her destiny was to find me a job.

Life's looking up. I've got a wonderful girlfriend, I've got a kid on the way. She's a bit sick at the moment, and she's working, so I get home before her, do all the washing up, do the hoovering and everything before she gets in, get the shopping, make everything as nice for her as I can so when she gets home she can relax.

When I was younger I had this idea in my head. I want to be working in the garage, I want to have this dream woman, I want to have kids. Now I'm 24, I'm working in a garage at least, I've got someone who knocks the spots off my dream woman, and we're going to have kids. A lot of things have come my way and I've got a lot to be grateful for.

Eventually I'd like to own my own business. If not, I'd like to maybe have a little lock-up somewhere and go back to building rally cars. It's just a matter of getting the capital to do it.



**Liliana Rodrigues**  
Travel Agent, Finsbury Park

My father was a diplomat for Guinea so I was born in Portugal and spent most of my childhood in France. There was high unemployment in France and it was difficult to get jobs there. I came here six years ago when I was 23. I thought that here, if you are really dedicated, you can get the job you want. I spoke Portuguese and French and I had to learn English. At first I just looked for any job, anything to get money because I was studying as well. Then two years ago I had my son Marvin and I need to provide for him.

When I first came I worked as a cashier, as a waitress, cleaning, before I went back to do full-time study in English and IT. I started my job search when I had my IT certificate. I was looking for training opportunities because I didn't have any work experience in an office or anything like that. I tried, but at that time I didn't really succeed. There wasn't any opportunity; even to start training in a job you had to have a year's experience. I was looking for any kind of job in an office, just to develop my skills.

I was eager to learn more. I looked for about six, eight months. I did unpaid work doing filing, using Word, Excel, just to get experience. But I needed money, so I stopped doing the unpaid work and went back again to get more IT qualifications.

While I was waiting for my baby to come it was a good time to study because I wasn't able to look for jobs. The midwives in the hospital were surprised that I was doing everything by myself; I was changing his nappy, feeding him, and doing my study when I was in there.

I started looking for work again when Marvin was a small baby. At first, people at the Jobcentre said, 'Your baby is six months, you wouldn't be able to cope. Your baby is too young, you have to wait.' But they didn't know that I was a determined person. I was looking for anything, connections, anything that would get me work, something that would help me with childcare because I was worried that I had to be realistic. I knew I was going to have to work because I am on my own, and I'm going to have to pay the childcare. All that.

One day I just thought I'd have to try again. I went to the Jobcentre. That day I think I found the right person. I showed her all my qualifications. I told her I don't mind if I don't get a high wage. I told her I just want to get back to work, I didn't want to be at home every day, feeling down, everything. She said okay, and she called WorkDirections.

I came here and met with my advisor John. He asked what I was looking for, which kind of job. At first I just said anything. But after that I found out that here you can do what you want. Actually they *can* help you. John was looking for jobs for me, and I looked for jobs on my own. I saw that you can really get

help here, and when they said they were going to help me with childcare, I was really motivated. I said to John, 'I have changed my mind.' I told him I really wanted to work in a travel agency. I worked once before for a travel agent for two months, but I didn't get much experience that time. WorkDirections helped me sort out problems, like they told me they could help me with the childcare, that I don't have to worry about the rent. I was able to focus on my goal.

One day John called me about an opportunity with a travel agency for six months getting work experience, and at the same time studying for the NVQ 2 travel qualifications. Now I work at the agency for three days a week and study with the Travel Academy. I'm not being paid for these six months so my plan was to look for a job at the end of the six months, but after a few weeks they actually offered me a job there for when I finished.

I wanted a job with more hours, so I looked for other jobs and got three interviews in one week. Now I have a job in another agency close to home working five hours a day. It fits well with childcare for my son and it suits my background because this agency arranges travel for a lot of African people.

Coming to WorkDirections gave me peace of mind. I was really worried before. I was trying to do the childcare on my own, and at one stage I wanted to give up, but John kept calling me and offering to help. They show a lot of attention, especially John. If I had a lot of things on my mind, he'd say, 'Don't worry', and he'd help work out the problems one by one. Like, you can get a new suit when you have to go for an interview, or travel costs. I was worried about childcare when I had to go to an interview, but

they use an agency, and this girl came an hour before I had to leave for my interview so we could see how she would interact with my boy.

They say that when you are a child you have the real dreams of what you want to do. Later you change depending on what happens in life. When you see the reality of things, you say, 'I don't think I can do that.' But if you are really focused, you can make it, you can achieve your goals.

I love it when people explain to me their problems and I can help them. That makes me feel good about myself. Eventually one day I would like to have my own business in Guinea, something like business training for young people. People really don't have many opportunities to study in Africa. It would be good to do something like give people opportunities to go and work overseas for a short period of time, then go back home and try to build something.



## **Ben Denty**

Trainee Assistant Manager, Bermondsey

I came to this country with my sister when I was nine years old, from Uganda. I lived in South East London on the Aylesbury Estate. I'm 29. I did primary and secondary school here, then I went and studied in Bristol for four years, did my GCSEs there, and I didn't do too bad. I got three Bs and an A and one C.

At that stage of my life I was very interested in motors, mechanically-run things, cars, motorbikes. When I came back to London I did a four-year apprenticeship with Thames Water working on their vehicle fleets, with day release to college. That got me a City and Guilds in mechanical engineering. It's a trade certificate.

After my four years at Thames Water, I went to university, South Bank at Elephant and Castle. I did a mechanical engineering BSA, Bachelor of Science Applied, which I finished in three years. At that stage I took time off to think of what I wanted to do career-wise. So since then and now I've just done various work: I've done admin, market research, and I've worked at Dixons. At that stage I was looking for something to do in my life.

Basically I wanted to be occupied. I did some charity work helping disadvantaged kids, from age nine to 15 who were on the street, who haven't got fathers, with mothers struggling to keep them, always getting into trouble with the police or at school. It was satisfying because some of those kids, they'd come down there and listen to what people have to say. I'd take them out, a group of five of them, and talk about all different things, what they want to do in life. The most satisfying fact is that through all the work we did, one of them who had been suspended from school was actually settling back to the same school. He got some attention and advice and tender loving care. That was very satisfying, that was one of my biggest achievements. I did that work for four years as a volunteer.

I worked for another charity office in Borough, a Ugandan charity that helps refugees, that advises them on things like housing, health, education. I was doing both areas of charity work at the same time. That is part of my future plan, to work in this kind of area with kids that need help and guidance. I've got nephews in this country that had help from child support workers. Without them, they wouldn't be where they are now. They're at university at the moment. I want to give something back into the community because I know it worked for my family.

There were periods when I was on income support, but whenever I had the time I was always looking for work, and I would always find it. I'm the kind of person that cannot sit still at home and just do nothing.

When I first came to WorkDirections I had been unemployed for a year, though I was doing the voluntary work. There is a lot of

hardship in being unemployed. Being on welfare, you don't get a lot of money and you can't really do what you want to do. I would say that there was a touch of depression. The only way I got away with it was keeping my mind occupied. Going to WorkDirections three or four days in a week helped.

Luke has done a lot for me. The first time I met him I thought he was a very nice person. We set up a timetable basically. Let's give ourselves three weeks of searching for work, going on the internet, going through the newspapers, printing up CVs, and jumping on the train and the bus and distributing them around the West End. Most of it was in sales and customer service.

Basically I was looking to get myself into any kind of paid work, and my long-term goal was to do evening courses while working and become something like a child support worker. I wasn't expecting to get a job like this, working for HSS. This is the biggest hire company chain in Great Britain. I've been employed as a Trainee Assistant Manager.

Luke helped a lot getting me this work. He inspired me, and he was honest. He would say, 'If you want to find a job, I can put the time in there, and I can even go overboard, as long as you do the same. We'll work as a team.' He wasn't saying this and that, going around the corner. He was straightforward and honest. I had to put the time in to accommodate him and he had to do the same. We worked as a team and he was dedicated.

Luke explained to me that looking for work was all about keeping busy, applying, putting out CVs, and eventually you get a job. Sometime after I was like, 'Oh, what's going on. I've had no replies, no phone calls.' It didn't matter; I just had to keep on going. He inspired me basically.

There were different vacancies that we'd talk about in different contexts. Between me and Luke there was regular contact, maybe through email, phone calls, letters, reminders of appointments, texts. There was always communication in that sense, and whenever something went wrong, when we expected that something was really going to happen, and it didn't happen, basically he would pick you up when you were feeling down to make sure you get up and start all over again. That is the kind of person Luke is. He doesn't look down on you.

Sometimes, on the spur of the moment, I'd go in to WorkDirections and Luke would take time out, even in his lunch hour or if he had another appointment. He'd take five minutes to find out what was happening, ask if I needed more printed CVs. He'd ask if everything was okay, check if my phone was working so I could get contacts from potential employers. He'd find out if I needed travel cards to go and put out CVs or for interviews. Just all those things connected to finding work, and the way he did it I think was marvellous. I've really got a lot of respect for him.

At certain stages I did think I would get a job because the facilities that they offer at WorkDirections are excellent, like the internet services and the newspapers, information that they get from potential employers that is available there. So I was very optimistic.

When I walked in to WorkDirections I thought it looked very professional and I had a hunch that from here I could actually get a job. It looked welcoming. It's like a place where you can go and get your head down and feel you're in an environment where you're not in a rush but you can concentrate and use the

phones, get stuff done. The environment is relaxed but it is also a serious environment to look for a job in.

How I got this job is basically that I went to WorkDirections, I was going through the Evening Standard newspapers which were there on the table in the Job Station, and then I just stumbled on the ad. I used the phone there to ask for an application form, then filled it in and posted it back. In a week and a half I got a phone call to go in for an interview. Luke provided me with a travel card and coached me for the interview. He advised me how to approach the interviewer, to be confident, be straight, relax, don't look like you're afraid of anyone. Just be yourself.

Before I went to WorkDirections, although I've been to interviews before, I never had that kind of confidence, I was too nervous, I was fidgeting. Luke gave me the confidence to go out there and be myself, and just answer the questions that were put to me. I even got to ask the questions that I wanted to put to the interviewer. Luke had the experience to advise me. I trusted his advice, and I took that advice, and in the long run it worked for me.

There are a lot of benefits in this job with HSS. At the moment I'm in training and that's going to take about a year as a Trainee Assistant Manager. After that it depends on my progression. I can go into assistant management. Then again, I could be the manager of a shop like this one, or a bigger one. There's a lot of opportunities in the company, I know that for sure, and I'm going to take them and work hard for them.



## **Batool Dawood**

Retail Sales Assistant, Brent

I came here in 2001. It's impossible in Iraq, it's impossible to live there. I was really scared, life became terrible, and there were no jobs. Everything was very difficult, so I decided to leave Iraq with my parents and my sister. When I came here, my English wasn't very good. I needed to improve my English to get a job.

I worked for 10 years in Iraq. My first job was in a travel agent's, but the company closed down. Then I worked as a secretary for two years and I enjoyed that job but I didn't find it was the most suitable job for me. But then I found a job in a fashion boutique, and this was what I was looking for. I liked it very much. After that I found the same job but in a different boutique with a high salary, and I worked there for three years.

When I came here I had to improve my English first so I did three English language courses at Barking College in East London. It's very important, to get a job, to be with people. It was a difficult time, especially because I couldn't express my needs with only a few words. So I improved my English for three years. I'm lucky. I have my parents, my sister, and my brother, but the rest of my family is still in Iraq.

When the Jobcentre sent me here I had no idea about WorkDirections. Before I moved, when I was in East London, I did something like this, a course of three or six months to find a job. For me it wasn't helpful. I couldn't find anything to improve my skills, and it was long hours, from 9.30 until 3.30, a long day, very boring, looking for work. From the beginning there I believed that I would never get a job. Even if I didn't like it, I had to do it. Some people on the course were always angry, always shouting, and being rude to the staff. For me I can't do something that I am forced to do.

When the Jobcentre sent me to WorkDirections, I thought maybe it would be something like the other time. But the first day I came here, it was different, not like the place in East London. When I came here first, I was nervous, I didn't know who I would meet, who would be my advisor, how people would look, would they be friendly or not. The most important thing for me is to find friendly people. I love that.

I was really lucky, because I found all that I was looking for. On the first day I came, I felt that I would be happy here. The first day, I met the manager. She gave me a big welcome and said, 'We can help you to find a job.' She explained that I didn't have to complete the whole time of six months. I could get a job before that, maybe after only three months. And she was right, because it happened. After that I met Katie. She's very nice, I like her very much; she's very friendly, helpful and understanding.

We did a lot. I was looking for a job as a sales assistant in a boutique. From the first day we did an action plan. We started from the first day looking for a job. She explained to me

everything about what we were doing and what I needed to do. We started looking on the internet, through the newspaper. I started dropping my CV everywhere. Katie advised me to go every day looking for a job. And really, she was right, because if I didn't go, I wouldn't get a job.

Katie helped explain how to apply online, and showed me how to pick up application forms. I applied for so many jobs I can't remember, 40 to 50 maybe. It was a very bad feeling when people rejected my applications. But even with some of them that were unsuccessful, I got more confident. That was more important for me, to learn.

I did practice interviews with other staff. That was helpful. I learnt how to relate to people, and use my body language, how to present myself, how to talk to people, and be confident, how to think and choose my words. I had five interviews for jobs. Two were unsuccessful. But then in two weeks I had three successful interviews. All of them came together, so I didn't know what to do. It was something I wouldn't have believed till now.

I did a group interview with 20 people and I was among the 10 selected. I don't know why they chose me. The English people there were more confident, so why me? I'm still wondering about it. I felt sorry, because all the jobs came together. I took the first job, in a ladies' fashion boutique. It's very close to where I live, but it's only two days a week. My ambition is to get a full-time job in a fashion boutique, so I'll still keep looking and Katie will help me.

I came to WorkDirections one or two or three times a week. I got a lot of benefit from WorkDirections. Everything you need, they make it easy. Because I don't work, I haven't got much money.

Katie gave me a weekly bus pass to go and look for work. She gave me money to buy a suit for interviews, to be smart, to have more confidence, to meet the manager or the person who will interview me. It's a great idea. Katie gave me a new mobile phone, because many times employers phoned me at home and I lost two job interviews because my parents can't speak English.

Everything Katie did helped me a lot. Katie's very nice, she's always smiling, and all the people at WorkDirections always give a big welcome to everyone. For me it's very important. They say, 'Don't worry, you'll get a job, if not this time, another, if not this week, another, if not this month, the following month. Just keep working hard and keep trying. You will.'

Since I got the first interview, I realised I really need to push myself, to go everywhere looking for a job, because eventually I would get the interview. I made the decision to go to all the shops to see the manager face-to-face. That is very important.

To be honest, at the beginning I didn't have confidence to ask even, 'Where's the manager?' But Katie told me to go to every shop, go to every boutique, ask to see the manager. I said, 'I can't! I feel like I'm embarrassed, I've got no confidence to speak to the manager.' She said, 'No, you should do that. Go again. Go again.' I like her way, to encourage me like that. Time after time after going into the shops to see the manager, it helped. Now I always ask, 'I want to see the manager.' Because if I don't see the manager, when they look at my CV, they wouldn't care, they wouldn't remember me. They would ask, 'Who is that?'

After I had started working, the manager told me that when I brought around my CV, they liked the way that I approached them smiling and looking smart. They said my CV was not as important as that. So Katie was right.

I feel very confident in my job now, dealing with people. This job is perfect for me. It's always busy. I come from a big family, so I like always to be among lots of people. It is also very important for me to have a job because it helps improve my English. I listen to my colleagues at work all the time and it helps me learn a lot.



**Valerie Baker**  
Childcare Worker, Birmingham

I left my husband in October 2003 after many years of a not very happy marriage. I wanted a little place of my own where I could earn my own living. I plucked up the courage to leave, basically expecting to leave my husband but keep my family and friends. I'm 59.

At first I lived with my eldest daughter but it didn't work out. She had tried to discourage me from leaving. It was a case of 'You're too old to leave, really, why don't you just get on with it?'

I was invited to live with one particular friend, who wasn't happy that I'd been paying to live with my daughter and offered to have me live with her for less. At that time she had fallen out with her boyfriend, so I went to live with her, and we got on really well, but then she got back with her boyfriend. So I was subsequently in the way.

I'd only been at my friend's for a week when I had this accident and I broke my elbow. I had to have surgery on my arm. They inserted wires. It was very painful and then it got complicated. After about three weeks the wires came through my arm, so it was a case of more surgery.

I had been a mobile hairdresser but I wasn't able to do my hairdressing any more. I still had a seven and a half hour a week job at an after-school club. I was a pretty strong person, a strong character, and it was a bit like, 'Well, I can't use my elbow, I can't use my arm, but for looking after children, you just need eyes, legs and ears.' So basically I carried on. I was kind of struggling, if you like, and I registered homeless with the council.

Although I was a hairdresser and a play worker I used to look after my elderly, disabled mum. She was in a wheelchair, and I used to do a lot of jobs for mum. One Sunday my mum was taken into hospital, and a week or so later the specialist said that she'd got about a month to live. So that was a shock.

Because I was working in the after-school job and I was earning the £33 a week, I couldn't get any benefits at all. Basically they were saying that if I *didn't* have a job, then I could get the benefits. You would have thought the benefits could have topped up what I was earning, but no, I wasn't entitled to anything. So I was sort of borrowing from friends, and then family.

Because I was a strong person before, nobody really understood how I felt. I think I was managing okay until I was asking my friends for help. I was living at my friend's and after she went back with her boyfriend she got a bit moody. One day I said to my friend's boyfriend, 'Am I in the way?' and he said, 'No, it's not that, she's just overwhelmed. No sooner do you come to live here, you break your elbow and now your mother's dying.' When I spoke to my eldest daughter about it, she said, 'Well I suppose you are in the way really, aren't you?'

Everybody was just not there for me. It was too many things. I was having panic attacks and I think I'd got really depressed. I

don't think I'd been to see a doctor. I didn't go at first because it was like, you know, you've left home, you know the consequences, you just get on with that. I broke my elbow, and had surgery, but the doctor couldn't do anything more. So I didn't actually bother anybody because I was coping. I was just getting on with it because I always have.

Everything came to a head when I had a fall, because I suffer from Ménière's disease, which affects your balance. I wasn't working at all any more so I put in for Incapacity Benefit with help from a worker at the council. Eventually I was awarded the Incapacity Benefit and a Disability Living Allowance, with back pay. So I was able to pay back the money that I owed. I also eventually got a place of my own from the council.

It was late in 2004 when I came to WorkDirections and was introduced to my advisor Alyena. And for the first time in all that time somebody actually looked at me, in my face. She made eye contact, which nobody had done for such a long time. She looked at me, and she talked to me, and she was absolutely brilliant. She was saying she could understand how I feel, and things like that. She was after me to make me come because I wasn't really doing anything. I arranged to come here every week, two or three times a week.

Because of my elbow all that was on my mind was, 'I can't do my hairdressing.' But Alyena was entirely different. She was saying, 'Well, this is what else you can do.' Because when you're depressed, you can't really formulate anything, can you? You can't make any plans. So I was on the confidence-building courses, and then I saw Judy the physiotherapist for pain management. There were other people as well on those courses.

And really they did help me a lot.

I'd studied various areas of childcare, for interest, when my third daughter went to university. After I explored the options with Alyena and Rina the psychologist, I decided to look for work in childcare. I could do permitted work, which allows me to get my Incapacity Benefit while I am working 15 hours a week.

This was my new life. Here, they were making me feel I had some worth. It's almost like they were saying, 'Well, we've got confidence in you, you can do it.' So I was making myself come here. And it was a goal, wasn't it? They were all working for me. So I had to get in there, and show them.

In February this year I got a job as a childcare worker. I was over the moon, but I felt shocked on the other hand, because I never thought it was possible. I had done a mock interview at WorkDirections for that job, which was very, very useful. The feedback they gave me was, 'Well, Valerie, you come across as being absolutely devastated you can't do hairdressing any more, so you'll take the childcare job.' And that was brilliant feedback. It was true. I had to leave the hairdressing behind. It was such a waste; I'm a hairdresser, but I couldn't do it any more. The girls here were saying, 'But you *can* do *this*.' They helped me see that for myself.

So I'm still learning all the time. It's a constant thing with the pain management, with the confidence-building, and it's fascinating. I've a very much more positive attitude, where I wasn't positive before, really. Now, when I'm in a situation that could be difficult, I stop and think, 'What's my initial reaction?' and then I think, 'Don't take it that way.'

I'm looking for something with a few more hours now. The aim was to get a job, and now I've got this job, and I can build on that, maybe a few more hours.

I couldn't have done it without the girls here. They were incredible. I call them my little angels: Alyena, Rina and Judy. The three of them, they really worked hard, and they got me out of the depression. They'd look at you. They were talking to me, and they were listening to me, and it was like you are giving me your time, and I'm giving you mine. It was the encouragement. They said all the right words, the important things. When I'd be sobbing, they wouldn't be embarrassed or look away, or tell me off, or anything.

I'd kind of lost my identity, actually. Coming to WorkDirections brought me back into the world. I was missing, presumed lost before, but I'm Valerie Baker now.



**Oliver Durrant**  
Singer/Songwriter, Westminster

I had a very good upbringing in a middle-class family, went to high school and got pretty good grades. Through high school I got into music, acting and performance and learned to play the drums and piano, and to sing. By the end of high school it had really got me, and it was like, 'That's what I want to do.'

Instead of going to sixth form I decided to go to college to study performing arts, a BTEC national diploma, the equivalent of two and a half A-levels. You do the whole spectrum of the performing arts, like set-building, technical stuff to do with theatre and stage management, acting, singing, dancing. I auditioned for a small part in an eighties musical called Edge of Heaven that was being performed at the end of my course, and I got the lead part instead. I got a distinction and from then on, performing was what I wanted to do.

When I did the musical there was a production company in the audience who asked me to audition for a tour that they were doing in the summer. I got the part, which was in a kind of tribute show with lots of singing and dancing. I had to start rehearsing straight out of college, so it was really intensive. Over

two and a half months we toured the country performing every single day, sometimes twice a day, to a total of about a hundred thousand people. It was a paid job, straight out of college. Bang, my career had started just like that.

Towards the end of the tour I got approached by a record company who said they wanted me and another girl to front a single they were recording from the show. We recorded a couple of songs in London and when they wanted to record more songs, we did it in Milton Keynes one night after the show. They set up a recording studio for us in the hotel and flew us to Scotland the next day to rejoin the tour. I thought that was all brilliant.

The single was released towards the end of the tour. But it was released on September 10 2001, the day before September 11. The whole music industry went into meltdown, all the promotion on the single was cut and it was just left to flop and fizzle out. In retrospect I don't mind so much. It was a bit like S Club 7, a bit teen-y, though at the time I was just happy to be recording.

For the next couple of months after all that, I was just at home in Norwich, working in a local pub doing bar and waiter work to make some money. I was a bit depressed, because I'd gone from doing all that amazing stuff and having loads of screaming girls asking for my autograph. I got into a bit of a rut.

In January 2002 I auditioned and got a part in a boy band that a production company was putting together. It was mostly vocals but dancing as well. They wanted the band to all move in and live together in London so we could work with the producers. We had to pay our own living expenses and that was when I first went to the Jobcentre and signed on. My parents have always been really encouraging and supportive and helped me out at

first, but they just couldn't fund everything.

Things weren't really happening with the band, and that was when I first went onto New Deal. When my advisor asked about my career goals and I told her I was in a band and wanted to be a recording artist she said, 'That's not very realistic,' and put it down as ridiculous and impossible. I ended up having to tell her about New Deal for Musicians and she didn't believe there was such a thing at first.

The band wasn't going anywhere. They weren't doing anything with us and it got really depressing. We were just sitting around getting ourselves into debt, and a couple of them left. After nearly a year I decided to leave too.

I saw an audition for another band, kind of R 'n' B pop music. It looked more professional, so I auditioned and got into the band straight away. Again, I had to move into a house with the others. It was the same kind of set-up but I did a lot more. The production company put money in, and we were doing stuff day to day. They covered all the recording costs. We only had to find the money to live, which was more than fair.

For this band, I got more into writing songs and we'd use a lot of them. We went on tour and we supported big name acts at the time, like Blue and Atomic Kitten. That was brilliant, playing to loads of people. I did that for about a year, getting lots of experience writing and performing.

It didn't quite work out in the end because at the time the music industry was turning against boy bands. There were far too many out in the market. When we'd take our stuff to record companies they'd say, 'No, no, we're not taking any more boy bands.' Also,

there was friction between me and the guys in the group. Because I was writing the songs, they felt the producers were putting me in the front to sing because I was their favourite.

The producers got fed up with the attitude of the other guys and said they couldn't work with the band any more. Then they approached me and asked to work with me as a solo artist. I started working with the producer and writing songs, moved in with my girlfriend, and went to the Westminster Jobcentre. That's when I was put onto WorkDirections.

I had an advisor who told me about Xposed, a show that WorkDirections puts on so musicians who are on their programmes can perform their music. That was the first time I performed my songs for an audience. Loads of people came down, and it went better than I could have expected. It was really nice to have that kind of support and everyone loved the songs. After that I did a few more gigs, and kind of built up a bit of a following.

Then I got a manager. He was managing a band called G4, a band that was very successful on the X-Factor on TV, and he used to manage Geri Halliwell. I got involved with him. We were writing songs, recording songs, tweaking them, getting ready to make a pitch to a record company. He'd arranged for me to meet Dannii Minogue with the idea that we could do a duet as a way to launch me as a solo artist. But the week before he was due to meet her, Kylie got breast cancer, Dannii wasn't releasing a record any more, and it all fizzled out. The manager lost interest and I was left again with nothing.

I was still on New Deal with WorkDirections, and that was when I changed over to Mike. From the start it was as if he completely

understood what I was trying to do. Before, I had felt a bit frustrated. I know it seems as if wanting to be a pop performer is a complete waste of time, and not a proper job, but I actually did have all my work background, and stuff on my CDs. Mike took me seriously. He'd make practical suggestions and contact people. He'd organise to book me for paid gigs. When I came to see him each week he'd have a list of things that I wouldn't really have known about, like websites to look for jobs, and things to do with music. It was more like a joint effort, really. It made it a lot easier for me to focus on what I wanted to do, to take the initiative and keep going.

I like the whole set-up here, where you come in and have just one advisor. I'm sure they've got loads of people on their caseloads, but it always seemed when I came in that I was the only person that Mike saw every week. It's like you're going to see your friend every week and your friend's got really useful information.

I was still trying to get managers interested. I sent my CD to Chris Herbert, who discovered the Spice Girls. He said, 'We love your stuff but we're not taking on any new people at the moment because we've got too many artists. But we'll keep you on our books.' I left it at that.

About a month later I got an email saying they were putting together a boy band. My immediate reaction was, 'I don't really want to do that.' But it was more credible. They already had a deal in place with Mercury Records, one of the best companies in the country. It was more professional than anything I'd done, so I thought it couldn't hurt to keep going. I did a few auditions and they offered me a place in the band. If Mercury like the

work, we'll get a record deal and they'll give us an advance, a retainer, and a percentage of sales. Our job would be just to record and perform.

It's ironic. This whole time I've been in boy bands trying to get record companies interested, and now the record company has kind of said, 'We want to do a boy band now.' In the music industry it's obvious that there's no set avenue for getting where you want to go.

When I was on New Deal with Mike, I went and did a couple of weeks of work experience on ITV, on This Morning. I did that and got on really well. Literally the same week that I was offered the band I got offered a job at ITV. So I had the choice. Do I take the guaranteed salary, or do I take the big gamble which is the band?

Obviously I took the band, because that's what I've been working towards. But in the TV industry, if you work hard, and are capable, you get rewards. With music, you can work your butt off for years and just not get anywhere. It's mostly luck, really, being in the right place at the right time with the right people in the right mood. I wish sometimes that I wanted to do a normal nine-to-five job, where I know that if I go to work every day I would get promoted and get somewhere.

With performing, though, I'd do it for free all day every day. There's just this adrenalin rush when you stand on stage, and you sing a song, and people are clapping. All eyes are on you, and you can really have an effect. If I can have an effect on somebody, if I can move somebody, if they're getting up dancing to what I'm singing, it gives me such great pleasure.



**Monique Osborne**  
Catering Assistant, Birmingham

I left school when I was 12 years old, so I didn't really get an education. But when I was younger, I loved school. I loved English, writing, reading, and I was good at sport. I got pregnant when I was young, so I came out of education.

In 1999 my dad died, so I decided to go back to college when my son was about 12. I went to college for the first time, and I enjoyed it. I did computers for beginners, and I got really interested in computers. I did maths, basic maths, African-Caribbean studies, community-based project planning. Then in 2001 I did counselling and a Stage One teacher training qualification. I did voluntary work as a secretary at a community sector organisation, and I enjoyed that a lot. And then I was doing voluntary work for the Jughead catering company which did catering for BBC Radio 1 and the Notting Hill Carnival and Glastonbury. I love music, and I write songs sometimes.

I didn't really know what direction I wanted to go in with my life. I wasn't really doing anything. I was doing my education and that stopped for a while, and I was doing nothing, really. In 2003 I went into New Deal and started setting up a business through self-employment help from The Prince's Trust. They

were really good. My business idea was to make beaded jewellery and prints in frames, and to sell some arts and crafts imported from Ghana. The target for the business was to sell to underprivileged people at a good rate. I did some market research and a business plan and was granted funding to get equipment. But then my son got into trouble with the law so I was told to take time off and return to the programme later. But when I returned I was out of time and I had lost my chance.

I asked the Jobcentre if I could go back to New Deal but they referred me here to WorkDirections. When the Jobcentre first told me I had to go to an employment agency I was not impressed. I had not heard about WorkDirections. Then I heard that I could get help there setting up my business again, so I was willing to go. My advisor Emma tried to help. We looked for business advisors, business set-up groups, but it was still taking a bit long. So then we decided to look for a job as well, maybe part-time.

When I set my business up the first time, it was because I was kind of scared to go to work for someone else. I thought I wasn't good enough because I left school early. I didn't have qualifications like everyone else. At first, really, I thought I'd never have a job. Then I did the Refocus course at WorkDirections, all about getting a job, and it was really good. It inspired me, it really did, and I've got a job now. I still want to do the business, but I'm going to work now, because that will help me financially.

Emma always encouraged me. Sometimes she would see that I was a bit scared so she would look for jobs for me. But then it would be up to me to get that job if I wanted it. Because I'd never had an interview before, I got interview training, a mock

interview with someone who was not my advisor, which helped a lot. When I went for the interview for real, I was more confident, because I knew what to expect.

Confidence is really important for work. Especially in catering and most jobs, because it's interacting with people. I see Emma as confident. If she sees me as confident I can think, 'Okay, then maybe I should just be thinking like Emma a bit more.' Before, I was a bit difficult. I didn't believe in myself and that was difficult for Emma. She could see me achieving things, and she was willing to help me get that.

The Refocus programme helped me understand how to look for work. You would come in, sometimes at nine o'clock, to prepare to get a job. Before that, if I was seeing Emma she might say, 'Monique, what time can you come for your appointment?' and they'd be compromising with the appointment times. But with work, there's a routine. From that training I learned that punctuality was one of my weaknesses, and I had to build that one stronger.

Nobody wants you to work for them if you're going to make the business lose. Having a job is not just about money, it's about caring for that person's business as well. So I learnt punctuality is very important; motivation as well. I realised that some of my fears weren't as bad as other people's, so that kind of gave me a bit of confidence. I felt completely different when I did the course, and I really wanted a job straight after. I'd never felt that way before.

We were looking for jobs in catering. After my first interview, Emma says, 'Don't be discouraged, be determined.' I laughed, and I says, 'Emma, I'm willing to take a hundred more

interviews, because I'm enjoying it.' It's like more practice, and I think that's what helped me. The first two failures helped me get the job the third time I went for an interview, about two weeks after the Refocus programme. That was for a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant in the city centre, but they offered me full-time. I have a lot more money than I got on benefits, even after paying rent and Council Tax.

To be honest with you, I wanted to do it for Emma. She inspired me to believe in myself more. She sees things I probably hide, and she's helped me bring them out. She sees me as a confident person, but I didn't feel like that. She's made that come out much more. Even with my qualifications and CV, she goes, 'Monique, you've got a lot of qualifications.' And I didn't think that. It sticks in my mind, what she says. If Emma can say that, then other people can say that as well.

Emma is strict, but she's nice at the same time. She creates a discipline within you. She makes you realise your weaknesses, and how negative they can be, and how you can make things positive to change your life better. And she does it nicely. She's very caring.

I remember one time I came in a bit late. That was when I realised what punctuality was about. Emma goes, 'Monique, every time I give you an appointment, you've come at a different time.' She's got other clients to see. And she says, '*You* want to make the rules.' Then I realised that in my fears and everything I was acting a bit negative. And when I'm trying to run away from my appointment, I'm really creating a problem for someone else. She doesn't get angry, but I know she's a bit let down because she's there to help me, and I need to have her help.

When I came here the first time I walked past the building two times, because I was expecting another Jobcentre. It was a beautiful building, right in the city centre and the security man was pleasant. It's a beautiful environment, it's clean and fresh, drinks are available if you need them.

Everyone here is kind, everyone is calm, the advisors treat you fair, and nice, and it's different. There's no excuse for not coming here. You get transport. Every help you need, you get the support. Also when I had my first interview I was given money to buy a suit. All of that, just coming here, has changed me. I can't really put it in words. It's really good.

I'm glad to tell others about all this because I would not have believed it myself. They help you here. They're not doing it *for* you, but they'll help you do it, and they'll make sure that you *are* doing it so that you do come off benefits because it's not good to stay on benefits. It's scary at first, but you need to do it. You get dependent on the benefits.

Now I'm working in the city centre in catering. I enjoy my job and would like to thank WorkDirections for everything. I know they're here to help. They really care about you, and I like that. And as a Rastafarian I give thanks to the Almighty God for life.



## **Abdul Boulaich**

Hotel Restaurant Manager, Bloomsbury

I was born in Morocco in a middle-class agricultural family. In 1969 there was a little problem between Gibraltar and Spain because General Franco closed the frontier completely without giving notice. He pulled out 12,000 people who used to work in the airforce, the navy, the RAF, hotels, bakeries, everywhere. He pulled them all out straight away. The government of Gibraltar called for Morocco to help and I decided to go to Gibraltar.

I was at college, but I went for the summer to give them a hand. I was learning English as a young boy and they offered me a job as an interpreter because six or seven thousand Moroccans came across the border to look for work, to give a hand and help Gibraltar and get the economy back.

I was 17 years old, working and enjoying it. I translated in Arabic, English and Spanish. I worked in a cargo handling company as a tally clerk, in charge of a mass of people and receiving all the cargo and merchandise from MacAndrews. I married and grew up in Gibraltar.

Since 1980 I was always having part-time jobs in bars and restaurants, mopping the floors, cleaning the glasses, doing lots of things. It was a very interesting job because I would meet people every day, and talk to people. I enjoyed it. I just carried on working behind the bars, restaurants. I eventually became a club steward, in charge of the Royal Gibraltar Yacht Club. I also worked for a year and a half at the United Service Officers Club till the army pulled out of Gibraltar. After that I worked at the Rock Hotel, a four-star hotel in Gibraltar.

Then I said, 'Okay, this is a small place for me.' I would have liked to become something else, like a food and beverage manager, something like that, because I love this trade. In 1997 I came to England from Gibraltar, by myself, though I'm still married.

My first job here was in the East India Club. At the East India Club they said, 'How can we give you a job here? We don't know you.' I said, 'Okay. This is my first time, but this is my CV.' They said, 'We have to call Gibraltar.' They sent him a letter, saying I was a good man, and they talked nicely about me. After 15 days they said, 'Yes, the job is yours.'

I stayed there about two years. It was a good place to work. I learned room service more, more about the trade, more about hygiene. I got my hygiene certificate there; I did a safety course, lots of things, because we used to be trained. It was very good experience.

After that I went back to Gibraltar. I stayed there one year. When I came back to England my second job was at a Gurin-owned five-star hotel, The Victoria. It was one of the best hotels in that area and I did a lot of different things there.

One day in 2003 while I was on leave from work, I was just walking home through a park. Some strangers came up to me and asked for a cigarette. When I said, 'I'm sorry, I don't smoke,' one of them jumped on me and hit me in my face. I started to struggle with them, the four of them. They got me to the ground, they put a knife in my leg, my eyes were blue. I couldn't see anything. My ribs were broken, I was unconscious. They took my mobile phone and some little change.

I finished up in the King's College Hospital. I found myself with two policemen taking a picture of me. They got only one of the men. I stayed in hospital for nearly three months. They removed parts of my lung and also I had broken ribs. I couldn't see much with my eyes, only with the glasses. In that time I lost my job.

After three months the hospital said, 'We cannot discharge you, but we have to move you for someone else coming in because three months is enough.' My operation was one of the biggest they'd done. They put me in somewhere called Passage House, a place for homeless people sleeping rough. From there I had to go to the hospital every month to check my blood pressure, to do tests. I stayed there nearly one year, and then I started looking for work. And looking for work. Impossible. My CV, my age, my everything. I don't know. I was on Jobseeker's Allowance.

They moved me from Passage House to a Salvation Army place for homeless people. It was a little bit better. I stayed there another six months. You've got about 125 people living there in the same building, 15 on each floor. It is not my style of life. If they were gamblers, they gambled more. If they were alcoholic, they became more alcoholic, if drug addicts, they became more

addicted. No-one took any interest in them, they were just there. They just paid the service charge and they were there. They got breakfast in the morning, and they had dinner.

I was so upset. Somebody had to help them. Somebody had to put them back to work. But I couldn't say anything. I sat down by myself. I watched TV by myself. I got two or three friends to say, 'Hello, good morning.' It was not my type of living.

While I was waiting, Victim Support said they would pay all my lost earnings. I've been waiting nearly two years now. I've given them everything. Police statements, everything. They are working hard on this, and they've promised maybe next month, maybe January, that I will get my compensation. That will help.

Then the Jobcentre said, 'You have to pass through New Deal.' I said, 'What's New Deal?' They said, 'You have to go upstairs to sign. They are going to help you find work.' I said, 'That's nice,' because I was looking for work everywhere. I would go to some places for work and they would say, 'You have a very good CV, we'll think about it. We'll give you a call.' Some people would say, 'Well, we'll let you know.' They'd all send me letters. I've got 27, 29 letters from the five-star hotels in London. They would all say the same thing.

Until I met Kate from WorkDirections. Kate said, 'Yes. We will find you work.' First she bought me suits, and she gave me travel tickets, and she gave me a mobile phone. She would send me in many different directions. Sometimes I'd phone her from the place. I'd say, 'I'm here, and I'm asking for a job.' 'Yes,' she'd say. 'I know you are there. You don't have to phone me.'

In summer I said, 'I'm going to Brighton to look because they say there's lots of work there. I was looking for nearly five

months with Kate. She was trying very hard, in many different places. Nothing.

Sometimes I'd say to her, 'Look, just give me washing dishes. I will do anything. I'm not going to stay in that place without work. I need the work.' Then she sent my references to The Russell Hotel, a very good hotel in Bloomsbury, a beautiful hotel. They asked me for an interview. It took three days. First I had an interview with the human resources manager, then he put me with the assistant executive food and beverage manager.

We started talking for an hour. He was very good. He gave me questions, I gave him answers. He asked me to come to the hotel at eight o'clock in the morning at breakfast time, and he said to me, 'What do you think?'

I said, 'This is a great hotel that needs people like me.' He said, 'Sometimes we have VIP people coming.' I said, 'When I am in the restaurant, everybody who walks in is a VIP.' 'When can you start?' he said. 'I am ready,' I told him. 'Any time you like.'

They said to come for an induction course. After that they gave me a job as a supervisor, with a different suit. After two and a half weeks, they said, 'No, you are not a supervisor, you are a manager.' I changed a few systems for the hotel, some nicer and better ways to do things, because I have experience. They are really happy with me.

Now, they say, 'Are you able to work tonight?' 'Yes, no problem.' 'Tomorrow?' 'No problem.' I do the rota, I do silver service, anything they need. They are good to me, I am good to them. My job is 39 hours, but if they ask me to do more I am happy to do it because I love my trade.

I always say thanks to WorkDirections who put me back on my feet and especially to Kate, who was good to me, who helped me. I've got a job, I've got good wages, I've got my own studio now; Kate helped me with the rent for that. I've got family coming to visit me. What else could I ask for? Nothing.

I've been working all my life, since I was 17. The past three years is the first time I've been out of work. I felt myself getting old, losing my brain, lots of things. Once you are working and you are occupied with something you love, something you want to do, you always stay younger. Now I feel capable. When I have time off, I will go and study computers, learn about the business centres, about banqueting. I can go into hotel management. I can look forward to the future.

**These are the personal stories of just 10 of the thousands of people WorkDirections welcomes onto its employment programmes every year.**

We run a number of programmes to support long-term unemployed people, as well as single parents, and those who are not working because of health issues in London, Nottingham and Birmingham.

Our goal is simple: to empower as many individuals as possible to secure better futures through suitable, long-lasting employment.

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