

In my experience, careers advice in the late 1980's was very limited. Long before the internet and when schools had one computer for about 800 children, I distinctly remembered a PSE lesson on what to do when we left school, taught by the most jaded PE teacher.

Armed with a pencil and a booklet, we filled out a type of quiz to indicate a binary YES/NO answer to such as 'I do/do not like working with animals, I do/no not like working outside. Thirty questions and a couple of weeks later for some magical system of interpretation, our results were back.

The results were one of my first insights into the class divide. The kids from more 'well to do'/middle class backgrounds received recommendations to seek valued and well-respected jobs such as Doctors/Nurses/or people who worked in banks.

I eagerly awaited the recommendation for my future career; only to discover the top suggestion was to become a Taxidermist.

My fellow working-class pupils received such lofty aspirations a 'Supermarket Assistant, Lorry Driver, Agricultural or factory worker – all valuable professions, but not immensely inspiring for a relatively bright 14-year-old. How did that pencil and booklet, the magical early computer understand the class divide and place us so neatly into expected professions?

3 years later, my epiphany came. Like many teenagers, I had a part time job in a supermarket, and coming up to my A levels I was offered what my mother considered to be an opportunity of a lifetime, to become a management apprentice in the vegetable department of a major supermarket. If anything, this was the spur I needed to focus on a university education.

30 years later, you may be disappointed to hear that I never became a taxidermist, or a supermarket manager. But how on earth did I get from being a working-class, council estate kid to a senior manager in the NHS?

I know that TED talks are supposed to inspire and encourage the listener to rally for action. I am sorry this talk may be a disappointment as it is more about my unplanned journey through employment in the public sector and a few of the lessons I learned on the way.

In some way, I hope they will be helpful to you.

The advice I wish I'd had:

First of all, choose a career that you expect to enjoy.... And if you don't enjoy it be brave and change.

Role models are important to us all. I imagine that most often we consider career and job options based upon what we see others doing around us. If we are surrounded by Doctors, Artists, creative types, interesting scientists then we are much more likely to consider this than other occupations.

As a teenager, my world was small – focused on the immediate community where I lived – and there weren't many people around me who worked in diverse careers. Essentially, I only knew those who worked on the land, in factories, supermarkets and teachers.

I hadn't even considered the NHS – to my young brain, there were only two Health professions: Doctors and Nurses – I was terrible at maths, so medicine was out, and I wasn't keen on bodily fluids, so nursing wasn't an option. Consideration of a career in health and social care wasn't on my horizon. So, following in the footsteps of an inspirational RE Teacher, I went to study theology and then onto Teacher training college. Following completion of training, I started out as a teacher in the Rhondda, however, I soon realised. I didn't like children and I didn't enjoy spending time with teachers –or being in the teachers' staff room; it was a place of disillusion and counting down the days to retirement, of course this could just have been the school I was working in but in my heart, I knew this wasn't the long-term profession for me.

My second advice is take opportunities as they arise

I have found that throughout my career, opportunities have arisen. My ticket to freedom away from teaching came from an opportunity to go on a secondment that nobody else wanted. Working in a small team on a valleys hilltop estate undertaking what was essentially social work; just me, a nurse, and a social worker. I LOVED IT. I found that it set me free.

Yes, trying to get kids to attend school, setting up literacy work with parents, helping people find jobs, reduce their drinking and cut back on the fags wasn't exactly easy, but it suited me, and I was inspired by the people I worked with.

From here, someone saw something in me that I couldn't see, and I was encouraged to take an improvement role in Social Services. The rest was history as I progressed through various interesting jobs, to become Head of a Social Services department and now an Executive Director of a Health Board.

Perhaps this is why I recognise why it's so important to give people showing aptitude and not necessarily the traditional qualification or experience a leg up and space to try.

My 3rd top tip is to banish any sense of failure

My parents were proud that I had become a teacher. I was the first in the family to go to university and have a job to quote my Dad with 'prospects and a pension'. Leaving teaching for a strange job doing undefinable community work wasn't something my parents could understand, they thought I was throwing away my education. In truth, I did feel a failure – and a little bit of me still does. I'm glad I made the jump, but now working in the NHS among people with Bonafide professions, professional bodies and Royal Colleges to belong to did still does make me feel a little bit inadequate. So, come on all of us who are Professional Managers, Project Managers, Operational Directors, isn't it time to set up a club of our own? A place for all of us in the NHS who don't belong anywhere else.

My 4<sup>th</sup> top tip is to choose jobs based on what is interesting, creative and where you can make a difference.

My career pathway has been more similar to a plate of spaghetti rather than a staircase. It has taken me 20 years to realise that this is ok. Not everyone takes a predefined route and sails through the same career from qualification to retirement.

I've also discovered that its ok 'not to know what to do when you grow up'. Now as an adult just about clinging onto my mid 40's, I look back and am thankful for my slightly odd career trajectory, it's given me a huge amount of experience of managing the weird and wonderful down to the downright strange. All these experiences have given me the resources and resilience to survive and thrive in the NHS.

So, my message to my 14-year-old self?

- You are and always were good enough.

Ability is more than good grades. Some of my best, most affirming colleagues were like me mediocre at school, yet have made the most amazing clinicians, practitioners, and leaders.

And finally,

- Prize your creativity, flexibility, problem solving and common sense – in my experience these skills are surprisingly rare and when they join forces with others, anything is possible.

Diolch.