

## **Making Yourself Visible on Employer's RADAR's**

When asked to give a talk on how to make yourself attractive to potential employers, I hesitated, what advice can I offer on this?

I then realized that I could look on it from a personal perspective, how have I made myself a marketable commodity in the job market? I have always been a hands-on person, rather than academic and as a result I have very few qualifications. Not a good foundation for employability. I have also been in and out of work for the past ten years, since the onset of mental health problems.

My CV was beginning to look rather peculiar. During this time I had been a Fishmonger, which ended when I noticed that too many people were avoiding being downwind of me. I went on to be a Park Ranger, which is a lot less glamorous than it sounds. I spent a lot of the time emptying the contents of dog bins into the back of a pickup truck; that job ended for similar reasons. I was also a petrol pump attendant and stank of diesel fumes. I began to notice a pattern emerging and decided on something more palatable and began work in a coffee shop. I now carried a more sophisticated and refined aroma around with me. I started to enjoy this job!

Working in a coffee shop did not do much for my career progression however, so I took up a part time position as a library assistant. Coffee and books, the perfect recipe! But while I had an abundant supply of books and coffee, the pay wasn't good and I had very little time during work to appreciate them. So I kept looking for the perfect job.

My search took me to David Lloyd's Health and Fitness club, who I approached to see if I could train to become a tennis coach. I have been a keen tennis player all my life. In return for me volunteering in the evenings and weekends, they put me through tennis coach training.

I was now on a coffee drinking, book reading, racket swinging career path. Not the usual route to career success.

My fledgling career as a tennis coaching librarian, fuelled by caffeine stimulants floundered when I had a relapse in my mental health condition. This resulted in three months in hospital and long battle to get back into work.

I eventually found work at a local Council in Adult Learning. It was not an easy time though, my employers finding it difficult to understand my needs as a person with mental health problems. It was a case of educating my employer about my disability, whatever a persons disability, given the right support and respect a disabled person is just as capable, if not more, at doing a good job!

I am now in a job I love and run RADAR's leadership and empowerment programme, so how have I achieved this? My career history didn't look good, I had a bad sick record, with lengthy periods out of employment, never stayed in one job for over a year, suffered (and still do) from mental health problems and had very few qualifications. How did I get any of my jobs, let alone a high profile leadership job?

The answer is about utilizing your core skills and where you haven't got them, developing them.

Take for instance the Park Rangers job. It is something I had always wanted to do, but I had not got the required skills or experience. I therefore sought a way of gaining these skills and did some voluntary work for the British Trust of Conservation Volunteers (BTCV). Then when a park ranger job came up I applied for it and because of my experience I got it, even if it did turn out to be a bit whiffy (I can still smell those doggy bins today).

I had always dreamed of being a librarian too, being an avid book lover. I applied for quite a few library assistant jobs, but despite being shortlisted a few times, never managed to secure one. Again, I realized that it was experience I was lacking, so I asked if I could do some voluntary work experience at my local library. I only had a couple of weeks work experience, but the very next library assistant job I applied for, I got. If the cap doesn't fit, then make it fit!

When I am applying for jobs, I am a great believer in quality, not quantity. Make a good job of your application and make sure you give examples of where you meet the job criteria and person specification. Don't just put I have plenty of experience of x,y and z without the evidence to back it up. Make sure you answer all the questions on the application form and don't simply provide a CV. Don't just send out the same CV for every job, tailor your CV so

that it has an emphasis on the skills required for the job you are applying for. It may seem like a lot of effort, but it is worth it. You won't get every job you apply for, but your chances of getting an interview are greatly increased.

Always look to broaden your skills. Having suffered from mental health problems and being diagnosed with a bipolar mental health condition, I wanted to do something to help others. I started volunteering for rethink mental health organisation, sitting on their West Midlands regional committee, their Public affairs committee, in addition to doing campaigning work for them. Through rethink I heard about RADAR's (Royal Association of Disability Rights) leadership programme. I applied to go on this and also took part in their MP dialogue scheme. As a result of this training and volunteering for both of these charities, I have spoken in Parliament and at the Party Conferences, appeared in the national press and BBC radio. By giving my time, I gained experience, experience that was to prove invaluable.

When applying for jobs and going for interviews, always give yourself the best chance, preparation is key. Research the organisation you are applying to. This way, you will be able to fill in the application to fit the organisation's profile. Also you will be better able to answer the interview questions and demonstrate your interest in the organisation.

Look on your disability as a strength and not a weakness. It is not a level playing field, those of us with disabilities often get ignored in the job market. However if you sell yourself in the right way, this can be looked upon as an advantage. Take for instance when I applied for my job in Adult Learning. I did my research, and found that one of the target groups for adult learning is mental health, having experience of this myself meant that I could talk knowledgably about it at the interview and add something to the department. I also fitted another slot, being disabled meant that they were fulfilling their role as an Equal Opportunities employer and employing disabled people; an example of positive discrimination. Finally, for those employers who say it costs too much to employ a disabled person, this is totally unfounded. Firstly adjustments are usually inexpensive and secondly they can be paid for through access to work schemes.

Always stack the cards in your favour, do your research, take time with your application and gain the necessary skills and experience wherever you can.

Finally, make sure you present yourself well. The employers first impression of you really counts, dress smart and act professionally.

These are all things that made me noticed on employer's radar's and now I am the Empowerment Manager at RADAR, a job I truly love and find rewarding. If you want to participate in or find out more about RADAR's Empowerment and Leadership programme, then I am available to talk to afterwards. One of the key aspects of RADAR's leadership programme is employability training, don't miss this opportunity.

For application packs, including details of this programme visit our website:

[www.radar.org.uk/leadership/downloads.aspx](http://www.radar.org.uk/leadership/downloads.aspx)

Or you can email me on:

[david.stocks@radar.org.uk](mailto:david.stocks@radar.org.uk)