



It's hard work to work

Jonathan Jansen | 12 August, 2013

I have to confess that I am still bruised by the intensity of some of your responses to my first letter to Jobless Graduates, where I tried to explain the reasons why you are still unemployed. But I see too many human shipwrecks to remain silent on this topic.

Let's begin this time by dismissing three myths about graduates and employment.

First, universities are not the best places for preparing young people for the workplace. As a young teacher with a BSc degree, my first months of teaching were a disaster. I had the theoretical knowledge about science, but I had no idea how to make that information accessible to learners in a school with troubled and talented youth bundled into five very different classes. Universities educate broadly, and only the workplace can train you to become proficient on the job.

Second, the reason graduates do not get jobs is not because they lack the hard (technical) skills, but because they are deficient in the really hard (used to be called soft) skills, such as the capacity for self-expression. You can accumulate as many degrees as you wish, but unless you come as the full package, you will remain unemployed.

Third, in most fields, a first degree is no longer enough; you need to deepen your knowledge and skills and become more competitive in a market flooded with mainly meaningless first degrees. The masters degree is fast becoming the gold standard for entry into serious professional jobs as the global economy demands more high-level qualifications.

So, what does an employer look for in a graduate? You need to do the basic things well. Can you compose documents on Word faster than anyone else? Can you express yourself clearly and confidently in the English language (forget what they tell you about other languages)? Can you do basic analyses on an Excel spreadsheet at the drop of a hat? Can you generate a PowerPoint presentation en route to work? Unless you can do all these things, and more, in the 21st-century workplace, you are out of the race for a decent job no matter what your degree.

You need to display confidence. Not false confidence, that smooth-talking gibberish you hear at political rallies. Real confidence means looking someone in the eye when speaking, or confidently gripping the hand of a client during greeting, or taking the lead in a conversation when everybody else seems to be floundering.

You need to over-commit to your assigned tasks; stay up late and come to work early. Do more than what was asked. When you go beyond the call of duty do not - I warn you, do not - ask for an increase in your wages. That will come when your boss recognises not another South African parasite who counts the minutes she or he works, but someone who commits to the task, not to the clock.

You need to show initiative. People who get and keep jobs are those who are observant and recommend to the boss ways of doing e-filing instead of paper-based filing, electronically connected office diaries, and Skype meetings to save travel costs. But those are already outdated innovations.

You need to be ahead of the game. It is no longer enough to be busy; you need to be innovative to get a job.

You need work experience. This must be obtained before you graduate through a law internship at a legal practice, or by offering your labour free to the engineers at a company, or as an assistant teacher in an independent school during the university vacations.

You need resilience. Young people who leave a job because it requires you to get up at 4am, or because you are asked to work late or travel often, deserve to be unemployed. Unless you learn and value the discipline of hard work early in your life, you will fold at the first signs of difficulty in work and in life.

You need to adapt. How you speak in a company board meeting is completely different to how you talk in a workshop of your peers. How you receive clients from Japan or China is completely different to how you host American business people or SADC politicians.

Learn quickly what tone of language, body posture and humour apply in different contexts. A bumbling idiot who knows nothing about cross-cultural habits will remain unemployed.

That is why studying in an all-black or all-white educational institution already puts you at the back of the employment line.
