GiG economy experience

In 2012 my employment for a Social Care charity came to an end when the contract finished. I applied for several other jobs but with no success. I was 55 years old and l felt that my age was working against me. Needing money to pay rent and bills l signed on to unemployment benefit.

Despite continuous job applications l could still not secure a suitable job. Eventually after 10 months on the dole the Job Centre explained that l would soon be required to attend The Job Programme.

I had not heard good things about this Programme so l decided to use self employment as the means to return to work. A homelessness charity l knew had offered me six months of part time work doing research with homeless clients so l signed onto an Enterprise Allowance scheme that provided: training to be self employed; a small monthly grant; and continued support with rent and Council Tax.

During the 6 months of the scheme l tried to secure further work but the only opportunity that bore fruit was applying to join a Market Research company as a Field Interviewer. The contract was a zero hours one and after we had finished initial training we only got paid per surveys completed and within quota. If l could not persuade people to take part then l got no pay. And in fact expenses were linked to performance so I often ended up out of pocket where I paid for travel to areas for work but did not manage to get surveys completed and within quota.

Over time l got deeper into debt as the little money l earnt barely covered my basic living expenses. If any large expenditure was required such as insurance renewals or a repair bill then l would have to use a credit card and the debt got worse. Due to a mix up when I transitioned from Benefits to Enterprise Allowance, I got into rent arrears with my council flat. This made matters worse and at one point I was being threatened with eviction.

Eventually I decided that I could not continue doing this survey role and I started looking for different work. This was coming up to Christmas 2015 so I thought there would be plenty of delivery drivers’ jobs about. I created a CV for previous driver work and circulated it to different job brokers.

The only reply I got was for a driver/pall bearer role in the funeral industry. I felt I had nothing to lose and applied. The company is an agency that supplies staff to the funeral industry. Again it was a zero hours contract but the owner insisted at interview that I “could have all the hours I wanted!” Unfortunately this promise did not materialise but at least the work (and pay) was more consistent than the Market Research role.

My financial situation started to stabilize at this point although I was still just about managing to break even. I managed to stave off the eviction notice from my landlord, the local council but had built up credit card debts of about £7000. I had done a couple of balance transfers in the hope that my earning power would increase but the funeral agency only supplied a dribble of work. I was managing to make minimum monthly payments on the credit cards but the totals were not going down.

There was always the anxiety too when larger payments such as annual parking permit charge or utility bills were due. And the lack of job security did not help. My employer had a purge on operatives’ appearance and presentation. We all had feedback from the manager that the boss had said; “If their shoes aren’t polished or they haven’t had a shave then, ‘Send them down the road!!’” In the back of my mind was also the fear that if I suffered an injury, such as with my back, (the job involved heavy lifting, in all weathers!) there would be no support from the agency and I would then find myself unemployed and also incapacitated. At one point this anxiety (along with other factors) caused me to seek counseling support through my GP for depression.

Eventually one of the companies that the agency supplied decided to offer permanent jobs in this role on guaranteed 20 hour per month contracts. This was an ideal opportunity because it meant that I could get secure employment with regular hours and employee protection. I applied and was successful. I later found out that about a dozen of the other operatives had also taken up this offer and moved across into these permanent positions.

I would still see former colleagues from the agency at crematoria, cemeteries, etc. I soon found out that the agency had started offering 20 hours contracts to those that wanted them (some still stuck to the zero hours). There was some good natured banter such as, “Oh you jumped ship too soon!” ”You should have stuck around and you would have got the new contract!” My reply was that if we had not jumped ship then things would not have changed. The agency had to introduce new 20 hour contracts because they were losing staff and thus business. I also reflect upon the fact that if the agency can afford to do 20 hour contracts now then why did they not offer them before? The owner of the agency still drives a Maserati (in fact I’ve heard he’s got a new Mercades as a ‘run-around’) and his last holiday was a safari in Africa!

I do not feel any ill will to my former employer. My main concern is that I am now on significantly higher income. I am paying down my credit card debt - slowly but surely. Plus I now have stability, and employee rights and protections.

Mike Spike Hudson – 2018