

Chapter 4: A Futile Chore

The blind bureaucratic rules forced upon me by unemployment have locked me into an endless iterative procedure that cannot possibly succeed. For 13 years this has dissipated my meagre resources which, under the control of my own better judgement could long ago have freed me from this miserable state. [Footnotes]

I strongly suspect that *those* who devise the rules by which the unemployed are forced to go about the task of becoming re-employed are unlikely *themselves* ever to have been unemployed. Certainly not for any significant length of time. Consequently, their minds possess no context against which to comprehend the socio-economic universe as it appears from where the unemployed stand within it.

They devise and regard their rules as acting on the unemployed as a mass. Their view is universal and statistical. They can never feel - and hence cannot possibly understand - the effects their rules have at their point of impact upon each unemployed individual. Furthermore, being devoid of the direct experience and context of being unemployed, any attempt to explain this effect to them in words is futile. Therefore this book is not addressed to them. It is addressed to those who, through their own experiences, are equipped to be able to understand and appreciate it.

My Official Status

For the first 10 years of my career, I was a permanent employee of 4 successive large commercial companies. For the 15 years that followed, I ran my own business as a self-employed software developer and technical writer. During the recession of the nineties, I exhausted over £12,000 of capital vainly trying to keep my business going. For the 13 years since then I have found myself in an undefined limbo.

To the Department of Social Security (DSS) I am unemployed. As such, I am denied many of the [basic freedoms](#) that other people consider to be 'rights'. To the Inland Revenue I am still self-employed, albeit with zero (or very little 'earned' income). To the Customs & Excise I am still VAT registered. I could de-register, but this would put me at an impossible [trading disadvantage](#) in the event that any self-employed work should suddenly materialise.

As an unemployed person I am able to receive [state welfare](#). However, to qualify, I am obliged to engaged myself wholly in a search for permanent employment: *not* self-employment and *not* a mixture of the two. Searching for permanent employment and searching for or accepting jobs on a self-employed basis are [wholly incompatible](#). In order to receive my welfare I am therefore forced to pass up all opportunities for work that may be offered to me or requested of me on a self-employed basis. This is extremely counter-productive since, having been self-employed for the previous 15 years, it is self-employed opportunities that are far more likely to come my way.

Self-Assessment

When the recession of the early nineties first hit and my business dried up, the first thing I did was to research in detail my entire past career and build up a exhaustive career history file. I then used this under the guidance of a book called 'The Perfect CV' by Tom Jackson to develop several alternative CVs (or résumés) in different styles to present my skills and experience for use in job applications. I

also produced presentations for the products and services I had been providing during my 15 years of self-employment. Just in case an opportunity arose that I could exploit covertly.

Based on a lecture topic covered at the Executive Job Club I was attending at the time, I also produced my so-called [aptitude profile](#). This was a self-rating of my own skill-mix against the skills-mix needed for a complete business or corporate team. As well as showing the skills I had, it also showed the skills I lacked for running a business or to complete a team.

I also needed some credibility. I therefore applied to my local Training & Enterprise Council (TEC) for their free offer of a 3-day session with a business counsellor to assess my past business. He recorded a detailed telephone survey of my major past customers and produced a set of [customer quotations](#), which were extremely positive. He also went along with me to see some prospective purchasers of my software to see if my presentation skills could be improved. However, nothing materialised from this latter exercise.

Next, I went through all my past technical notes, rationalising all the information into a knowledge resource from which I could, in the future, generate new software products or write books. I used this exercise as a vehicle for enhancing my skills, updating my knowledge and developing small demonstration applications. I then combined this knowledge resource with my history file to create a comprehensive Internet web site, which presented all my past experience plus what I am now able to offer to a prospective employer or client.

This enormous self-assessment and the resulting web site revealed the following:

- I have over my career accumulated a vast amount of knowledge
- This knowledge is very broad-based
- But it is at the same time also very deep and detailed

Permanent employment is suitable for somebody who is young and highly specialised in a specific field in which there is a regular need for on-going work. After a time, they may start to get bored with the particular work they are doing and move to something fresh. They can then be easily replaced with somebody similar. My long and diverse experience would make me feel very restricted and bored in that kind of role. I realise it. Potential employers also realise it. That is one reason why they don't employ me.

On the other hand, however, my background makes me ideally suited to helping a lot of different people, with a whole lot of different problems, in a small but key way, as and when needed, over a very long term. This situation lends itself ideally to the modus operandus of self-employed consultancy.

Searching For Work

Unfortunately, this is not the way the blind rules of the DSS employment services see it. They require me to search for a [permanent job](#). Therefore, for the first three years of my unemployment, I [searched](#) for a permanent job. I think I gave it a fair try, but at the end of those three years I concluded (reasonably I think) that what I was doing was not working. Furthermore, I could by then see clearly why it was not working. But *rules* carry the force of law. Consequently if I wanted to continue to receive state welfare, I had to continue to follow the rules.

During my first 3 years of unemployment I still had about 15 client sites using my software. To them it was what industry jargon calls 'mission-critical' - their businesses depended on its continuous correct operation. I did not want to leave these people without my support. Since I was the only ultimate expert on the software I had designed, written and installed for them, I continued their support contracts and also accepted the odd day's consultancy work from them. However, this

business was not enough to keep me, and I did not have the capital necessary to expand this remnant of my former business back up to the level at which I would no longer need to rely on state welfare. In any case, being obliged to take the first permanent job that may be offered, I could not legally commit myself to the on-going support of systems and software for new clients. Rebuilding my business, once the recession was over, was therefore not an option, even though, commercially speaking, it would have been the most sensible course to take.

The whole situation was very difficult to manage. Officially I was spending all my time looking for a permanent job. Unofficially, I was engaged in the self-employed support and consultancy for a residual handful of 'former' clients. Thus if at any time I had been accepted for any permanent job I would have had to take it. This would have forced me to break the support service contracts with my clients, leaving their systems totally unsupported. Consequently I had to do this work covertly as an unofficial continuation of my former self-employed business.

Nevertheless, for most of my time during this first 3 years, I engaged myself, as I was officially required to do, in the search for a permanent job. I had to close my mind to the insurmountable difficulties that would arise if and when I actually got one.

I made a list of all the employment agencies that advertised in Computer Weekly, Computing and other (now defunct) industry journals. Then I selected the top 243 of them that advertised permanent jobs (as well as contract work). I then used my own [contacts management](#) software to mailshot all these agencies and record my contacts with them[†]. The mailshot included my new painstakingly redesigned [CV](#). Over the 13 years since I started this exercise I have had 3 interviews resulting from agencies.

In parallel with this I naturally kept up a relentless campaign of applying for jobs advertised in the press. From these, over the past 13 years I have had two interviews.

Also, in parallel, I embarked on a more direct approach. From the self-assessment of my skills, and the services I had previously been offering as a self-employed person, I devised a questionnaire. This was addressed to a generic potential employer. It listed my skills and asked what demand their organisation had for each skill (in terms of the number of personnel employed or required). Its purpose was to find what demand there was for my skills in my local area.

This was the kind of information I expected my local [Training & Enterprise Council](#) to have. I therefore sent my questionnaire to my local TEC and asked them if they could supply me with a list of companies within the county who would be in the market for those skills, or alternatively, mail out my questionnaire (which obviously I could not afford to do on state welfare) with their next business survey. They said they did not have the kind of information I was asking for, and they refused to mail out my questionnaire. Consequently this ideally focused job search information was for me unobtainable.

A Grand Reappraisal

At the end of that first 3 years of unemployment, it had become blindingly obvious that there were some insurmountable fundamental reasons why my quest to find a permanent job was not going to work. Furthermore, I knew that these reasons were way outside my control and my ability to influence. I therefore embarked on a full reappraisal of my options. I decided to follow two concurrent and parallel paths: one official, one covert.

Officially, I continued the [futile process](#) of applying for permanent jobs in accordance with my statutory obligation and condition for continuing to receive state welfare. The other was to try to rebuild my self-employed business covertly. I was to take up residence in what could be called a 'grey

area' of the law. In other words, an area in which I was morally doing the right and sensible thing, but in which various mutually incompatible pieces of irresponsible and ill-thought-out legislation had placed me (and I suspect hundreds of thousands of others like me) between a rock and a hard place.

I rejected the artificial and wholly unnecessary constraints imposed by the statutory incompatibilities between unemployment, permanent employment, self-employment, and VAT registration. The difficulties these were causing me were not of my doing. I therefore decided to consider *all the possible options* for 'earning' a living for which my skills and abilities equipped me, irrespective of the statutory mechanism through which I would eventually realise them.

After much research and consideration I concluded that all my best options fell into the following 5 categories:

- consultancy: using my accumulated knowledge in IT to help others work out strategies and find solutions.
- [programming](#): producing new packages of my own and bespoke work for clients.
- [writing](#): books for normal publication, and technical manuals for clients' products.
- [teaching](#): courses and one-off lectures on IT subjects at local schools or colleges.
- [employee plus](#): finding a corporate partner through which to develop and sell specific software products I have designed and partly developed.

I further decided that, provided it did not occur at a time that would harm any of my children's education, I was prepared to [relocate](#) to any amenable part of the world where the local economy would allow me to practice my software skills in return for a reasonable living.

Skill Updates

Throughout my 13 years of unemployment, I dedicated roughly half my time to a self-devised programme for bringing and keeping my knowledge and skills up to date. This programme consisted mostly of reading books, attending free industry seminars and practising what I learned by applying it using my own computer equipment. Some of the subjects I covered, and in which I now have considerable competence, are:

- The Internet: its origins, history, technologies, facilities and how to use it.
- HTML: the hypertext mark-up language in which this book is written.
- JavaScript: interactive extensions to HTML (used in my own Web site).
- Java: the programming language in which I wrote applets for my Web site.
- Web sites: how to design them and set them up on servers.
- computer networks: mainly Ethernet & token ring technologies & protocols.
- [neural networks](#): problem solving software based in part on brain structure.

Purely out of personal interest I read quite a lot on [chaos theory](#) and ended up writing various pieces of software (including several applets on my web site) to illustrate some of the phenomena associated with chaos.

One would suppose that with the above areas of knowledge and expertise, built upon the previous 25 years of industry experience, I would be in high demand. However, I was soon to discover that there were irrational and insurmountable barriers between my painstakingly acquired expertise and its application to gainful employment.

Barriers

The most sensible and viable option for me now would be to start (or more correctly, restart) my business as a self-employed software developer and technical writer. But all the same barriers to

success that resulted in my failure during the recession of the early 1990s are still there. The most imposing of these are:

- [capital starvation](#)
- [the image barrier](#)
- [personality barrier](#)
- [corporate marketing](#)
- [market prejudice](#)
- [restrictive practices](#)
- [unfair foreign competition](#)
- [corporate bullying](#)

These barriers are way beyond my control and influence. They can be overcome (or more correctly dismantled) only by society and those who govern, influence and control it. And unless or until society dismantles them, future self-employment for me is not a realistic option. Not, that is, unless I can eventually find a sufficient number of a most [unusual kind of client](#).

The only remaining alternative is a permanent job with an employer. However, there are perhaps even greater barriers between the job-seeker and permanent employment. Most are concerned with the ability to learn new knowledge and acquire new skills. Some are concerned with improving one's presentation. With effort and determination on the part of the job-seeker, all these barriers can be overcome. However, these are not barriers to me. I have the skills and I can put on an effective presentation.

My problem is that there are certain other barriers that no amount of determination and effort on my part, as a job-seeker, can possibly overcome. They too are beyond my influence and control. The most imposing of these are:

- [family circumstances](#)
- [interviewer ignorance](#)
- [age prejudice](#)
- [length of unemployment](#)
- [prior self-employed status](#)
- [work mode restrictions](#)
- [cost of seeking work](#)
- [the downshift barrier](#)

These barriers can be overcome (or more correctly dismantled) only by society and those who govern, influence and control it. And unless or until society does dismantle them, future permanent employment for me is not a realistic option. Not, that is, unless I can eventually find a most [unusual kind of employer](#). There is also the question of the [fairness](#) of the Contract of Employment that I would be required to accept. Being long-term unemployed, I am in no position to bargain. I must accept whatever terms and conditions are imposed upon me by whoever would condescend to employ me. This leaves the older, highly skilled unemployed open to a particularly underhanded form of [exploitation](#).

As if the above barriers to both self-employment and corporate employment were not enough, there is yet another thing that actively and relentlessly works against all my efforts to get work. It is the rigid and uncompromising set of rules that all unemployed persons are required to follow in their search for work. These rules force anyone who, like me, was previously self-employed, [to actively and systematically destroy](#) his own market for both permanent jobs and self-employed business.

What Is Needed?

Obviously, I need some means of destroying, overcoming or circumventing these barriers. I cannot create or acquire such means. Only society at large can do that. And the social instrument charged with the task of helping the unemployed to find gainful employment is an organisation called Employment Services or ES. I have had a lot of dealings with this organisation over the past 13 years. Though few, there are some individuals among its staff who, in good spirit, see the unemployed as deserving of help and endeavour to provide it as best they can. However, their bold

efforts are forever critically frustrated by the constraints of the stupid rules that are imposed upon them by 'the system'.

These [stupid rules](#) impose one single ready-made catch-all solution to the problem of unemployment. The trouble is that for me - and indeed, as I have observed, also for a lot of people like me - it is not a solution. A notable observation is that, over the entire past 13 years, nobody has ever *asked me* what the problem is! Whenever I have raised the subject of the barriers I have just described, they reply with words such as, "Well, I can't do anything about that. This is what you are required to do." The result is that for 13 long years I have been forced to follow an endless and pointless loop of application and rejection. It has been a truly futile chore. And it seems to have no end or purpose.

If ever the above barriers are going to be overcome then society will have to provide each unemployed individual with:

- a systematic [job-seeker oriented view](#) of his local economy
- an effective [information resource](#) for finding work
- [adequate means](#) both for sustaining one's life *and* for marketing oneself

In addition, those who influence and govern society will have to engineer a total metamorphosis in [public opinion](#) and corporate attitude concerning unemployment and the unemployed.

Conclusion

Those who govern our society have the power to reshape its economy in a way that would allow me - and all like me - to be able to turn our labour into our needs of life. The solution is simple. Therefore, I can only conclude that they do not do so because they *choose* not to do so. They impose unworkable rules and procedures on us. They despise our counsel as to the reasons why we cannot find work. It seems to me that they don't really want to know. While they wish to be *seen to be doing* something to help the unemployed: they do not actually want to eradicate unemployment. It appears to be in the interests of those who govern society that a reasonably [high ambient level](#) of unemployment be maintained. It appears that unemployment is intentional.

I have expended endless effort trying to discover what was wrong with me. What was it that made all potential employers and clients deem me unsuitable? I attended many courses and job clubs in my quest to find the answer. Many of these were mandatory for unemployed people receiving welfare payments. All have been to no avail.

There were indeed things wrong with me - or rather, things about myself that I could certainly improve. But having worked for 13 years correcting them all, I have long since passed the point of diminishing returns. There is nothing I can usefully do further in this direction. The time has come to dare to suggest that there could possibly be something wrong with the other party in this matter, namely, [the society in which I live](#). After 13 years of trying to put *myself* right, I do not judge this to be in any way an immodest or arrogant suggestion.

But unemployed I was, and unemployed I am. For me, it seemed unquestionable that unemployment was here to stay. Changing my status was beyond my control. I had to recognise that my only form of income in the long term would be state welfare. The immediate and most vital issue to which I had to turn my attention now was simply the task of *staying alive*. For the time being, my inquisition on society would have to wait.

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† This practice subsequently became illegal under the [data protection act](#).

Addendum Jan 2014: Since I wrote this chapter in May 1998, I remained unemployed until I left the UK in 2004 for a better and more respected life in another country. I retired in 2007. I am now 71.

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