

Growing Up on the Job

By Josbeth

Having to ask your parents for money has to be one of the most annoying things there is. They'll never just give it to you—they always want to know what it's for and why. Since you're not enjoying that line of questioning, you begin wishing you had a job. I know this for a fact because it's what started me on my first job search when I was 14.

At the time, I assumed that if I had working papers and a place was hiring, then they had to give me a job. I was wrong. I went from clothing stores to supermarkets and none would hire me because of my age and lack of experience. I tried to look for a job at least four times that year, in different sections of Queens and Brooklyn, but no one would hire me.

I was 15 by the time I finally got one. Luckily, my gym teacher had taken my constant complaints about how much I needed a job seriously. So, when he heard about something called The Big Apple Games, he told me where to get the application.

The Big Apple Games is a program that allows teenagers and children to use school facilities over the summer for recreational purposes, like sports and arts and crafts. It also sponsors competitions between schools. I applied and got a job at my school's pool, helping autistic and mentally ill children learn how to swim.

My First Job: Great but Temporary

Those kids made the job a wonderful experience for me. They seemed so frightened and curious and needed to have someone around them constantly in order to feel comfortable and protected in the water.

One little girl would only dunk her feet in the water and would not dare to go in completely. I always offered to carry her into the water but she would refuse, even though I could see the curiosity in her eyes.

Finally, toward the end of the summer, she made the decision to go in, but only if I would carry her. That day we had so much fun. Instead of playing with all of the kids I dedicated my time to her. Whenever she got scared she would clutch her arms around me. I was so proud of her because even though it took her some time, she somehow built up the courage to go in the water.

That was a great job except for one thing—it was temporary. In August, I was on the prowl again. One night a friend of mine who worked at the Metro Mall in Queens, New York told me that a bagel shop was hiring. I went there the next day and they hired me on the spot just because I had worked before. It didn't even matter that my summer job had nothing to do with bagels. They must have been in desperate need of a worker.

From Bagels to Videos—for Peanuts

I learned how to make sandwiches, serve ice cream, work the register, and make coffee and tea. It was fun but I was only there for a month because the owner decided to sell the place, and the new owner brought in his own employees. Still, it was something to add to my resume.

After a short vacation, I went into a neighborhood video store and asked if they were hiring. They told me to come back on the weekend, so the boss could interview me. I went back on a Saturday morning and they put me right to work (they called it “training”). They hired me mainly because I had experience working a register.

I had to organize the movies, sell greeting cards, and work the register. The work wasn't bad but the job had problems. First, I had to work the whole weekend, from morning till late at night, so I had no time to go dancing or to the movies with my friends. And since it was off the books, they paid me a lot less than minimum wage. I was working excruciating hours for just a few peanuts.

I stayed there for three months only because I was too lazy to go out and find something else. What got me out of there was a family emergency that required a trip to Puerto Rico. I was there for a month, which was longer than expected. When I returned I decided not to go back to the video store.

Dressing for Success

Instead, I went and got an application at a shoe store that was being remodeled. Three days after turning in the application, I was hired. That was a year and a half ago and I'm still there.

My jobs have taught me a lot. You'd be amazed what you can learn just working in a shoe store. For one thing, in the workplace rules are enforced, and this has taught me to be responsible. I have to be at my job on time and dressed from head to toe in proper attire (meaning slacks or a skirt, a blouse, and dress shoes).

If I didn't dress in that manner then I would get written up, and after three write-ups I'd get fired. Lucky for me I haven't been written up yet. I guess it's because I understand the importance of the dress code. I receive more respect from elders when I'm well dressed and make a better first impression on customers.

Another useful skill you learn in the workplace is how to communicate. You have to know how to speak to people, whether it's over the phone or in person. You must always keep a positive tone. Let's just say a customer needs your help to find a certain shoe, and you don't think you have it. You don't say, “We probably don't have any more.” Instead you have to say, “Sure, I'll check to see if I can find it.” You always have to be polite. If you're not, you'll be sure to have some problems with your boss.

Extreme Patience Is Required

Many times you will find yourself in a position where you really don't feel like being nice. That's when patience and self-control come in handy—two more qualities I've developed at my jobs. For example, one time I had been going nuts all day, helping people find what they wanted. Some couldn't find a certain style in their size, others wanted their feet measured, and the rest were driving me crazy by asking me the same questions over and over. "What's the price on this?" (It's right in front of their faces.) "Is it on sale? Why not?" I was totally exhausted and frustrated.

Then, on top of all that pressure, I got one customer who approached me with a nasty attitude and told me he wanted a certain shoe. I told him, "OK, just hold on one moment until I finish helping her." He responded, "Just hurry up 'cause I ain't got all day for this #@!#@."

I wasn't even gone for a minute when I heard stacks of shoe boxes falling from the overhead racks where we store the stock that doesn't fit on the shelves. The guy had decided he didn't need me and tried to get the shoe himself; instead, all he did was make a mess.

To top that, he left that mess on the floor and walked out without buying anything. I was the miserable one who had to pick it all up. And all I could do was curse the man out in my head when I really felt like beating him up with the shoes.

Working Brought Me Out of My Shell

But I kept cool. I released my frustrations by discussing the situation with one of my coworkers. They always seem to find a way to help me laugh at these incidents. One of my friends said, "What a herb, maybe he thought they would give him a job if he got the shoes himself. Too bad he flunked training." Another guy said, "Did you see how fast he ran? He probably thought we were going to kick his ass. What a wuss!"

Comments like that never cease to amuse me. It's even funnier when we have to whisper to each other so the manager can't hear us. On this particular occasion even the customer I was helping before I was so rudely interrupted joined in.

Working has also helped me improve my social skills. I used to be the type of person who never spoke unless I was spoken to. But having to talk to complete strangers at work all the time has changed me. Sometimes I find myself smiling at people on the street just because I woke up in a good mood. On the train I'm no longer afraid to comment to someone about how beautiful a day it is if that person looks friendly enough to listen. Working really does help relieve shyness.

No Free Time, but No Regrets

The only drawback is that I feel as though I have rushed my teen years just to be independent. I never have time to hang out at the mall, go Rollerblading, or just hang out with my friends, because I'm always too busy working. My friends don't even invite me anywhere anymore because they know I won't have the time to go. I miss hanging out but I don't regret working.

So if you're in need of some cash or you have some spare time left between school and homework, my best advice is: Get a job! It's not that hard, all you have to do is keep looking. Don't give up just because a couple of people turn you down. If you do get that job, expect to sacrifice plenty of playtime. But in the end you'll find it's worth it.