

The life of reilly

By Stuart White
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A British university graduate made to work for her jobless benefits as a shelf stacker in Poundland (a discount retail chain is taking legal action against the UK Government under the Human Rights Act. Cait Reilly, who studied geology at Birmingham University, had been unable to find a job in her subject area and was claiming unemployment benefit while volunteering in a museum. But she had to give up the placement in order to work in the budget store under a Government scheme designed to encourage the long-term unemployed to go back to work. Cait Reilly said she had to sweep up and fill the shelves at the store and she is now taking landmark legal action against the Government after being told she risked losing her £53.45-a-week (P590) Jobseeker's Allowance if she turned down the two-week unpaid work experience stint. Ms. Reilly's lawyers are seeking a judicial review into the Department for Work and Pensions rules that compel unemployed people to take unpaid work, stating that the scheme amounts to 'forced labour' and is against the Human Rights Act.

Graduate unemployment and the issue of having to accept a lowly-paid position is as much of a problem here as in the UK, and some employer attitudes hardly help. Not long ago I witnessed a client conducting a large recruitment campaign block against all candidates who had some form of tertiary education as he did not want to attract 'over qualified' candidates. Regardless, some already working as cleaners and other low-paid positions applied but their applications were not even considered. Others had taken Street-Smart 1 at UB and had cunningly erased their qualifications. As a result they were successfully placed, however they will never be able to climb the corporate ladder because ostensibly they don't have degrees and if they own up they may be accused of cheating and lose their jobs - Catch 22!

From my own experience I know that a period of unemployment is not only humbling but totally demoralising. Though mine only lasted 6 months, the effects endured way longer. I had left my very good job in search of greener pastures only to find my reality was looking for work in an ailing economy with a depressed job market. Not a smart move you may say, and you'd be right. Six months later I was reduced to waiter-ing jobs (just a tad more humbling than actually doing nothing). I questioned my self worth, had no money, increasing debts, low self esteem and felt detached from mainstream, working society. During this period I added no value to man, beast, society or self. I was, in effect, on hold!

Desperate times deserve desperate measures and high national unemployment is pretty desperate. Is this really the status quo - that many of our university graduates have to take jobs as cleaners and lie about their education in a market where there are simply too few jobs at graduate entry level? In my situation, deep down I did know that I would eventually find employment. Not only was I well-educated but I was skilled as well and had a track record to show for it. But what if you are unproven and armed only with a university degree? And what will be the impact on your psyche when after three years of job-hunting all you have to show is a pile of rejection letters? If you're lucky, that is. As one disgruntled job seeker recently told me, "Mostly you don't even get that for your efforts!"

While there is a lot of concern over the very high unemployment rate among the youth, this is not translating into positive action at any level, nor serious consideration being given to the effect this will have on Botswana. The problem is not simply economic but has far-reaching social implications as well. Results from research conducted at the Labour Institute for Economic Research concluded that being out of work leads to personal unhappiness, regardless of economic and other considerations. And without getting too heavy on the psychology, a nation with a band of educated, unhappy people is asking for problems in a whole bunch of easy to imagine ways - throngs of highly educated young people walking the streets in a constant state of despair, fearing that they have already failed at the game of life. But have they really failed, or has the system failed them? Are we forming the right policies? Are we asking the right questions? What skills does Botswana need in the next 10-20 years, how will we re-integrate the current graduates, is there enough development in areas of vocational and technical training, should we be exporting labour, what is the impact of the brain drain and loss of our brightest and best on Botswana? And when we've worked all that out, we need to act on the answers!

As for Ms. Reilly, is honest work, however humble, really a breach of her human rights or rather one of its most basic cornerstones?

STUART WHITE is the Managing Director of HRMC and he can be reached at the below contacts

Managing Director
HRMC
Phone: 395 1640
<http://www.hrmc.co.bw/>

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