



PROGRAMME: "NICE WORK"

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LAMB: Hello. If you heard the autumn series of Nice Work last year, you may remember the three listeners who acted as guinea pigs in our experiment about work-related stress. By the end of the series they all seemed to be getting on top of their problems but today they're back to tell us about the life-changing events all of them have experienced at work since then. Also in the programme, why do two-thirds of the young people who sign up for modern apprenticeships drop out or fail their courses altogether? First though, the trials and tribulations of work experience. Over the next few weeks tens of thousands of school leavers, students and new graduates will take their first steps on the career ladder. Some are destined for their local job centre, some already have jobs lined up, while others are heading off for a stint of work experience. The competition is

of course hotter than ever for good jobs and work experience can be a really useful way of getting a foot in the door but, as Jamie from London found out, it can also turn out to be a huge disappointment.

JAMIE: I went to this quite well known magazine and ended up working there for a whole year. I think I was completely exploited the whole time. A lot of people worked there for nothing. You weren't told but you understood that if you didn't do it for nothing, there's plenty of other people that would of and it's true they would of. In fairness to the editor, he sort of sat me down and said, you know, I'd really like to be training you up but we just really haven't got the time to do it. That was a lesson in itself. Having been on the floor behind my friend's sofa for about a year, and I couldn't bear it any more and I needed to earn some money, it just got to the stage where I managed to get a job through another friend, who again they needed someone to help them out for a couple of weeks, and they ended up taking me on. There wasn't a leaving present or a goodbye party or anything like that, it was a shrug of the shoulders and get someone else in. I don't think that going through that year of not getting paid has helped me get a job. I think people's attitude towards me in the fact that I'm prepared to do that for nothing, that sort of says a lot, rather than what I actually did, I think the attitude is important.

LAMB: Well listening to that with me was Liz Rhodes of the National Council for Work Experience and Joanne Butcher from the National Council for the training of journalists.

LAMB: Joanne, I know you've been looking into work experience within the media sector in particular, have you often come across stories like Jamie's?

BUTCHER: Well Jamie's experience is one of the horror stories but fortunately these stories, whilst memorable, they are very much in the minority given the vast number of placements that are out there and the importance of those placements to the recruitment process for getting into the media.

LAMB: The thing that really struck me about what he said was that he didn't seem to learn anything, there was no training at all.

BUTCHER: I think because Jamie was there for a whole year being unpaid and untrained, he didn't have a mentor, it wasn't an effective placement and probably he could have got as much out of it in just two weeks learning that way.

LAMB: Liz Rhodes, obviously you promote work experience, but would you accept that a lot of employers do just use work experience people as cannon fodder, cheap well or free labour?

RHODES: I think that some do, but I think increasingly more and more are realising that it's important to give them good quality opportunities and what we're trying to do is to promote the fact that work experience is an important activity these days and should be taken much more seriously.

LAMB: And how much luck are you having actually convincing employers of that?

RHODES: It's quite a challenge but we are slowly trying to get the message across that provided some thought is given to what they would like the student to do, so that there's some sort of preparation induction at the beginning, there's some support in mentoring during the period of the placement and a debriefing at the end. Then you can have some very positive results which, in fact, can impact on the business.

LAMB: I suspect that a lot of employers don't really see what they're getting out of this.

RHODES: I think that's true. I think a lot of them perhaps think that it's not in their interests and it takes up too much time and effort. What we're trying to do is to turn that view around and demonstrate that there is a business case to be made for taking students on work experience provided that they are given tasks and projects that the business actually wants doing.

LAMB: So what sort of things do you think they should be used for then?

RHODES: Well they can be used for doing projects or tasks that perhaps people haven't got time for. Lots of employers have ideas that they wish to develop but they've had to put them on the back burner because they haven't got the time and resources within the organisation to take them forward. So for your small businesses say, a market research project, that is something that can be easily achieved by a student who goes in for say eight or twelve weeks.

LAMB: Joanne, do you think work experience should be salaried? Obviously, Jamie didn't get paid a penny during the year he did this placement. I think they gave him a buss pass or a travel pass but I understand they threatened to take that away when he did a day or two of paid work for someone else each week. Is that right?

BUTCHER: Well it depends if the work experience is part of a training programme, if it's just for two or three weeks, then there needn't be payment for that. But we do recommend in our guidelines that we have for journalism, that payment of expenses is a minimum and certainly payment for any work that's published while on that placement is very important. But the horror stories of people working for six, twelve months as was Jamie's experience, they are in the minority and now of course they are unacceptable in employment law terms as well with the minimum wage legislation.

LAMB: Liz, obviously work experience can be a bit of a lottery. How can people ensure that they don't fall into those sort of traps before they even turn up for work on day one?

RHODES: They need to have checked beforehand that there is something that they will be doing. I go back to the point I made a moment ago in which the employer should think through what it is they want doing, so that both sides know when the individual turns up on the first day, what is expected of each other.

LAMB: And if it doesn't turn out that way, should they walk out the door?

RHODES: Yes, well they should first of all try, if they have sufficient confidence, to sort of talk it through with their manager or the director of the organisation and if there is no luck with that, then they should, yes.

LAMB: Joanne, you'd agree with that?

BUTCHER: I'd agree with that too yes, and I think for the student to get the most out of the placement, it's a bit like preparing for a job interview. It's about doing your homework and then when you're actually on the placement, being professional, punctual, cheerful, enthusiastic and proactive on the job.

LAMB: Liz Rhodes, Joanne Butcher, thank you both very much indeed. Now after a recent press report of the high salaries that plumbers, electricians and other skilled trades people can earn nowadays, you might think that school leavers would be queuing up for vocational training courses. But enrolments for the modern apprenticeships which were supposed to solve our skills shortage have slumped and around two-thirds of those who do sign up for a course either drop out or fail. Now only yesterday the trade secretary, Patricia Hewitt, highlighted the lack of skilled workers in the car industry. Next month the government is unveiling a new skills strategy to tackle the wider problem. In a few minutes I'll be discussing what's going wrong with modern apprenticeships, but first our reporter, Mike Johnson's been along to Warwickshire College in Leamington Spa to find out how they work.

THORNICROFT: My name's Keith Thornicroft. I'm a lecturer in welding of fabrication at Warwickshire College. We're in the welding shop and we've got maybe a dozen modern apprentices working away. At the moment we've got sheet metal exercises going on. The first year will be full-time to get the basic skills and then the two to three years after that are day release. The rest of the week is earning money with their employer. It definitely strengthens their case, they're more employable. I know years ago that having an apprenticeship was, you know, a valued thing and then like it sort of dipped but we're just trying to get the credibility back.

JOHNSON: I've moved to another corner of the welding and fabrication shop to talk to some young people between 16 and 19 who were on the modern apprenticeship course. They're both in Landrover overalls. First of all Bill, I take it that means you're employed by Landrover?

BILL: Yes, we've had our contracts with Landover for three and a half years now and then we'll be into a job there.

JOHNSON: So how did you manage that? Did you get a job because you're on the modern apprenticeship course, or did you just go out looking for a job, or?

BILL: No you apply for your apprenticeship over the internet with Landover and then you have to go to various interviews. If you get your apprenticeship, you then have six months trials, you get a six months contract, then if you're up to date with your work, you've done it all, then they take you on again.

JOHNSON: So for you, you have to have this modern apprenticeship to carry on working at Landover, is that right?

BILL: Yes.

JOHNSON: So that provides a bit of incentive to stick it through and come out the other end.

BILL: Definitely as well and you're also paid to get into college in the first year, which is more than what most people get.

JOHNSON: Yea, you get a wage effectively.

BILL: Yea, earn while you learn.

JOHNSON: How about you Ben. I mean this is obviously essential for you, to keep working?

BEN: Yea, I think so. It's like the basis of what I'm doing at work and then you can like go up the ladder on to different jobs, this can just be a starter if you want, it just gets you into the company.

JOHNSON: Will it give you something that will lift you above other candidates for jobs do you think?

BEN: Yea I definitely think so, experience and the hands on experience.

JOHNSON: Well, I'm now in the refectory of the college. With me is Suzannah Deacon, who's 21. She's just completed her modern apprenticeship in business administration and she works here at the college. Suzannah, first of all take us back. You left school with 'A' levels but you didn't want to go to university, you didn't want to keep studying?

SUZANNAH: No. I didn't do brilliantly in my 'A' levels but at college we were pushed to go to university, but I knew that I didn't want to do that because I didn't want to end up in loads of debt, I wanted to go out and actually earn some money.

JOHNSON: A wage was important?

SUZANNAH: Yes definitely.

JOHNSON: Now you've been through it, what's it been like? People talk about the problems of modern apprenticeships, not being able to last the course, having to do key skills like literacy, numeracy and information technology. How was it for you?

SUZANNAH: I found it hard because I wasn't going to go on to do any more education things at all, but I think the key skills was the thing I enjoyed least about it, the key skills were quite difficult and they were quite time consuming as well. It just seemed to take up so much time I could have used for my actual NVQ.

JOHNSON: That's your national vocational qualification, the thing that is specifically about the job you do, business administration?

SUZANNAH: Yea but we couldn't actually complete the NVQ without the key skills as well, so it was something we knew we had to do but I don't think anyone enjoyed it.

JOHNSON: But you've decided to stick with it?

SUZANNAH: Yea.

JOHNSON: Why, why did you stick with it?

SUZANNAH: I think I liked the idea of starting from being a trainee and then going all the way through to completing a thing that they wanted me to achieve.

JOHNSON: Actually being able to say I stuck with it.

SUZANNAH: Yea, because I think getting the certificate at the end is really important.

MORGAN: My name's Ewen Morgan. I'm principal of Warwickshire College. Modern apprenticeships are one of the major ways in which we engage with employers. I think as device for delivering well trained technicians, they need tweaking. I think that the idea behind them is a good one, however, they lack a certain flexibility. As far as a product is concerned for employers to use, they fall short. One example, is the key skills that students have to undertake and they have to be assessed at certain times and it could require the student being released for up to six times during the year and this can be quite onerous for a small business.

JOHNSON: People talk about very low completion rates. Yours here is I think around about 40 odd percent. That's still quite low isn't it? What's that all about?

MORGAN: We struggle to get above that level of completion and that's about students perhaps not valuing key skills, the length of time that it takes to go through the assessment process. I think we have to go back a step. We certainly have to get volume numbers of people valuing the modern apprenticeship and I think that starts at school. School teachers who perhaps have never experienced apprenticeships have gone through the traditional routes of 'A' levels and university may not be valuing a modern apprenticeship as much as they should. We need to get high quality motivated people on to these courses and for these courses to be seen as valid alternatives to the more traditional academic routes that many young people follow.

LAMB: Ewen Morgan of Warwickshire College ending that report by Mike Johnson. With me in the studio I have Rod Kenyan who's head of the secretariat for the government's new modern apprenticeship task force which was launched earlier this year, and also Andy Westwood who's head of policy research at the Work Foundation. Rod Kenyan, your task force is charged by the government with sorting out modern apprenticeships. Listening to Mike's report it strikes me that everyone is saying the big reason that there is this failure and drop out rate is this key skills element, the literacy, numeracy and computer skills bit that everyone has to do. What are you going to do about that?

KENYAN: Well it's certainly true to say that in the discussions we've had so far with various parties involved, key skills does crop up from time to time. But I don't think there's any evidence which suggest that key skills in themselves are one of the reasons for drop out. Many people, certainly in the non traditional apprenticeships, and we had some of those in the business administration, that sort of area, leave for other reasons. They may get promoted, they even get other jobs, so that's not necessarily down to key skills. Key skills are important and I think I liked what the principal was saying from Warwickshire College about flexibility. I think we would be crazy to abandon the need for key skills. The 'A' level student talked about literacy and numeracy, surely we need that in our young people, but I think maybe we need to look at how it's delivered as part of the modern apprenticeship and that's where the word flexibility came up. I think it's important, there may be better ways in which it can be delivered.

LAMB: I thought it was interesting that 'A' level student was struggling with the key skills element because frankly if she is, then if someone who left at sixteen maybe with no other qualifications is really going to struggle, aren't they?

KENYAN: Yes it was interesting and I have to take what she said, that was her perception of what was going on. I mean there's different levels at which key skills can be sat depending on particular frameworks of apprenticeships. But I think if we have a system at the moment where young people leave schools and do not have basic literacy and numeracy to the standard which employers are looking for, apart from other, what I would call softer skills, I think it's important that these are included as part of their

apprenticeship. The thing we've got to try and do is to take it out of the academic schoolroom type setting and have it more vocationally based. But those issues do need to be assessed in my view.

LAMB: Okay, well let's talk about targets because the education secretary, Charles Clarke has said, he wants to see 28% of under 22 year-olds starting an apprenticeship, so that's about a third of under 22 year-olds and he wants to achieve that by next year. Is that realistic?

KENYAN: Yes I think it is. I mean the target is set on the Learning and Skills Council, who are responsible for delivering modern apprenticeships in England certainly, and the 28% figure works out, it's a bit of a complicated way of calculating and profiling it, about 175,000. All the evidence which we have to date is that the Learning and Skills Council is delivering that, we're just about on profile to deliver that. So the 28% I would say, is achievable and certainly the task force, and one of our remit is to help the Learning and Skills Council in achieving this target, I think we regard that as an important area in which we can assist them to do that. I'm confident we'll do it.

LAMB: Andy, well we'll hold you to that.

KENYAN: Thought you might.

LAMB: Andy Westwood, is there a case for saying that these modern apprenticeships are actually fundamentally flawed. The conservative government revived apprenticeships in the '80s but they've been struggling ever since, should they be scrapped?

WESTWOOD: I don't think they should be scrapped. I think most people would agree that the idea of apprenticeship is a good one. I think the problem is that we're expecting kind of one part of a system to solve a lot of other bigger problems in the system, and the bigger problems are kind of, you know, the state of further education within the UK, you know, we don't particularly resource further education colleges very well, we don't value the technical education they deliver.

LAMB: We've got a real prejudice haven't we against what I might call "dirty hands" work here in Britain?

WESTWOOD: Yea absolutely, I mean one of Charles Clarke's ministers, David Milliband, referred to it as pernicious snobbery that exists in the workplace.

LAMB: Yes this is the upstairs-downstairs tag, isn't it?

WESTWOOD: Absolutely. We are a nation of kind of job snobs I think and you know we're also a nation of kind of people who tend to look down on this dirty hands work.

LAMB: We're laughing about this, but this is a problem, isn't it? How do we get over it?

WESTWOOD: Oh Absolutely. I mean the irony I think is that, you know, I mean one problem with the apprenticeship system is that it's almost a kind of relic from a bygone age. It's a system where, you know, when we were a heavy industrial kind of economy, the apprenticeship system was one that people could see, people followed and people did well at. Of course that economy's all changed. It's only about one in five people who are employed in those industries now. So that's one of the problems facing the numbers. But if you look at the organisations who are now offering big numbers of modern apprenticeships, I think there's a reason to be optimistic. So you look at kind of people from the service sector which is our growth area. So places like Whitbread, places like MacDonalds who, believe it or not, are offering large numbers of these modern apprenticeships and they're also offering all the things like communication and kind of team working. They're the ones that are most difficult to deliver in the traditional sectors and I think, I think once we kind of get our heads away from this kind of snobbish attitude to these jobs, we'll see that actually these are the places where the future of apprenticeship kind of lies.

LAMB: Rod Kenyan, one final thought, I mean this is all about young workers under 22 year-olds. What about older workers, why can't they do apprenticeships?

KENYAN: Yes I agree almost entirely what Andy was saying then. I think there is some cultural issues here and we've got to encourage life-long learning and people wanting to, you know, school, and training education, a bit like measles, you get it when you're young then it finishes. It's got to carry on and that's the message. Now that brings me to your question in a sense. At the moment, as you know, it cuts off at 25 and once again, certainly from a taskforce perspective, a number of employers have been saying to us, is there any chance in which that could be raised, that limit. I mean there's financial issues involved here clearly, and I think the government have been listening to this and I don't know what's going to be in the skills strategy, but I think the government have been listening.

LAMB: But generally you're hopeful that it might happen?

KENYAN: I would like to see certainly some relaxation. I mean you clearly have to have financial limits on this. I mean it would be crazy otherwise. But I'd certainly like to see the 25-year age limit lifted, if that was at all possible.

LAMB: Rod Kenyan, Andy Westwood, thanks both very much indeed. Last year we appealed for listeners to help us out with an experiment about work-related stress. Now stress-related illness is the biggest cause of absenteeism in this country after back pain. It's become so common it's often described as a national epidemic. Clearly bosses have a big role to play in de-stressing their workers, but self-help being the Zeitgeist nowadays, we decided to try and find out what people could do to cure themselves. From a big field of volunteers we finally selected Maria, Hugh and Ruth to take part in our experiment. They all had extremely demanding jobs, they all recognised that stress was causing them major problems both at work and in their private lives. Here's a clip of Maria at the time talking about the effect her work was having on her.

MARIA: What I do think would benefit me is if I knew how to, when I got home of a night or of a weekend I could switch off. For the first hour I just hit the crisps, hit the chocolate, hit the coffee and my husbands like barraged with nagging wife. I'm absolutely exhausted by about 9.30, I toss and turn for at least an hour before I get to sleep.

LAMB: For Ruth the route of the problem was a constant feeling of being disempowered at work.

RUTH: The things that I don't think are my responsibility, that they should be dealt with higher up the management chain have not been dealt with. Recently, I've become a bit weepy and little things can be the thing that tips you, you think I can't cope with this and I hate feeling like that.

LAMB: And here's Hugh talking about his inability to escape from the stress of his job.

HUGH: I thrive off deadlines and pressure, but there are many times when you realise it's gone further than that. Recently I went to see my dentist. He tells me I'm grinding my teeth in my sleep. Then I have noticed that even when I'm working at my desk, my jaw is very tense.

LAMB: Now for the experiment we found a top flight personal coach called Pauline Willis for Ruth, we set Maria to work on a rigorous programme of physical exercise and we sent Hugh home with a CD Rom on stress manager produced by one of the leading academics in the field, Dr Carey Cooper. They all worked hard and by the end of the series they all felt they were getting on top of their stress problems. But taking part in a radio experiment is one thing and keeping up a new way of life afterwards is quite another. So have they regressed? Well yesterday, after nine very eventful months out on their own, Maria, Hugh and Ruth came back into the studio to tell me how they've been getting on.

LAMB: Maria, you were in a very highly stressed job as a customer liaison manager for a big American sportswear company. Obviously, it was taking a big toll on your home life and the exercise regime that you took up, it did seem to help. But what's happened since we last spoke?

MARIA: Since we last spoke lots of things have changed. I've actually moved house, I've left my husband, I've actually got promoted at work, it's the same job title but

with more responsibility but I seem to be able to cut off when I get home now. I have made the absolute commitment not to take the work home with me.

LAMB: Well that's interesting because from what you say, you've undergone some of the most stressful experience that's possible to go through.

MARIA: Yep.

LAMB: You feel you've got your work under control now?

MARIA: I am still doing extra hours but now I can relax a bit more because I don't have any stress when I get home, so I can dictate what I do. It's just myself and my daughter and work, it's a lot easier.

LAMB: So you're not hitting the coffee and the chocolate any more?

MARIA: No, I'm not, I've lost weight. I've actually sort of decided that, you know, like by going out for bike rides and going out for a walk, don't have time for the gym because, you know, there's not enough hours in the day to complete that, but I do make time to do leisure activities now where I didn't before.

LAMB: I mean it's interesting in retrospect, it sounds like a lot of the stress that you were suffering from was to do more with your personal life perhaps than work?

MARIA: I think there wasn't any rest when you get home sometimes and you want to talk about work, if you're not able to just let off steam because you've got to carry on when you get home, it doesn't help. But work itself as well, we've sort of like gelled as a team and we all now have fun as a team.

LAMB: And obviously it's a very difficult thing to work out what it is that is actually making you miserable. Do you feel that taking part in the experiment perhaps started that process where you could actually identify what the problems were?

MARIA: I think it gave me sort of time to think that I was losing some of my identity in the big swamp of home and family life. You've still got to be me, Maria, at the end of the day and I think part of it was when I was going back to the gym I was finding a bit of be Maria and I quite liked that, so I wanted more.

LAMB: Ruth, you worked in the theatre when you joined our experiment and you spent time with a coach who helped you to approach your employer about the aspects of the job you were finding very upsetting and stressful at that time. What's happened since then?

RUTH: I've actually left my employer. I'm just about to move house to a different area and I'm working as a temp in a different organisation very happily. But more importantly, I'm still together which I wouldn't have been had I remained where I was.

LAMB: Why did you leave the job?

RUTH: Having done all the professional things, all the right things, I still totally failed to make anything change and that really depressed me, it was having a terrible effect on my health.

LAMB: I must say listening to the clips we just heard of you speaking right at the beginning of this experiment, you sound literally like a different person, like your voice is completely different, you were so miserable then and it literally, I don't think I'm overstating it saying, this has really transformed the way you feel about yourself, hasn't it?

RUTH: Oh totally, totally. I'm much more relaxed, much more together. I left a company I had worked for for twenty-four years and had huge, huge loyalty for but I had enough confidence to walk away and to say, I'm worth more than what's been happening to me.

LAMB: It sounds like you're in the process of winding down your relationship with your coach and detaching yourself a little. Is that right?

RUTH: What she's been trying to get me to do is to realise that I can actually influence things myself, and some of those things have been really really major. Things I never thought I would deal with I've coped with. Just before Christmas I was first on the scene of a fatal road accident which, given how I felt about life in general, could have been a huge huge wobble and I wrote and said what I'm going to do about this and she left me quietly until I'd actually gone and taken appropriate reaction with somebody else and then she said, "now we'll talk about it", but I'd actually made the decision what I wanted to do to rectify that situation and that was really good. Having the confidence and knowing if I'm really hashing it up, she will intervene, has been quite good.

LAMB: That's interesting, because this aspect of having a coach I think is intriguing at what point you learn to cope without that stabilising influence to be there, you don't have that backstop any more. When do you feel that you'll be ready to say, okay that's it, I'm just going to manage my own life completely?

RUTH: I should be doing it now I suppose. I think I'm moving house in about a month's time and that will be major. I think it will probably just be the odd e-mail saying what's happening. I'm beginning to realise that I can cope with anything if I take the right action.

LAMB: Hugh when you joined our experiment you were editing a big pharmaceutical magazine, a very very high pressured job, it was really stressing you out, but you've made some major changes since then I gather?

HUGH: Yes, I mean, completely. I have now gone completely freelance working from home, so there's no hellish commute and it's all going very well.

LAMB: What prompted that decision?

HUGH: Well funnily enough it was about the same time that I did the programme, so I wondered if it was really sort of thinking about the stress and everything and realising that quality of life I think was just not high enough and probably life-time goals and all that kind of thing and really wanting to make a move.

LAMB: It's really interesting you say that going freelance, going self-employed has distressed your life, because I think a lot of people listening to this would think well, actually it's a lot less stressful if you're comfortably employed by someone.

HUGH: Well there is the uncertainty, but I suppose I mean I'm 29 years old, I'm thirty this year and I think I just need a whole new challenge. I've been an employee for a long time, it's safe, you get your money at the end of the month but I was ready to take on a bit of instability, I suppose. So it's a different kind of stress but it's more positive, if you know what I mean, because you're building a business for yourself.

LAMB: So are you still grinding your teeth at night?

HUGH: I haven't been to the dentist but I don't think I am.

LAMB: That's encouraging, isn't it, that rather suggests you are doing the right thing.

HUGH: Absolutely, yes.

LAMB: Last time we spoke, I seem to remember you saying that you were thinking you might revisit the CD Rom which you used on time and stress management. Have you actually gone back to it or is it just, you know, got stuck in a cupboard?

HUGH: I haven't gone back to the CD Rom. That said, I do still use some of the techniques from the system, sort of making to do lists and specifically not just making a list but saying how long each item would take. These kind of things I still apply them now. So it was useful.

LAMB: You did say that you thought you thrived on the stress, but it's interesting you're now saying, you actually feel a lot happier now that you don't have it?

HUGH: Yes, I mean I think there were a lot of negative and positive pressures on me in terms of wanting to achieve and now I've got a very simple goal, I'm just

myself on my own in a business and I've got to build it and it's entirely up to me, the stress that I put on myself now and it's positive I think.

LAMB: Well at the risk of stating the blindingly obvious, I think there's a lesson there for of all isn't there? Our thanks to Ruth, Maria and Hugh and of course the experts who helped them. That's it for today. If you'd like more information about this afternoons programme, call the BBC Action Line. Here's the number, 0800 044 044. You can check out our website at www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/nicework. If you'd like to get in touch, e-mail us at nicework@bbc.co.uk and we'd particularly like to hear from you if you have any questions about returning to work after a lengthy career break. Join me again for more news and views from the weird but occasional wonderful world of work at the same time next week.