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Gizza job: the new middle-class mantra

Rosie Millard needed domestic help. Within hours, dozens of young graduates desperate for work applied



It was a short advertisement on Gumtree, the internet noticeboard, for a part-time nanny. Three hours a day, five days a week. The first applicant answered just two minutes later. Twenty-four hours on, they had been joined by more than 80 others, an astonishing array of applicants far beyond the familiar swathe of enterprising eastern Europeans and weirdos

("I will be your butler and servant . . ."). They almost all had one thing in common: overqualification.

"I am a graduate from the LSE" . . . "my last job was at the museum of decorative arts" . . . "I am a highly driven multi-format producer" . . . "given the credit crunch I am willing to do jobs I've never done before . . ." This last missive was from Britt Lee, who describes herself as a "friendly female graduate . . . looking for anything".

Really? "Sure," says Lee, 24, when I speak to her. She's not proud. "I'll do anything. Cleaning, childcare, caring for the elderly." Washing-up? A paper round? "Why not?" Cooking? "Sure, I'm not very good, but why not? I'm willing to learn," she says. Lee says she goes for job interviews almost every day. "I went for one today as a promo girl for a goth-punk brand called Death Kitty at a display in Kensington Olympia next week. Anything which will get me out of the house and earning a bit of cash." Was she successful? "I'll find out on Monday."

These days there's a lot of competition out there. As massive unemployment looms, the young graduates who have reaped the benefits of student loans and higher education for all are now cannon fodder in a darkening economic climate.

Henry Mowat, for example, a 24-year-old who worked for the Commonwealth Bank of Australia as a business analyst before arriving in the UK from Sydney to work in the City. He has instead found himself chopping onions and organising play dates for five-year-olds: "I got here about five

days before the collapse of Lehman Brothers. It was the worst possible timing, so I ended up part-time nannying and working in the kitchens of a catering company.”

How does he feel about the transformation of his financial career into something slightly less dependent on a pinstriped suit?

“I didn’t want to go back to Australia and I needed the money, so I thought I’d do whatever. The opportunities for full-time work in the finance sector in Australia are worse than here. There’s no full-time work anywhere for people my age.”

Still, he is philosophical: “It’s happened at a good time for me because I haven’t lost anything. My plans have changed; that’s all. I enjoy nannying. I see it as a good way to make money.”

Lois Foulger, 23, read drama at Brunel University. She is working as a cleaner in Islington, north London: “I clean for six hours a week. I don’t really enjoy it, to be honest.”

How many jobs has she applied for? “Since last July, over 100.” How many interviews has she had? “Around five or six. But for horrendous jobs like call-centre work. At least cleaning is physical.” Like Mowat, she’s determined not to sit around moping: “You have to do something. Otherwise you might end up with depression. I have even thought about prostitution.” Really? “No, that was a joke,” she says hurriedly.

Alistair Veck, 23, a lawyer, was “working at the Old Inn in Swansea, until I realised I was better off on the jobseeker’s allowance. I’m trying to get work in an office so when I apply for chambers they can see I’m still in the game. I went for a job at JJB Sports in Swansea, but I didn’t even get an interview. It’s quite frustrating, particularly when you know that with all those repossessions there’ll be an increase in legal work.”

Others are more philosophical. Audrey Muliva, 26, a nutritionist, has just lost her job behind the counter at Mr Bagel’s in Hackney, east London. “It’s closing down so I’ll be looking for a job, probably as a nanny,” she says. “I don’t mind. At the moment the situation is so bad that any hope I might have of getting a job as a nutritionist is pretty slim. I’m not sad; it’s good to have a change.”

Annie Merrylees co-founded My Big Buddy, a male nanny agency, just over two years ago and has never had such a wealth of overqualified chaps eager to change nappies. Indeed, at the end of last week she successfully provided me with Charles, an enthusiastic Kiwi who also happens to be an economics graduate — and former employee of Deutsche Bank.

Out of 200 “buddies” on her books, Merrylees estimates that about 15% are lawyers, bankers, insurance brokers and accountants. She says none of them appears to feel particularly suicidal about taking such a radical career swerve.

“I think it’s a happy transition,” she says. “They find the work rewarding and fun. Let’s face it: being a nanny is a nice break from something as serious as accountancy. The pay isn’t going to be as good but if it’s a temporary move, it’s okay. And frankly, who wouldn’t prefer a job which involved playing football in the park or messing around on a Wii?”

If they can be taken seriously. When Samia Aslam (BSc from Sheffield Hallam) goes to a job interview for a nanny position, she says her education counts against her. "People don't want to hire me when they find out I have a degree," she says.

Few of those I spoke to were surprised by the bankers turned nannies, though. As a friend of mine said: "In 1982 and 1992, when the City downsized, you saw lots of masters of the universe becoming greengrocers. It happens every time."

It's a thought. Perhaps I should get my new master of the universe to help with the children's maths homework?