

Growing up and finding work as a person with a learning difficulty

My name is Cecilia Mercier. I have a learning difficulty.

No one noticed until primary school that it took me longer to learn things than other children.



The school did not know how to deal with me. They said other kids and teachers could not slow down for me. I felt different to other children.



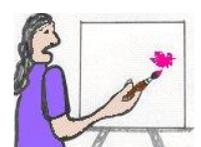
I had to leave my mainstream primary school and go to a special educational needs school. The teachers said they teach kids like me at the new school.



Some of the teachers at the new school still went too fast and got irritated if I did not understand the work. I did have nice teachers who gave me 1-1 support. These teachers understood me, cared and gave me more help with the work.



At the new school I really got into art and I was good at it. People say when you have a learning difficulty you have a creative side. I think that is true.



I then went to a few mainstream colleges for about 11 years. This included Southwark, Lewisham and Camberwell. I did lots of different courses including art and other subjects.



I got lots of different certificates including:

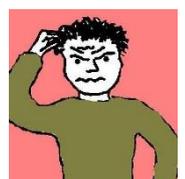
- A pass in the Individual Vocation Programme, for reading, writing, maths and art
- A pass in Access to computer level 1
- A pass in Open Learning workshop in computing
- A pass in AQA Entry 1 in Adult Literacy. I got 87% out of 100%
- A merit in BTEC Foundation in Art and Design



After about 9 years at the colleges, I was surprised and shocked that I got into Camberwell College of Arts. It is a top art college and not everyone gets in. The projects were hard but it was really good. I always got good marks like a merit in HND Textile Design. I had some support with the writing and reading side of this course.



The next step was to go to university but I did not want to because I wanted to get a job and earn money. Also I felt that I had done enough studying.



However I felt lost and worried that I did not know how to go about getting help to find a job.

I then went to a job centre to sign on and get support with looking for and finding a job. That was an ongoing battle because they were not good with supporting me and they did not understand that I needed help.



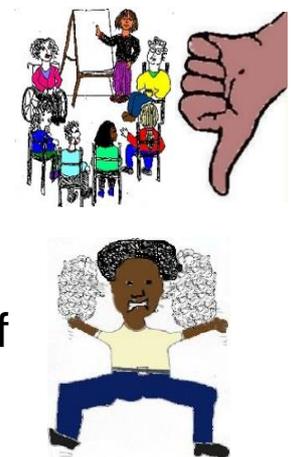
The job centre staff did not believe that I had a learning difficulty. This was because I got 87% in an adult literacy exam but also it was because of how I looked. The staff could not tell by looking at me that I had a learning difficulty.



The job centre made me do a lot of tests to prove that I had a learning difficulty. I felt like ripping the tests up. I needed help; finding a job, filling in forms, writing letters, reading job papers and looking on the computer for jobs.



It got worse as I was put on a course 5 days a week to find work. I called it a waste of time course. Day to day was bad. I just looked at papers that I could not read, the job centre staff did not help me and were not supporting me. That made me mad because I knew that the staff did not care.



I had to make notes to prove I had found 5 jobs to apply for and that I had called them up to get a job application form. The phone calls were the worst because I didn't have the confidence to speak on the phone. In the end as I did not get the support with reading the papers and making the phone calls I just made up that I did these things.



One day at the job centre I saw the light. There was a Learning Difficulty Advisor, and he mentioned Mencap, who could help. He said that I could do a course about interview skills, jobs and building up confidence but also I would get support. He explained things to me clearly and I felt happier.



I did this course at Mencap for 2 years. After that they told me about a one day a week admin job at Mencap. I had an interview for this job and I got it.



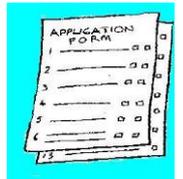
This was my first paid job, I was 29 years old. I really liked working at Mencap - the staff were nice and friendly. They really supported and helped me.



I will always thank the staff at Mencap for the support and the experience working in an office.



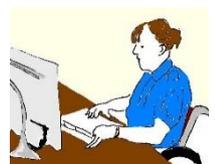
When I was doing my admin job the staff at Mencap told me there was a full time job going at SCIE. I decided to apply for this job. The job was for an Admin Support Assistant post. It looked so hard and at first I did not want to apply for the job because I was scared. I got an interview. It was scary at first but then I said something funny and it made me and the people interviewing me relax.



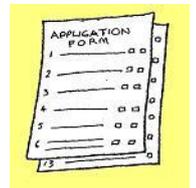
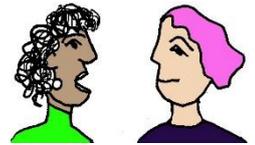
Then I got the phone call from SCIE saying I got the job. I was so surprised and happy that I started dancing around my house.



I spent 7 years in that role at SCIE. Then my role changed and now I am an Admin Support Assistant on the SCIE Co-production team. I really like it in my team. They really support me in my work and they care about me. I can go and talk to any one of my team if I am not happy.



As a person with learning difficulties I think it is hard to get the support you need to find a job. People with learning difficulties need support with filing in forms, reading job papers, understanding information and writing letters. It is very hard to do these things without support. You want to get a job but you need to be supported to do this.



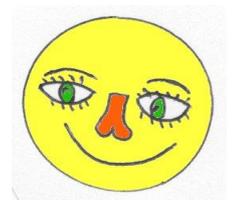
People with learning difficulties often need support in work so that they can do the job, learn new things and move forward. More people learning difficulties need to know about and use Access to Work. Access to Work is a government scheme that pays for support, travel and equipment to make sure disabled people can access paid work. This means people with learning difficulties can get support in work. I have a supporter though Access to Work.



Often people with learning difficulties are scared to ask for help. I was scared to ask for things and did not feel supported so I stayed quiet. It's that inner demon of not having confidence, sometimes the inner demon comes back in me. This happens when I am doing new things and meeting new people.



I have come far in my job. When I started I was so quiet and did not speak to anyone in the office but now I have a bit more confidence and I am proud of myself.



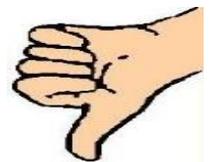
It is so important for people with learning difficulties to work so they can feel happy, make friends, be more independent, have confidence and have money.



If I was not working for SCIE, I would be back at the job centre and I do not know how easy it would be to get a job. Would I get the support to look for a job and would another company understand my support needs like my team at SCIE? If I was to get another job I might not get the support I need. I feel there would be no hope for me and it would be so hard because I do not get support outside of work. My family would do what they can to help me find work but I would need more support.



I feel lucky to be in a good job. A lot of people with learning difficulties do not work and do not have the chance to work or grow in their job. Only one in ten people with learning difficulties have a job. Most of the jobs that people with learning difficulties have are unskilled and low paid.



People with learning difficulties need equal job opportunities, as not a lot of people with learning difficulties work and would like to.



This is so people can be pushed, have the chance to work and do the things they like to do. For me if I am pushed to do new things and I do something well I feel happy and proud.

