

Connecting The Dots...

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Changing jobs in search of a better life...

Working at National Foods Limited's despatch section was the last thing I thought I would do after successfully completing my "O" Levels at Rukweza Secondary School in 1985. In my wisdom or lack thereof, I had assumed that achieving better grades at "O" Level would open the floodgates for job opportunities, being either blue-collar apprenticeships or white-collar placements. Alas, nothing of the sort happened in the early days of finishing school.

Nonetheless, this job came just in the nick of time, with my first wage going towards paying off debts that Mother had accumulated at Harare High School, where my brothers Donald and Garikayi were enrolled for their secondary education. Upon realising that my brothers' circumstances were such that any further delay in my getting employed would condemn them to a life without education, I was ready to take up any kind of job. I was keen to even settle for what they would call rese-rese (loosely translated; any job) in today's parlance.

The reality that Mother was struggling to meet even the most basic of family needs, including food, hit me like a ton of bricks. To compel her to cough up what was owed, the school had advised her that it was just a matter of time before Garikayi and Donald would be forced out of their respective classrooms.

To all intents and purposes, my brothers' continued stay at school had solely been out of the school authorities' empathy; as they had been generous enough to allow them to attend school on credit. By the time I showed up at the school to settle the outstanding fees, they were almost at the end of their tether.

Back then – as is the case now – most schools were flexible with the payment of school fees because the government's policy was that children should not be sent home, even when they hadn't paid the term's fees. School authorities were also sensitive to the family dynamics in their communities, allowing the under privileged additional time to have fees paid by their financially crippled parents. They knew when to recline their ears to pleas from parents for more time to make good, beyond which grace period they would not entertain any more stories.

Just as well, those in debt would always honour their commitments even if it meant borrowing from their neighbours or selling their most prized assets, such as cattle, goats and sheep, to extinguish their school fees commitments. This is unlike today, where deviant parents use every trick in the book to avoid paying their dues, even when they can afford it!

Prior to independence in 1980 and during the first two decades that followed the attainment of independence, a payslip was a ticket to negotiating payment terms and accessing credit when faced with financial difficulties.

It was also the most acceptable legal evidence of one's verifiable source of income when making high-value purchases of moveable and immoveable assets where the seller needed to consider pre or post payments spread over a period of time.

Departmental stores such as Greatermans, Woolworths and HM Barbours would go all out to sign up clients who could buy their clothes and other paraphernalia on credit – dressing their customers even when they didn't have the immediate cash in their wallets. All the clients needed to show was their current payslip, which was evidence that they had a steady flow of income against which they could settle their indebtedness.

Even without a deposit, one could walk out of a shop with a television set from TV Sales and Hire (now TV Sales and Home) or a bedroom suite from OK Bazaars (now OK Zimbabwe). Overnight, one could become the proud owner of a lounge suite from Nyore-Nyore Zimbabwe Furnishers, which has the distinction of being the first retail outlet to offer credit to black Africans as far back as 1967 under its maverick owner, Teddy Cohen.

To this day, a payslip has remained the most sought after document when individuals apply for loans at a bank or financial institution as proof of employment and source of income. Interestingly, even though Mother did not have a payslip at the time, she had successfully managed to talk her way into keep my young brothers in school while she tried to find ways of raising the money for their school fees.

While the school headmaster had been extremely understanding of her situation, she had stretched his patience a bit too far by missing the deadline within which she was expected to settle.

It was becoming more and more apparent that Donald and Garikayi would be sent home, thus my first wage came at the right time as I directed it towards extinguishing the debt to keep my brothers in school and consequently keep my mother's reputation intact.

At NatFoods, we would work for two weeks in the despatch section at their Stirling Road Plant in the Working Industrial Area, followed by a week's time off. We worked as drivers' assistants for the next two weeks, delivering supplies to NatFoods' customers followed by another week's time off.

Our assigned destination was Mashonaland Central, one of the country's ten political provinces covering an area of about twenty-eight thousand square kilometres, with a population in excess of one million people.

Our brief was to service customers in the Mazowe district – on the fringes of Harare Metropolitan Province – going deep into Bindura and Shamva districts, and further northwards into Mbire, one of the districts on the north-eastern extremity of Zimbabwe, close to the border with Zambia.

Mbire has a legendary and historical idealism of being home to the salt pans that enticed one of Zimbabwe's historical patriarchs, Chief Nyatsimba Mutota, to leave the medieval city of Great Zimbabwe. Before getting to Mbire, we would deliver our products to customers in the remaining districts of Guruve, Mt Darwin, Rushinga and Muzarabani – situated along the Mozambique-Zimbabwe border.

Because I knew my job at NatFoods was not permanent, I made it my business to go through the classifieds column of every newspaper daily to look for advertised job opportunities. With my "O" Level passes, I was upbeat about landing a better job.

Back in the day, anyone with five "O" Level passes or more, stood a good chance of becoming a teacher, police officer, agriculture extension officer, nurse, dental officer, or landing an apprenticeship training post. Because I am vertically challenged, I restricted myself to jobs where minimum height standards did not apply.

Although this restriction has since fallen away when it comes to joining the police, one had to be at least one-hundred and seventy centimetres in height. Consequently, the police, army, correctional services and fire department were out of bounds for me.

As I desperately needed a job that would give me liquidity in my first month of employment to take care of family expenses, job opportunities where one had to finish training before becoming salaried were a massive turn-off for me. I was not keen on training as a teacher, agriculture extension officer, or any profession that did not provide me with an income from day one. I was therefore inclined towards apprenticeship opportunities, such as training as an aircraft engineer with the national flag carrier, Air Zimbabwe, which operated eighteen aircraft at the time and was a major player on the regional and international scene.

Saltrama Plastics – a household name that had been in the business of manufacturing plastic packaging since 1937 – was also on my radar. The former Art Corporation Limited subsidiary had opportunities for training as either fitters and turners or toolmakers. Although my friend, Ngoni Kangara, got lucky and was recruited for training as a fitter and turner, such opportunities eluded me. After Ngoni had completed his apprenticeship, we celebrated him when he was seconded to Germany for further training, availing him a chance to learn from the best. Within Europe, Germany is the undisputed leader in terms of both plastics manufacturing and sales. Germany is also Europe's best-served nation regarding available plastics production facilities.

Having cut his teeth in Europe, Ngoni became a founding director of his own company, Conductus Investments (Private) Limited. Since its establishment in 1995, Conductus has been supplying plastic products for various uses in industries such as horticulture, plant nurseries, agriculture, forestry and plantation industries – specialising in both virgin and recycled plastics.

When I founded Friends of the Environment in 2010, our parts with Ngoni crossed again when we got Conductus, his company to supply us with the plastic pockets we use for tree planting, given they had been in the plastics business for years.

In one of the weeks I was doing the delivery shift, working for NatFoods, I was pleased to come home to a letter in the mail box from Carnaud Metal Box, inviting me for an interview. Metal Box was one of the many companies whose press adverts I had responded to.

On the day of the interview, I arrived at their premises on Auckland Road in Southerton in good time for my interview, only to be told that the branch I was supposed to be at was in New Ardbennie, about four to five kilometres from where I was in Southerton! Without wasting time, I took to the road, run-walking to their plastic division in Ardbennie, arriving about an hour later, exhausted, confused and dripping with sweat.

Despite not doing well in the written exam, I was given a job as a production trainee, which sounded important. I thought to myself that this was precisely what I had been looking for, a job that came with training, at the same time getting an income, after which I would be a qualified artisan. Two things must have contributed to my getting the job; firstly, the interviewing panel must have reasoned that my genuine intentions and dedication to duty had already been proven through my jogging all the way from the packaging division on Auckland Road to New Ardbennie. My somewhat dramatic arrival could have resulted in their confusion in comprehending their first impressions of me. Having arrived for the interview late and not done so well in the written test, they had decided to give me the benefit of doubt.

Secondly, I had correctly answered what they regarded as the most difficult questions. When combined with my good “O” Level results, they must have decided that given the opportunity, I had the potential to do well.

I resigned from NatFoods immediately, before joining the plastics division of Metal Box as a production trainee, on the first working day of April 1986. Apart from the plastics division, Metal Box was the sole supplier of metal cans, crowns and aerosols in Zimbabwe.

Established in the United Kingdom by James Denby Lee and James Crabtree in 1853, the company got the name Metal Box in 1930 before becoming Carnaud Metal Box (CMB) in 1989. It established itself in Salisbury (now Harare) in 1959, and decades later in 2002, the business was acquired by Nampak.

After joining Metal Box, I was pleased to note that other candidates who had been interviewed before me made it through the selection process, namely Godfrey Mujeni and Fred Chiriya, both of whom I would get to meet. Godfrey, I was told, had done well with the written exam, while Fred got almost a hundred percent of the questions correct – making him the darling of our group once we started working.

A few weeks into the job, and to my utmost dismay, I realised that we were only production trainees in name. In reality, we were glorified general hands whose work entailed assembling, sealing, and loading packages into trucks, checking labels to ensure proper processing, lifting parcels to the loading bay; matching items with their destinations and working efficiently to meet the expectations of both our employer and clients.

The disappointment kept me glued to the classified pages of The Herald newspaper, where I would religiously scan through the job vacancies column, in the hope of finding another breakthrough. To make matters worse, my take-home pay was a measly weekly wage of $57 which was barely enough to cover my basic needs, not to mention sending my brothers to school. The weekly wage was able to take me through the week only because New Ardbennie is not far from Egypt where I stayed. I would walk to and from work. Also, the Zimbabwe dollar at the time was still a powerful currency within Southern Africa and beyond. When the unit was first introduced in 1981, the Zimbabwean dollar was worth more than the United States of America's greenback at US$1,47 to ZW$1,00.

While the government embarked on populist policies based on socialism resulting in the softening of the currency, the Zimbabwe dollar continued to hold its own in 1985/86, trading at around ZW$1,64 to US$1.

There were coins of varied amounts in circulation, which could buy basics such as bread, fresh milk and postage stamps, with notes starting at ZW$2 and going up to ZW$20, whose groceries' worth would fill up a supermarket trolley. The main feature on the notes in circulation was the Chiremba Balancing Rocks in Epworth, which were metaphorical as they symbolised the importance of balancing development and preserving the fragile environment.

As time flew by, I got to see some of my friends and agemates driving around on nice wheels, while wearing expensive clothing labels. My previously closed eyes were beginning to open to the sight of the fairer sex.

Not satisfied with my new job at CMB, I continued to look for new work opportunities. Among those to whom I applied was the Customs and Excise, before their merger with the Department of Taxes forming, the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, (ZIMRA).

I would come close to joining them before deciding to join Old Mutual.

After going through a three-part gruelling interview process, I decided not to join them at the last minute, even when I was offered the job. As I was interviewing for a job with the Customs and Excise, I had also been interviewing for a job with Old Mutual, the financial services group founded by John Fairbairn in 1845, at their offices on the corner of Speke Avenue and Second Street.

On the 1st ofJuly 1986, I would decide to join Old Mutual instead of the department of Customs and Excise. For fifteen years I would work for them in different capacities, departments and divisions until I decided to leave them on the 28th of February 2001 to start Nyaradzo Funeral Assurance Company the following day.

Landing a job with Old Mutual was a cause for celebration because not many companies in Zimbabwe were as good.

More on my experiences at Old Mutual, where I spent fifteen years of my working life, shall follow in the next instalments. Suffice to say, after joining the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange-listed financial behemoth, two significant developments would leave a permanent mark in the nation's psyche, one in 1986, and the other in 1988.

In October 1986, Mozambique's first black president and the darling of many of us at the time, Samora Moses Machel, died tragically when his presidential aircraft crashed near the Mozambican and South African border, plunging the whole of the African continent into deep mourning.

A true Pan Africanist who was loved across the length and breadth of the African continent for his selflessness in fighting the colonial powers who had a firm grip on the continent, Machel's death invoked memories of the stellar role he had played in the years that preceded Mozambique's independence in June 1975.

Samora Machel was particularly popular in Zimbabwe, not least because he had advocated for unity between the two liberation war parties, ZANU and ZAPU, whose fraternal ties had been marked by the intensification of the rift between them. Machel had made resources available to the freedom fighters fighting to liberate their countries, including ZANLA forces fighting the then Rhodesian government, which made him unpopular with the apartheid regime in South Africa.

When news of his death reached Zimbabwe, a sombre atmosphere pervaded the country, with the then Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, cutting short his private visit to London. Riots broke out in Harare with over five thousand protesters pouring onto the streets of the capital city to express their outrage over Machel's death which had all the hallmarks of an assassination.

Protesters stormed the South African embassy in Harare and vandalised South African businesses operating in Zimbabwe. The Malawian Consulate in the city centre was also not spared, as President Kamuzu Banda was one of the few African leaders who maintained diplomatic ties with South Africa, which was being accused of assassinating the late Mozambican president.

White Zimbabweans were also attacked randomly by irate blacks in the streets as a form of retaliation and protest. Artists across the continent used their creativity and talent to compose songs and poems in his honour.

The Runn Family, a musical outfit based in Mutare, composed a masterpiece titled Hatichina Wekutamba Naye in the wake of his death – which was dubbed one of the best soul songs of the 1980s. Released shortly after the group had moved from the Shed Studios to Gramma Records, the song highlighted the loss African nations had endured with the deaths of high profile freedom fighters such as Josiah Tongogara in December 1979 and Steve Biko in September 1977.

It was also in 1986, that negotiators from ZANU and ZAPU held three meetings at the Parliament Building in April, July and December, as they sought political rapprochement to end blood-letting disturbances in the Midlands and Matabeleland regions which were resulting in the loss of innocent lives.

By the end of 1986, relations between ZANU and ZAPU had greatly improved resulting in the Unity Accord being signed in December 1987, after marathon negotiations that started in October 1985.

These developments helped me understand that while I was on the right path with my efforts towards lifting my family out of poverty, socio-economic stability in the country and the rest of the continent or world was equally important, especially towards the attainment of education and improved quality of lives.

Looking back to the journey I travelled as a young man, I am astounded at the maturity with which I handled life's curveballs at various points in my young adult life. I am therefore grateful for the opportunities I came across and took up, including those I missed.