

Ted Talk prophets started with prosaic first jobs



Pamela Meyer, lie detector, speaks during Session 6: The Dark Side, during TEDGlobal, in Edinburgh, Scotland, July 13, 2011. Photo: James Duncan Davidson/TED

By Chris Taylor | NEW YORK

Prophets of yore had difficulty getting their messages out - chipping stone tablets or scribbling on scrolls. These days there is a much easier way to reach the masses: The Ted Talk.

The lectures tend to be bite-sized, inspirational, revealing of humanity and the world we live in and extremely popular, having been viewed cumulatively over 4.6 billion times since going online in 2006 (www.ted.com).

For the latest in Reuters' "First Jobs" series, we talk to a few popular Ted speakers about how they got their starts.

Dr. Dambisa Moyo

Ted Talk: "Economic Growth Has Stalled. Let's Fix It" (bit.ly/1oWCWmm)

Views: 1.35 million

First job: waitress

When I was around 20 I worked at a seafood restaurant in Washington, D.C., called L&N Seafood Grill. I was a college student at the time, and they kept their overhead down by having a lot of

students work there. In theory it was not that difficult - but I found it very challenging. In retrospect I appreciate how tough that job was.

Restaurants like that have more than one seating, so it is all contingent on how efficient you are as an individual. You have to move guests in, and move them out. In that job I learned that customers can be very particular - and that some people are just not very nice at all. In fact, in the service business, there is almost an expectation that people will behave badly.

A restaurant is its own complex economy. Just think about how many different people are involved: the server, the coat check, the person pouring water, the chef, the cleaners, the manager. It is all highly specialized, and everyone has to work together seamlessly. That kind of reliance on teamwork is a model for how all businesses should operate.

Tim Harford

Ted Talk: "How Frustration Can Make Us More Creative" (bit.ly/1Zgutpp)

Views: 2.1 million

First job: management consulting

The first job I had after graduating from my master's degree was at a management consulting firm – a spinoff from McKinsey full of ambitious people in sharp suits trying to sell the dot-com boom. Nobody really knew anything, but people worked hard and spoke with confidence.

Everyone except me. I felt completely out of place – everyone else seemed to have skills I didn't have. And the skills I had didn't seem to be welcome. Within a couple of weeks I was so anxious that I was crying in the elevator up to the office.

I was even allergic to my own suit. I told a colleague, making her cry with laughter. "You only need to do two things to do this job well, Tim," she told me. "Wear a suit, and talk bullshit. And you can't do either of them."

But what could I do? I asked my friends. All of them on similar career tracks, they told me to stick it out for a year or two, showing some persistence before finding something else.

It was only when I asked an older friend that I heard much wiser advice: to quit immediately. I did, and within weeks I found a humbler job that suited me perfectly.

I learned a few lessons. When you ask for advice, make sure you get some different viewpoints. If you're making a mistake, stop making it as quickly as possible. And if your job brings you out in hives, it's time to find a different job.

Pamela Meyer

Ted Talk: "How to Spot a Liar" (bit.ly/1bogYC6)

Views: 14.6 million

First job: record-store cashier

Back then there was a burgeoning local rock-music scene in Washington, D.C., spearheaded by the iconic radio station WHFS. So it was a funky, interesting time, and the epicenter of progressive rock was a little store called Kemp Mill Records.

I only got paid \$3.50 an hour, but I thought I was living the dream. I worked behind the counter as a cashier, and got to rock out to bands like Little Feet, Wishbone Ash, and a local favorite called Corrugated Fiberfill. I got to talk to people about music all day - although I didn't get to control the cleanup-time music, which was always Abba for some reason.

It was my first introduction to the idea that you could get paid for something you loved.

(Editing by Beth Pinsker and Jonathan Oatis)