

# HIDDEN TALENT



The trilogy of Hidden Talent by Peter Colley

# Hidden Talent: Part 1 - The Endless Issues and Fruitful Genesis

## Introduction

Transitioning from education to employment has always felt like squeezing through a narrow tunnel hoping you fit. Whether you're a graduate, recently released from prison or a young parent, the job market manages to be a cruel mistress to anyone in those demographics. For five years, Talent Match Leicestershire was turning over no end of trials and tribulations that young people had to endure before finding something resembling financial stability. But there was one demographic that was under-researched. A pool of people whose own struggles along with many of their talents were, for want of a better word – hidden.

## The Focus on Disability (or lack of it)

In an employment landscape made up entirely of short straws, the disability demographic still seems to end up with the shortest. In 2015, Public Health England revealed that a pitiful 6% of people with learning disabilities were in paid employment, with only a fraction of those people working over 16 hours a week. By 2016, the Office of National Statistics reported that 5.8% of adults with learning disabilities were in paid work, yet 65% of them want a job. With statistics like these, who says irony is a lost art?

Over the first two years of Talent Match, Leicestershire Manager Emma Southern began picking up on a pattern; a pattern of young people whose disabilities or poor mental health provided additional barriers to the job-hunting process. And yet there was no dedicated support plan in place.

Now, many hidden conditions like autism, dyslexia, and OCD are often diagnosed around the age of five-years-old. But a lot of the clients coming through TM Leicestershire either hadn't had the entitled support or even worse, hadn't even been diagnosed.

This, in turn, led to another issue; those with hidden conditions often endured years of social isolation, unable to build up the social and emotional experiences many of us have by the time we hit the big 20. And because they have received minimum awareness of their condition, they have difficulty with successfully describing it to an employer. It's like expecting a tourist to hold an entire conversation in French within seconds of setting foot in Paris.

But the truth is, and most young people on TM will tell you this; they need a paid job. They need some direction in life. We now have an entire generation of people with disabilities eking out a living on benefits because chances are, no one has ever given them the encouragement to mount anything more than that.

Mental health didn't fare any better in the way of awareness. Much like hidden conditions, it is very difficult to describe what isn't visible to begin with, especially if they haven't received a formal diagnosis. 1 in 4 people struggle with a mental health issue every year, but because of the perceived lack of understanding, those people may think it best to suffer in silence. Research has shown that the attitudes of employers haven't done much to dispel these fears. A report from Mental Health at Work revealed that 15% of employees who make the brave decision to disclose their illness to their employer face disciplinary action or dismissal. So much for inclusivity(!)

A problem that besets both hidden conditions and mental illness is that of stereotyping, thanks in part to an overly dramatized media. For example, many films and TV shows would have you believe that people on the autism spectrum are walking calculators whereas the reality is much more subdued. For many autistics, mental prowess shines through in subjects they are passionate about.

The stigma people with mental illness endure is that having a mood disorder turns you into a ticking time bomb waiting to go off, when in reality, people with mental illness are most likely to be a danger to themselves. But these stigmas and stereotypes can sometimes make people reluctant to reach out,

which adds to the isolation problem. 9 in 10 people struggling with poor mental health have reported some form of stigma or discrimination and gives them yet another reason not to seek help. Emma Southern noticed these worrying issues and resolved to do something about it...

### **Sowing the Seeds for Hidden Talent**

Having recognized the growing need for disability support, Emma set out to find ways TM Leicestershire could implement a support strategy. One of the first seeds to be sown came from PADD (People against Disability Discrimination). I'd like to say Emma went to the ends of the Earth to find the information... but for the sake of realism, we'll just say Hull.

Founded by the innovative team of Talent Match Humber, Emma attended a session that shed some much-needed light on various disabilities. Using a fun icebreaker called Danny's Game, the team looked at several celebrities who despite having been diagnosed with hidden disabilities who were no less inspirational.

During this time, TM Leicestershire underwent a revamp, and Emma realized that the best way to ascertain the most prominent issues and how to support them was to have a research project dedicated specifically to awareness raising.

And that's where I come into this story. Coming off of a year in unemployment purgatory, I got wind of Talent Match and that Emma wanted to commence a disability project. She wanted someone to research and explore the trials and tribulations of young people with hidden disabilities. Due to my Asperger's Syndrome, you might say I have spent much of my life on the disability fence, so I know the pains of both benefiting from and missing out on that much-needed support.

But we needed to consider how we were going to get the message across, requiring a collective opinion to make sure we were acting as a voice to the demographic. To find that voice, we needed one final push...

### **The Meeting That Changed It All**

On 24<sup>th</sup> September 2015, Emma brought together several young people with hidden conditions (predominantly autism), all of which had endured long-term unemployment. The meeting brought to light a lot of issues, including, but not limited to;

- The word 'disability' is not a popular label for people who don't see it as such, with one autistic young man denying vehemently that he had a disability or that he 'suffers' from autism, taking an inspirational pride in his condition
- We had a fair number of university graduates among us, who despite the qualifications, still have difficulty finding meaningful work
- Many of these young people have endured long-term social isolation, which meant they hadn't been able to build up the social and emotional skills most people have (and need) by their late-teens
- People seemed to confuse 'disability' with unskilled, hence a reluctance to employ them. But many of the young people attending the meeting all had positive traits that a company could make use of.

In the meeting, we decided that the project would focus on raising awareness of the all-too-under-explored benefits of employing people with learning disabilities. The talent was there, but we needed to identify the support before we could identify the talent. It was then that one member of our innovative team, Gaz Lewis, led the charge in christening the project Hidden Talent, a name that we hoped would one day act as a beacon for young people with learning conditions (disability does NOT exist in Hidden Talent's dictionary), encouraging them to be the best person they can be and show the world that those with autism, dyslexia, ADHD and many other conditions are not a hindrance, but a force to be reckoned with.

And thus, Hidden Talent was born. The hard part was about to begin. But we were off to a confident and innovative start...

## Hidden Talent: Part 2: Setting New Trends

### Introduction

In September 2015, Hidden Talent was born. We had a message we wanted to spread, we had reliable people to help spread it, and we were developing a string of tools to help us do so. The next two years changed the way Talent Match Leicestershire supported the unemployed disability demographics and laid the groundwork

### First Impressions...

Hidden Talent made its first public appearance on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2015 at the Leicester Business Festival. We had booked out a room based on the De Montfort University campus and had invited employers from across Leicester to be the first people to hear what the disabled demographic had to say about employment opportunities (hint: wasn't all sunshine and rainbows!)

To hammer the message home, we had a group of young people with hidden conditions who all had the chance to speak about their stories and experiences. These remarkable individuals all had so much to give, and yet paid employment continued to evade them. The workshop was a surprising success, but none of us could predict what would come next....

### ...and Freezing Igloos

As it turns out, one of the audience members at the LBF presentation was responsible for the management at Highcross Leicester and was quite taken in by these stories. And thus, they gifted us with a pop-up shop in the Highcross shopping centre itself over the Christmas period. We set up a clothing section, bought in a magician and masseuse. But this festive period gave Hidden Talent time to shine as we collected research from the members of the public to get a measure of what they know and what they don't know when it comes to hidden conditions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, autism was the only one they really seemed to know anything about. But the perceptions of the conditions they *were* familiar with gave us a good idea as to how to target our project and probably did more to shape our approach than any other event. It was certainly made all the more memorable by the chilly air in the shop. (note to self: next time event is hosted at makeshift igloo, always pack a portable radiator!)

### Taking a 'Backwards' Approach

Originally, the Hidden Talent team focused on four of the most hidden conditions (autism, bipolar, dyslexia and ADHD – we would later add OCD to the group). But one thing I didn't take into account was the gargantuan number of hidden conditions. For every condition we were covering, there seemed to be another ten going underexposed. So, we decided to work backwards.

Rather than focus on the conditions, we would focus on the traits, mainly because many of the conditions we came across had overlapping traits (with anxiety and depression being the most recurring). And our logic was that if we could identify a support structure for a particular trait – such as sensory overload, for example – we would cover at least three conditions and identify an overlapping support mechanism.

We found this approach to be quite useful with some of the young people we interviewed. They showed all the signs of having a condition, but because they didn't have the diagnosis, support was out of reach.

To gather more data to collate, we created a form in response to the disability question on existing application forms (apparently, a one-word answer is all it takes for an employer to understand about something that impacts your life 24/7!). This form would instead cover all aspects of their condition when interviewing these the young people – how it impacts them on an individual level, and what they can bring to the workplace. This way, when a young person walks into an interview, they can bring in

that form so that even if the employer is scratching their head about the young person's condition, they can get up to speed fairly sharpish.

### **Crafting Original Content**

We needed something that would give Hidden Talent a unique stamp that would make it stand out in the hidden condition crowd. To gain this, we started crafting some content as a response to a lot of the current disability support out there.

Many people with hidden conditions struggle to successfully articulate themselves at interview, with the employer none the wiser as to the mental struggles they may be enduring. To help candidates get their heads around this, we designed a tip-guide for young people regardless of their condition about how to conduct themselves at an interview, and how to balance that seemingly impossible juggling act of disclosing a condition without making it seem like a hindrance. With this guide, we could ensure that an employer's first exposure to a hidden condition was a positive one.

### **Finding Friends to Ride the Wave**

The difficulty with trying to be a voice for a relatively silent demographic is that you sometimes feel like you feel like you're alone on an island, struggling to make your voice heard. So, we are grateful that there were plenty of organisations out there who shared Hidden Talent's vision of a diverse workforce.

These wonderful innovators included Menphys, which specialised in disability support during the formative years, Tina Barton and John Coster of Leicestershire Equalities Challenges Group – who always ensured Hidden Talent had a chance to speak at their annual Choice Unlimited event. And of course, Kevin Baskerville, whose work with the autistic community has highlighted the need to intervene on behalf of people at an early age rather than step in and tidy them up in their late-teens-to-early-20s. All of these great people have helped us shape Hidden Talent into what it is today and ensured that we are much more than an island of eccentrics.

### **Mapping the Mental Health Framework**

Mental health comes with its own fair share of taboos, thanks to an overreactive media giving the impression that people with poor mental health are ticking time bombs waiting to go off. As such, people with PHM suffer just as much risk of being rejected at an interview as someone with a hidden disability. And we were discovering that some of the mental health issues overlap with the disability issues, making us realize that we needed to expand our scope to mental health. And I couldn't do it myself without spreading myself thin.

Now, my younger brother Chris has always had a lot to offer a workplace but has been tainted by the discrimination brush, not being able to get any support for his anxiety and depression. Now Chris has never been one for mincing words (as I, his brother, have learned a great many times) and he is a capable researcher. So, in July 2017, we put him to work and he spun us gold, being able to drive home the pains of PMH and the various forms they can take. These proved to be a vital part of the Hidden Talent message, allowing us to take our project to new heights, and Chris' onboarding carried us over into perhaps the highlight of Hidden Talent's lifetime...

### **Converting the Job Centre (Without Hypnosis)**

Our generation's relationship with the Job Centre has been... rocky at best, with a lot of negative stereotypes on both sides. All the more reason why we felt the need to establish a positive relationship with them.

I'd been saying that since Hidden Talent started that we needed to break into the Job Centre. But circumstance always seemed to get in the way. But in July 2017, our wish was finally granted. We were put in contact with Coalville JobCentrePlus and granted an audience of job coaches who we could present to.

This presentation was perhaps our most successful up to this point. Considering Hidden Talent had been up and running for nearly two years, we had accumulated a wealth of knowledge and original

material to share, as well as some further research gathered at the meeting. And the job coaches were very receptive to the messages we were trying to get across as well as the diversity of hidden conditions (I like to think every job coach walked out of that meeting NOT thinking all autistics were human calculators).

## **Conclusion**

It hadn't been easy and there were times when I found myself thinking "What the hell am I doing here?" Don't worry, we didn't fall back on the "make it up as you go along", we did look at planning ahead, making connections, forging relationships and personally, I would say the first 2 years of Hidden Talent's lifetime were a success. We now had an adequate support strategy catering more directly to the hidden condition demographic within TM, people had given us the opportunity to speak at conferences.

Talent Match Leicestershire had given Hidden Talent a strong start and carrying the TM brand around made it easier to promote the project.

But Talent Match had a finite lifetime, with its main funding coming to an end in December 2018, which meant that – short of robbing a bank – we had to try and find a way to keep the project afloat and make sure that all of this hard work was not for nothing...

## Hidden Talent: Part 3: Forging a Legacy

### Introduction

By 2017, Hidden Talent had had a successful lifespan. We had managed to get ourselves in front of multiple audiences, get our points across (without being chased out of the room to some cheesy getaway music). But as Talent Match Leicestershire whizzed through its fourth year, it became apparent to everyone working on the project that we needed to guarantee some kind of legacy. If I had wanted to develop something only to see it sit there lying dormant, I'd have grown a garden(!) So, we began making plans for what life after Talent Match could look like for Hidden Talent...

### Building the Qube

When it comes to support, we realised that there was a shared empathy among the young people on Talent Match which meant that peer support was much stronger. Based on the work Hidden Talent had done, Emma Southern picked the brains of Adrian Hobbs of Workvine and the managing staff of Neovia Logistics in order to talk about the possibility of taking on a group of young people who had endured long term unemployment and had received minimal support for the hidden conditions.

The seeds were shown throughout much of 2017, with Emma meeting with the Big Lottery to discuss the possibility of funding, and of course, head-hunting both the support staff who would be the guiding light and the young people who would clarify ensure our program's success.

We managed to find two leading mentors in the form of Shan Needham and Paula Smith, some of the best and brightest Talent Match had to offer. They have had an extensive background in supporting vulnerable young people and with then based at Neovia, they could help the workplace confidence flow like wine.

The young people who came onto the Qube were an eclectic mix of personalities. They all had a lot to offer but had yet to find a reporter willing to support them and give them some direction. On average, they had been out of work for an average of 4 years.

The Qube was up and running by 2018. The young team of 20 trailblazers were given a series of tasks in the logistics setting and though the prospect was daunting for some, but some of them rose to the challenge, even taking up the role of a spokesperson for the group. With the invaluable guidance of Shan and Paula, the Qube team were a hit with Neovia and proof that Hidden Talent could be more than a passing fad.

The Qube helped Hidden Talent make a big jump towards the mainstream, in which the work was showcased via TV and radio. And in the winter of 2018, Hidden Talent found itself nominated for the Prince's Trust Community Impact Award. It was a pleasure to see all of these young people given some much-needed recognition. The hidden condition demographic has had to endure decades of being short-changed and this platform gave them the means to show everyone that they could perform as good as anybody else, if not better.

The success has been so wide-reaching that we have been able to secure funding to allow the Qube to continue into the next year, possibly even bringing on some new faces. Ideally, one of our next steps is to look at taking the model of the Qube and seeing how we could apply it to other sectors, such as retail or hospitality.

### Bringing Access Generation into the Fold

Access Generation has been a close ally of Talent Match Leicestershire since mid-2017. A social enterprise ran by Chris Tarry and Jemma Redden, the organisation works to provide research emphasizing the value of employing young people and how company websites are failing in their obligation to provide substantial opportunities. For their pilot project, looking at 50 companies, I acted as one of the lead researchers analysing the websites and finding out whether today's job adverts are confusing a vacancy with a brain freeze (seriously, on some of these adverts, you need to swallow a dictionary to understand much of the jargon they throw at you!)

But I digress. Access Generation and Hidden Talent both share similar goals of wanting to support a disadvantaged demographic when the odds (and definitely the finances) are frequently stacked against us. But they saw something in the project and in late-2018, it was agreed that Access Generation would take on Hidden Talent and making sure it was in the best possible position to make a difference with its content and the people championing the brand, more than filling the void left by Talent Match Leicestershire. Speaking of which...

## Conclusion

The first era of Hidden Talent is over. It is easy to see this end as the sun setting on the project (especially if you happen to be watching a sunset while reading this). Where we go from 2019 onwards, I do not know. Change is afoot, we have had to say goodbye to several people that made the project what it is today. And as the world of work continues to change, and hidden conditions are dragged into the spotlight, and employers are contemplating their navels as to what good support looks like, we need Hidden Talent to be there acting as the voice of reason (or something close to it).

Moving forward, the dynamics and the strategies will change, but the message remains the same as it did when we first started out as a couple of eccentric malcontents who weren't happy with the system and decided to do something about it.

*“You may not know what good support looks like yet. You will learn.”*

