

OPINION

HOW MUCH OF GETTING A JOB COMES DOWN TO LUCK?

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

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The process of getting a job, on paper, seems quite simple. Apply every day, tailor your CV, and write a cover letter that ticks every requirement, and a job should follow. However, most of the time, it does not. There are far more applicants than openings, and doing everything right only gets you into the running.

A lot of what decides the rest is luck, and that luck starts the day you are born.

Italian researchers once tried to put numbers on this with a computer model that followed a thousand simulated careers over 40 working years. The most successful person in it was barely more talented than average, and the most talented finished with less than they started with. It is a simple model, but it matches a lot of what I have seen.

Take the family you are born into. Some families have the money to invest in you early. Others have the know-how, knowing that Olympiads, competitions and extracurriculars exist and how to steer a child towards them. A study of 1.2 million inventors in the United States found that children from the richest one percent of families were ten times as likely to become inventors as those from families below the median income. Even children who topped their maths class in primary school were far more likely to invent if their families were well off. The researchers put much of the gap down to exposure: the mentors, information and networks a child grows up around.

Then there is the lottery of where you are born. If you are Bangladeshi and want to work abroad, you need money, a strong profile, and an employer willing to sponsor your visa. A French or German graduate can take a job anywhere in the European Union without a visa or a sponsor. Professor Branko Milanovic, a former World Bank economist, calls the advantage of being born in a richer country the "citizenship premium", and his research suggests more than half of the income differences between people worldwide come down to the country they live in. Staying home does not remove the odds either, as Bangladesh had around 885,000 unemployed university graduates in 2024, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), so every opening draws a crowd.

Timing plays its part too. A role goes up at 11 PM, and whether you apply depends on whether you happened to be looking. Then there is knowing someone who knows someone. A contact builds rapport before you have even applied, so your application gets a second look instead of sinking into the pile. Experiments on 20 million LinkedIn users found that acquaintances, people you share a few mutual connections with but rarely speak to, did more to move people into new jobs than close friends did.

I count myself among the lucky ones, although it did not feel that way at the time. After my engineering degree in the UK, I went back home to figure things out, which felt like stepping off the expected route into a UK job. That detour turned out to be where the luck kicked in. I worked my way through networks, landed internships in banking and finance, and went into each one with an open mind. Those internships pushed me towards an MSc in Management, and the master's led to a full-time role. It worked like a butterfly effect. If any one of those links had been missing, or if I had started applying for full-time jobs straight after my engineering degree, I doubt I would have found one. None of it would have happened without a family that could send me abroad to study, which is luck I did nothing to earn.

You cannot choose where you were born or when a role goes live. What you can work on is noticing the chance when it appears. Professor Richard Wiseman, a psychologist who spent years studying self-described lucky and unlucky people, once asked volunteers to count the photographs in a newspaper. Half of the second page was a message saying there were 43 photographs and they could stop counting. The unlucky group took about two minutes. The lucky group took seconds because they saw the message. Wiseman found that lucky people tended to be more relaxed and aware of their environment, so they spotted chances that others walked straight past. That part is within your control. Say yes to things before you feel ready. Go to the event, reply to the message, take the internship that does not fit the plan, and weigh what saying no would cost you. Do not let a run of rejections talk you into staying in. Things rarely work out the way you imagined, but it only takes one good opportunity going your way, and you never know when it will turn up. Mine came out of a year I spent convinced I had fallen behind.

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