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What the 'CV of failures' really reveals about career setbacks



Lucy Kellaway

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Not all rejections are equal and those followed by successes stop mattering at once



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Lucy Kellaway's most painful rejection was failing to secure even a minor part in her school production of 'The Boy Friend'

Johannes Haushofer, an assistant professor of psychology at Princeton, last month published a CV

recording every professional failure in his career to date. He listed the university courses he didn't get on to. The academic jobs he failed to land. The papers that were turned down for publication. The fellowships that went to someone else instead.

The resulting "CV of failures" was a Twitter sensation and picked up by newspapers around the world. So humble! So inspirational! So brave! — was the verdict. The whole thing was so popular it constituted what Prof Haushofer called a meta failure — as it attracted far more attention than his entire academic output combined.

Although amusing, his CV doesn't strike me as brave in the slightest. If you teach at Princeton, listing your failures takes little courage. To say that the Stockholm School of Economics turned you down feels more like a taunt: look what they missed. It is not humble: it is a humble brag.

To prove how easy it is to be blasé about failure when you've had some success, last week I cheerfully sat down to compose my own CV of rejections. It involved quite a lot of brain-racking as my memory has done me the service of forgetting most of my failures over the past 40 years but, as far as I recall, it goes roughly like this.

In 1977 I failed to get accepted by Exeter, York, and Sussex universities to do a bachelors degree in economics.

In 1981 Boston Consulting Group, Bain, Shell, BP and the Treasury rejected me as a graduate trainee. Two years later I failed to get jobs on The Times, the Telegraph and (I think) the Evening Standard. In about 1985 I was turned down by The Economist and in 1987 failed to land the Laurence Stern fellowship on the Washington Post.

In 2004 and in 2010 successive novels were rejected by numerous publishers in various countries. In 2015 I was interviewed for board positions at ITV, British Land and Belmond — and given the thumbs down by all of them. And from 1985 to the present day I have failed to win so many journalism awards that listing them all would fill half this newspaper.

Studying my failure CV, the most interesting thing is the very long period in which I appear to have failed at nothing at all. From about 1991 to about 2004 I hardly received a single rejection. Yet far from being the most successful part of my career, it was the most sluggish. I was bringing up children, trying to hold it together at the Financial Times and generally attempting to keep the show on the road.

This shows that if your failure CV is very short, that in itself is a failure — you aren't trying hard enough. If, on the other hand, it is very long, that may mean you are a no hoper — or it may show

you merely aim high. For each of us there is a perfect ratio of rejections to acceptances — probably about four to one: any fewer than that, and you aren't putting yourself out there enough.

The next thing that occurs to me is that not all rejections are equal. Some hurt a lot (like when a detested rival won a prize that I had my heart set on) and others hurt not at all. Failures followed by successes stop mattering at once. As you can only do one degree or one job at any given time, as soon as you have landed one, those that got away are meaningless. I minded not getting a job on *The Economist* until I got one on the FT, when I stopped minding entirely.

Indeed the only rejection that still hurts almost half a century on is not even on my list. I was 10 years old and failed to secure even a minor part in the primary school leavers' production of *The Boy Friend*.

When I asked my colleagues about their failure CVs, many reported something similar. None minded their assorted rejections from the BBC and the Foreign Office, but it was an early rejection at school — often in sport — that still rankled. My husband always used to claim that his failure to get on to the first 11 cricket team at Eton was the most bruising thing that ever happened to him, and made him turn against the establishment for the following 20 years.

The bald CV is silent both on pain, and on explanation. Prof Haushofer offers the reassuring thought that most failure is no more than bad luck as the world is stochastic, applications are crapshoots and selection committees often make mistakes.

I'm not so sure this is the right way of looking at it. If I think back to my failures, I remember concocting comforting stories to explain them away, telling myself that the process was arbitrary, or I was too outspoken, or it was just Buggins' turn.

Yet looking at my CV of failures a more plausible explanation occurs to me. I failed in almost every case simply because there was someone else who put in a stronger application or gave a better interview.

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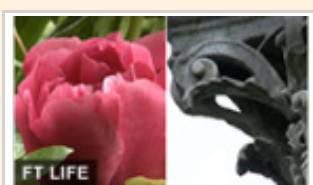
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