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Furlough: 'In limbo' or 'one long garden party'?

By Lucy Hooker
Business reporter

⌚ 30 October

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Flora Blaythwayt found that during furlough, she could turn her hobby into a new enterprise

When large parts of the economy were suddenly mothballed in March, the government stepped in with a scheme to pay 80% of the wages of people who could no longer go to work. At its peak nearly a third of the UK workforce were on furlough.

While for a lucky few it felt like an unexpected holiday, others were in limbo, robbed of a sense of purpose and belonging. Some had a job to go back to. Some didn't.





'I felt rudderless'

When Flora Blaythwayt's employer, a supplier of condiments to restaurants and hotels, told her she was being furloughed, she had to go away and look up what the word meant.

"I thought, is this it, is this the chop?" she says.

Being paid most of her salary certainly made things easier. But she had just come out of a relationship and was living on her own in London.

"I felt horrible, in limbo, lost and alone. I felt rudderless," she says.



Flora's cards incorporate plastic waste found on the banks of the Thames.

She needed something to focus on, so she went beach cleaning along the banks of the Thames, picking up scraps of plastic and other litter. Then she went home and turned the bits of old toys, sweet wrappers and bottle tops into greetings cards.

"I was distracting myself, doodling around, getting the creative juices flowing."

She gave the cards to friends and sold some on the e-commerce site Etsy. Then bigger retailers started to show an interest. What started as a wholesome activity to get her through lockdown, was starting to look like an opportunity to start her own sustainable business.

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Washed Up Cards is far from providing financial security yet, but Flora thinks her furlough, which comes to an end on Saturday, may not turn out to be the disaster she initially feared - even though she doesn't have a job to return to.

"When I got told I was being made redundant I felt really wounded, gutted.

"But as the weeks have gone on I've started to think I'll look back and be grateful for being catapulted in this new direction."



Furlough felt like a well-deserved break for Louise

'It was a bit like a second honeymoon'

"My furlough was fantastic. I loved it," says Louise Solomon, who works as a chef in Brighton.

"It was a godsend, to have a few months at home, not having to get up, not having to be anywhere."

Louise has spent the last 30 years working long shifts in professional kitchens, on her feet, with few breaks.

Her wife, a key worker, wasn't furloughed, but with Louise at home they found they had time to garden, sort cupboards, walk the dogs together, just "relax and have fun".

"We were able to reconnect and get to know each other again. It was a bit like a second honeymoon."

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After three months she went back to work which wasn't easy.

"I suddenly felt older," says Louise. "I'm 50 next year. I've always been able to keep up, but I felt my pace had slowed. My body hurt for the first time."

Above all, though, she appreciates how lucky she was to have a job to go back to, given the precarious state of hospitality right now. "I appreciate for others it wasn't like that and my heart goes out to them."



Julie Simmons has worked for Stanhill Court Hotel for five years

'I missed my colleagues'

While it was nice to spend time with the family, Julie Simmons found being sent home from her job as a hotel receptionist robbed her of her sense of purpose.

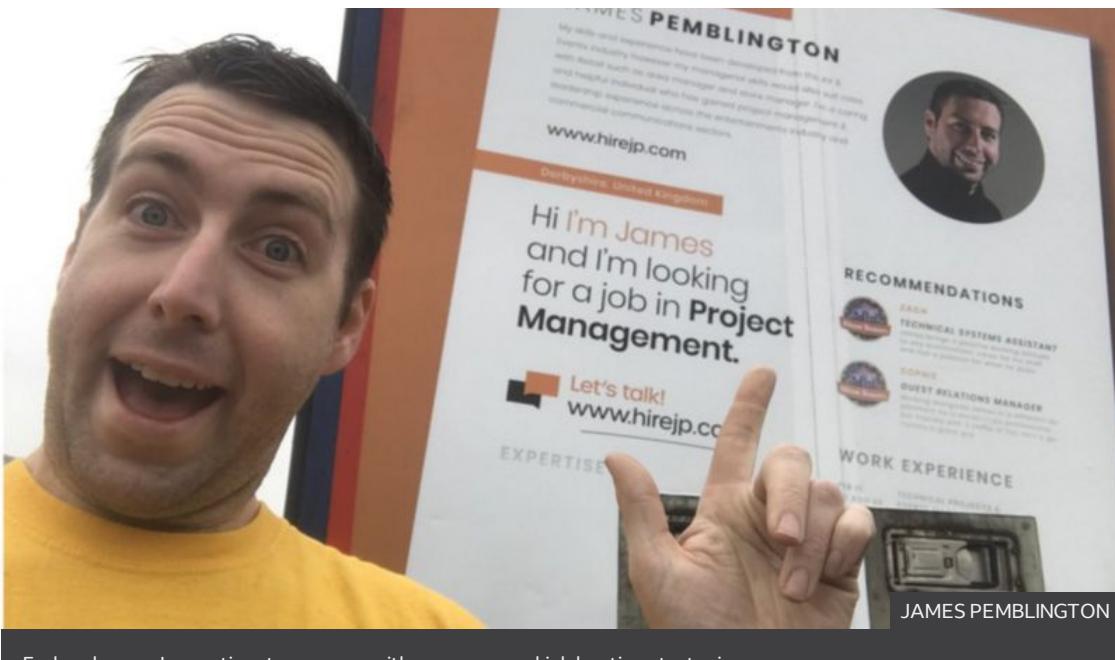
"I think it did affect how I felt about myself," she says. "It's nice to feel you've brightened someone's day. To not have that interaction was odd."

Julie lives near Crawley in West Sussex, an area which, thanks to its reliance on Gatwick, boasted the highest rate of furlough in the country. But it wasn't just airline employees. Closing down air travel had a ripple effect on everything from local shops to taxi firms and hotels.

"It was very strange going from being there five or six days a week to nothing at all and not seeing anybody. Because we're a small hotel, we're a close team, we're all good friends. I did miss that," she says.

Plus there was the worry and uncertainty over whether she would have a job to come back to at all - although in the end Julie returned to work in September, albeit to a smaller team.

Julie says friends who worked through those months, teaching key workers' children in schools for example, at least felt they were making a difference. "It's been hard to think there are people out there risking their lives and you're sitting at home reading a book," she says.



Furlough gave James time to come up with some unusual job hunting strategies

'Furlough gave me time to prepare'

In March 33-year-old James Pemblington was working in his dream job, creating audio-visual effects at Alton Towers.

Right now he should have been supervising blood-curdling screams, the smoke machines and even the stink of fake vomit for the theme park's Halloween event.

But after five months on furlough he was made redundant.

"It's quite heartbreakin," he says.

However, James worked out early his role might be under threat and when the blow came he was firing on all cylinders.

First he asked a friend who does David Brent (of the Office) impersonations to make him a funny video reference. Then he had "Hire JP" T-shirts printed and distributed an edible CV - a chocolate brownie with a QR code printed on top.

He even had his details printed on the back of a lorry.

None of this landed him a job in his field, but he is about to start a short-term contract managing a new Covid testing site.

"I'm grateful for furlough because if I'd have lost my job at the start it would have been more of a shock," he says. "The furlough period gave me time to prepare myself to hit the job market."

He adds that if he had stayed on furlough for longer, it might have been self defeating "because in a couple of weeks there's going to be another few thousand people applying for the same roles".

The new job starts on Monday. In the meantime he's putting his creative skills to good use: preparing a full-blown audio-visual extravaganza for Halloween in his front garden, complete with ghosts, eerie green lights, spooky voices and billows of smoke.

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