



# Don's diary: Novice to grandmaster in two short years

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## June 2001

They are interviewing me for the position of lecturer: "So, when are you intending to submit your PhD thesis?" I shuffle uneasily in my seat before replying: "Erm, sometime in September." Another interviewer retorts:

"I think what we mean is when do you really think you'll finish?" My blood runs cold.

Surprisingly, they offer me the job.

## September 2001

One week into my new job and I am brimming with enthusiasm. A colleague (someone who once managed to juggle a job and PhD study) advises me to use my allocated research day every week, but also to recognise that I am going to have to devote a lot of time to lesson preparation. This reminds me of Estelle M. Phillips and Derek S. Pugh's *How to Get a PhD*. In a chapter titled "How NOT to get a PhD", they clearly warn against taking on a new job.

## December 2001

It's the end of term and I have just finished delivering an array of lectures. On the PhD front, I am struggling with my first empirical chapter on organisational differences in work stress. The last time I sent off a chapter to my supervisor was six months ago. I need to do something meaningful over the holiday period.

## April 2002

The chapter on work stress has still not been sent off for comments. I have been giving my supervisor weekly progress reports to help manage feelings of guilt about a job not done.

I gaze broodingly at the picture of a contemporary from my undergraduate days studying psychology at Leicester University. His Australian university webpage shows he has been PhD qualified for ages - look at that list of publications. In comparison, I feel like an academic embryo, still waiting to be born. Oh, to give up the loneliness of the long-distance writer.

## December 2002

I take the train down to London to hand in the whole draft of the soft-bound thesis to my supervisor. What a "present" to burden him with. For me, at least, this will be one PhD-free Christmas period.

## June 2003

Today is my interview for that prized PhD in psychology qualification. Looking intently at the face asking me the first question, I am given a carte blanche to talk at length about what I did, why I did it and what I found. I defend some of the core arguments of my thesis: that personality can influence how employees see sources of stress and how they react to them; and that there are two major sources of stress in the National Health Service, which are organisationally or occupationally linked.

After a while, I lose track of time. Chapter after chapter, my thesis is dissected; yet I do not feel like an insect "pinned and wriggling on the wall" (apologies to T. S. Eliot). Instead, I am a chess grandmaster pre-empting my

opponent's next moves. Before long, I shake hands with the examiners - a worthy draw.

I receive a thoughtful gift from a dear friend. It is a book, *Everest: Reflections from the Top*. I have reached the summit after a change in supervisor, umpteen address changes, two new jobs, several failed relationships and marriage after a three-month engagement.

I thought I had reached the pinnacle. It is just so dizzying seeing the mountains left to climb.

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