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Got here in the end



A 12-year detour took Jemel Elfrougui away from engineering and into the warehouse labour pool, but a John Lewis internal staff development scheme has allowed him to retrain in an area closer to his heart. He spoke with Will Dalrymple

Based in Park Royal, London, Jemel Elfrougui has just started his third year of an apprenticeship in heavy vehicle service and maintenance with John Lewis.

He says: "At the workshop I'm helping to maintain a fleet of seventy 7.5t home delivery vehicles, and supporting a Waitrose DC with 5t sprinters for home delivery, and then there are big tractors and rigids where we do the long-distance stuff. On a day-to-day basis, I am servicing those vehicles and rectifying defects - wear and accidental damage, little problems.

"Today I was working on a brake warning light on a 7.5t DAF delivery vehicle. When we checked the brake pads they were fine, but the dash light was still coming on. Then we had to go through the sensors and the wiring until we found a break, so we replaced the wire in the loom. With brakes, you need to be extra-careful."

Elfrougui says that the site has made him feel welcome. "I was very lucky when I came here. My manager was very understanding and accommodating, and it seemed like everyone was appreciative of my work ethic. You always hear stories about them sending out apprentices to buy some tartan paint, or to go buy a spirit level bubble. So there was some trepidation. Were they going to treat me that way, at 30 years old and a father? But I've had nothing but respect from them. They have given me time and patience."

Coming to engineering more than a decade after some of his apprentice colleagues, Elfrougui explains that he is



making up for a missed chance. When he was 15, he put himself forward for an optional mechanics course at school, but teachers discouraged him from taking it up because his grades were too good. So he followed the academic route through sixth form. His marks led him to a university place in media studies and psychology.

"I finished the first year, and was not interested in it at all; it didn't do anything for me. And then I was stuck. I was in Bath, all the way across the country from my family. I'd signed a contract for a house in my second year. As I wasn't going back to university, I wasn't going to get any further funding or help. With rent to pay, I needed to start working."

He got a job working in a local warehouse. A decade soon passed, and several jobs later had risen to the position of assistant manager at a John Lewis warehouse in the West Country. Despite this success, he wasn't content with his career, and was looking to get back into engineering through an apprenticeship,

but his family responsibilities - a flat and a young child in it - meant the £6/hour apprentice wage was too low to make ends meet. Until, that is, he found out about a John Lewis staff development scheme that allowed him to train as an apprentice while maintaining his current wage. The company uses S&B Automotive Academy in nearby Bristol for day-release education.

On engineering, Elfrougui adds: "Once I got here, I felt like I'd finally found a place where I was employed to do the sort of things I enjoy: problem-solving, working with my hands. In my previous jobs, I was the odd one out. When I was working at Waitrose, there was a problem with one of the locks on a door jamming. The screws had come out, and the mechanism was not latching properly. Initially, they refused my request to have a tinker with it, saying: 'You can't touch that; we'll send out for someone certified.' A couple of days later, I had 10 minutes free, and fixed it with a little pliers and a screwdriver. For people who are mechanically-minded, it doesn't seem intimidating tackling little tasks like that. It's nice now to be receiving formal training to go along with my natural affinity." 