

Balbir Bharj Transcript

Speaker 1:

What is your full name?

Balbir Bharj:

Balbir Bharj.

Speaker 1:

What year were you born?

Balbir Bharj:

1960.

Speaker 1:

Where were you born?

Balbir Bharj:

Nairobi, Kenya.

Speaker 1:

What do your parents do for a living?

Balbir Bharj:

My mum's a homemaker and my dad was a building contractor.

Speaker 1:

Please tell us why you decided to work for the Royal Mail?

Balbir Bharj:

I work for Post Office, which is a separate to Royal Mail. Post Office is the counter and I decided to work... My main reason was the Post Office was looking for a part-time person, so at that time I needed only a part-time job, so it was my part-time job which [inaudible 00:00:49] me. And they had a good name, with respectful jobs.

Speaker 1:

What did your family members think about your decision to work for Royal Mail?

Balbir Bharj:

They were happy with it.

Speaker 1:

Tell us how you started working for Royal Mail.

Balbir Bharj:

How I started working with Royal Mail? Okay I work for Post Office, so it was because I had a little girl who was only a year old, so I wanted to work for Post Office, a part-time job. So I looked for the job as part-time with The Royal Mail in the newspaper I found it, and I was very happy to find that. And all the mothers, the new mothers, looked for those kind of a jobs. So it was new part-time jobs for the Post Offices, so that's the reason why.

Speaker 1:

Tell us how you started working for Royal Mail.

Speaker 3:

You just asked that.

Speaker 1:

Describe your training you do?

Balbir Bharj:

Training was very intense in those days for me, because we had loads of products in the Post Office and I didn't know we had so many products. Post Office only had one product offered themselves, product meaning it kind of a check what they had, called a postal order. And the rest were everybody else's, so we were the agents for those products, and it was so many. So I had to learn each and every thing out of that, from a stamp, how to stick a stamp because I didn't know how to stick a stamp on a envelope, so we learnt that as well as cashing checks, the cashing the giros in those days, you've not heard those. But it was pensions, lots of money coming in, coming out, how to count the money, how to put the money, how to talk to people, how to talk to the customers with children in the branch, and how to connect with the vulnerable people who couldn't stand in the queue for long time, or who even didn't have nobody to talk to. So Post Office was the roof for all that.

Speaker 3:

Where is says Royal Mail, change it to Post Office.

Balbir Bharj:

Post Office.

Speaker 1:

What was the first job you did for Post Office?

Balbir Bharj:

Sorry?

Speaker 1:

What was the first job you did for Post Office?

Balbir Bharj:

First job for Post Office. First job... Okay I worked as a counter clerk, so a counter clerk had different jobs. So it was on the counter, off the counter things, but it was a part of my job all of it. So it was called counter clerk in those days, or postal workers.

Speaker 1:

Tell us how you felt on your first days at work.

Balbir Bharj:

It was amazing. I still remember it. It was amazing. The counter clerk, the colleagues of mine next to me they looked after me. They knew it was a first job for me, because I never worked before that apart for my own shop, so they actually helped me. They were helping with the picking up of the papers from the counter and if I didn't know anything off the transaction, the work, they will help me, and also yeah it was a really nice day, I didn't know when the time passed because it was really happy to serve my customers.

Speaker 1:

Describe your work in those early days.

Balbir Bharj:

Describe my work, good one. Good one. It was interesting because, like I said, my training had lots of different products to learn about. So, there was some things I didn't see for months and there were some regular work I was doing non-stop, every time, every other customer was the same work. So it was good and it was interesting when I had something different to do, any of the licenses like a TV licenses, we used to do them over the counter those days. So it was good to check there identifications and because you couldn't issue that for somebody, different people, so we had to make sure that it was issued to a right person. So we had to see the identifications and take the right money in, give the right change in, it was good, interesting. So we were always alert looking for things like that.

Speaker 1:

What was the atmosphere like at your work in the early days?

Balbir Bharj:

Pleasant. It was pleasant. Because you work, we were around the counter and in our times when I just started we had our own queues. We don't see that nowadays, but you know now when we go to the stores we have only one queue. But those days Post Offices had one clerk and then their own queues, so it was interesting to see how the customers switched their queues thinking this is a shorter queue, but then we had longer transactions and it took longer than he could've actually gone to that...and then he was frustrated 'oh I was better off in the other queue'. So it was a bit funny, it was good, it was but, you know...we really had good time, yeah it was really nice.

Speaker 1:

What kinds of people were you working with?

Balbir Bharj:

We had mixed people, men and women, young and old and from different ethnics, so it was really a nice...I'm talking from one branch in my head now with the people over 15. So we had everything, we had a few cultures, different cultures, so it was nice to have something...nice to know about different cultures, it was nice to talk about different cultures. And it was fun because we could learn new things in them, and it was fun. Fun. Work and fun.

Speaker 1:

How diverse was your workplace when you started?

Balbir Bharj:

Sorry? How?

Speaker 1:

Diverse was your workplace [crosstalk 00:08:11]...

Balbir Bharj:

Yeah, okay, I've touched to that already, so it was 15-16 people, so we had well mix of everybody, few people different. We had different cultures, we already had men and women, so we already touched that no women or no men.

Speaker 1:

What sort of equipment? [crosstalk 00:08:35]

Balbir Bharj:

You happy with that?

Good.

Speaker 1:

What sort of equipment did you use in your work?

Balbir Bharj:

Oh, when I started everything was manual, so we actually had a pencil and a rubber all the time. So we always...And a sharpener of course, because the pencil broke. And we had to have the pencil because we were working with numbers. So if the adding was wrong we need to make that double check, because it was money not just the numbers. So anything we were counting, we were actually counting money in theory. So it was all manual, so we had to balance our sheets, so money in and money out. So had to be nil nil at the end of the day. So if we had £100 we had to balance it to £100, it was a lot more money and the example. So we had to keep the books in tact that if I've taken £100, I need to count for the £100 out at the end of the day. So I was good in my maths.

Speaker 1:

Describe your uniform.

Balbir Bharj:

Very nice. There were two good reasons for having the uniform. One that we looked prettier, and everybody looked the same, so no difference, nobody had...Just like schools now, and it was...We changed our uniforms within the times. When I started we had white shirts and black trousers. Then we had gray and red shirts with gray trousers or skirts, with a black jacket and then we had, I forgot now, it was a long time ago, three years ago. Yeah so mainly gray and red because the Post Office colors are red, gray and white.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about the skills you needed for your job.

Balbir Bharj:

Sorry?

Speaker 1:

Tell us about the skills you needed for your job.

Speaker 3:

Skills.

Balbir Bharj:

Oh skills. Sorry. The maths was the main thing, that we could count the money, and then it was the confidence level was very necessary because we were handling the money and giving out the money quite a bit, so we needed to be confident we were giving it. And then it had to be skills to know that it was the right person, like an evidence, the identifications of the person to give out the money, if you know what I mean, yeah? So if my money, if I'm giving it to...money giving to somebody, I needed to make sure it was his money, so that skills needed to be there. And we had to be vigilant that it was not a scams or anything. It was money.

Speaker 1:

Describe a typical day at work.

Balbir Bharj:

Sorry?

Speaker 1:

Describe a typical day at work.

Balbir Bharj:

Oh, typical day, yes. Typical day, giving out money, taking money in, few green giros in those days, it was a check and taking the loads of checks, at the end of the day count the checks, send those through our head office, count our money, put that one in the safe and having the chats...And one or two customer's nice stories every day, all funny stories.

Speaker 1:

What were your favorite things about your work?

Balbir Bharj:

My customers I think. Because in the job we did, it was important that we had the connection with our customers. They felt that they were looked after. They had to have the trust in us, because we were selling stuff so they needed to trust that it was a good for them, it was the right thing for them to do.

Speaker 1:

What were the difficult things about your work?

Balbir Bharj:

Difficult, difficult, yeah sometimes on the bad days, like rainy days and that, the queues were longer and the customers are outside the queue in the rain and then they didn't like it and obviously it was taken out on us.

Speaker 1:

And can you tell us about any discrimination you experienced or witnessed?

Balbir Bharj:

Good question. Discrimination, no. I didn't see any, but I heard that it was happening at one of two places, but it was dealt within the time, because it wasn't tolerated within the Post Office.

Speaker 1:

Tell us a story that stands out from your working life.

Balbir Bharj:

Okay. One was a vulnerable person, elderly lady, who came in but she fell down while she was in the queue, and what I saw from the counter that there was blood as well. So that I can't forget, but what we had to do was obviously, anybody would do that, you shut down the counter because what's important is that lady and her life, so everybody was evacuated outside, the ambulance was called. So the person who...first aid person went down and calm her down, put the bandage on her where the bloody was out. And she came back with a nice letter saying that 'thank you for looking after us', and it was our pleasure to hear from her, because we didn't see her for many, many weeks. But when she came she brought a nice handwritten letter to say thank you to us.

Speaker 1:

What was some of the naughty things people did at work?

Balbir Bharj:

Oh you want to know those? Okay. I'll tell you a naughty thing I can share with you, because we dealt with the money, some of the cheeky people took half the note. So because the half the note, the two third of the note is no good to anybody, so half the note and stick it in the envelope and then they'll put it outside in the queue. It was very naughty but then that person will think it's full money, it's a whole money and they will take it...I remember one of those and they rolled it out and he put it in the pocket,

but it was no money. But sometimes they'll be 'oh there's money in the envelope, it's on the queue on the floor', all right then bring it in. But it was naughty, but that's about it. Okay.

Speaker 1:

Talk us briefly through the different jobs you did while working for Post Office.

Balbir Bharj:

Sorry I missed.

Speaker 1:

Talk us briefly through the different jobs you did whilst...

Balbir Bharj:

Different jobs. Okay. So many. We sold the stamps, we had to...selling a stamp was a big thing for us because we had to stick it on as well. We had to stick it on the right side on the envelope and the right hand side and the top of the envelope as well, so the address in the middle of the envelope. We had to repeat that again and again. There were some customer who didn't know because they've never done this envelope before, a letter. So first time letter and where to write the address, where to stick the stamp, how do I seal the address, where do I post the address, so all that is part of my job, okay? That's post box, red box, everybody's seen that, that's where the letter goes.

And the other things what we were selling, stamps, and there was a different types of the stamps. So every month we had a new stamps in, they used to call first takeovers and the...what do they call them? The celebrating stamps. So we celebrated every occasion happened in Britain, be it [inaudible 00:18:18] days, be it any... some personalities who've done very good work in their life. So they had different stamps.

And other than that we did so many different licensing like fishing license, TV license, passports and things, we still do those. Anybody been to the Post Office to get the passport done? No. We did those, so we did digital passports and postal orders. So different jobs meant quite a lot.

So on the counter customers and then the queue hosting on the customer side, so we had their accounts opening for different banks. National Savings Bank was one of the important banks in those Post Office dealt with. Then we had Bank of Ireland after, loads of those different [inaudible 00:19:17]. And then Bank of Ireland the savings had a different different products, it was a savings account, it was a current account, it was different kind of bonds, it was a different age accounts. Yeah?

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your favorite job.

Balbir Bharj:

In the Post Office? My favorite job, so many. I don't think I hated anything. Yeah so be it the back room, we used to call it back room duties where then whatever was done on the counter, we take the money and/or post the letters. Then at the back room then we put those letters, collect them and give those to the Royal Mail people who took them back. So we had to do all this and then in the back room duties were we send off our checks, send off our paperwork, what we did on the counter, to our head office or to different banks.

Speaker 1:

How did you progress in the Post Office?

Balbir Bharj:

Yes. I started as a part-timer, because that's what I wanted to do. Then part-timer progressed from learning 10 products up to then 20 products, up to 177 products and then the back room. And then I worked full-time because then I could work from 9:00 to 5:30 because I enjoyed my work, and then learning all this. Then I did do the managing for the branch, so my first managing branch was in [inaudible 00:21:10] and then I moved to different branches. So I worked in Shepperton, from there I went to Brentford and then there I went to Hounslow branch, and all those branches have closed now. And then I went to Hammersmith and Acton, Northolt, Earls Court and Shepherd's Bush. So I managed in Earls Court, Northolt and Shepherd's Bush.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your relationships with your colleagues.

Balbir Bharj:

Good, yes. It has to be good because if you work there, there's no...everybody's different, but if you've learnt people, the people's skills, if you've learnt that you want to be good and you want to do good, then you want to do good. So then you will learn with everybody to keep good relationships. It was good because we shared things, we shared our rubbers and pencils and sharpeners, and then later on we...You had to be because we're working with the customers so if a customer needed something and I don't have it, then I need to have it from my colleague. So you need that relationship so they respect you and they share those things, and you can only do that when you have a good relationship.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your experiences of joining clubs at work.

Balbir Bharj:

Joining clubs is good thing, but we had no clubs in the offices where I was. So we had to do them outside...the socializing outside our working time, which was local clubs within wherever we worked, because it was easier for everybody to join the local clubs. So in Hammersmith we did, in Earls Court there was a club outside. Or lunches and dinners together.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about any other opportunities to socialize.

Balbir Bharj:

Socializing opportunities was mainly when I was managing, and then we wanted the staff...when you achieve something I feel we should celebrate it. So to celebrate it you need to have that social time where everybody's happy, everybody's doing things, everybody's enjoying that time, everybody's celebrating that achievement we had, be it small, be it big. So we went out, as far as we hired the cars, we went speed up on the roads to France, we went by road, we went to Belgium by road, we went to Cornwall there and Thorpe Park even. So we were kiddies to celebrate in Thorpe Park, yeah.

Speaker 1:

What made you join the union?

Balbir Bharj:

Yes. I think I didn't have that choice when I joined in, I'm sure we had the choice, but I think it was a culture to join that union anyways, but I'm glad I did because they were very helpful anytime, every time.

Speaker 1:

And why is the union important for postal workers?

Balbir Bharj:

The union is there because if so the company can't bully basically maybe. Too harsh but in our terms. So they do the right things, so it should be good for the company and it should be good for their workers, so they don't take the workers' benefits off them if they were doing them, and they were making the changes to do good for the workers.

So there was a time when, I remember when we... Christmas Eve is very important, as an example. So Christmas Eve we worked until twelve o'clock but then the Post Office wanted to do it at four o'clock, so there was a clash between the workers and the Post Office management. But that's when the union came in and then they made sure it was twelve o'clock. Later, much more later it actually came to same thing, closing at four o'clock, but yeah.

Speaker 1:

What part did the union play in your life?

Balbir Bharj:

This.

Speaker 3:

That's for the kind of people that become reps so that's fine.

Balbir Bharj:

Okay.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about any strikes or disputes you were involved with.

Balbir Bharj:

Yeah. The strike, I think there was one strike, I can't remember when, it was for the pay rise and I was on the counter, so counter clerk as a worker, not a manager but as a worker. Obviously it's important to everybody because it comes to the pay rise, so the Post Office were struggling for financial prices, and they didn't want to do the pay rise for the works, but the workers wanted it. So I wanted it. And I went on a strike for that with the union.

Speaker 1:

And what was your most memorable moment at the Post Office?

Balbir Bharj:

The day I joined in and the day I left. Those are memorable, but I had happiest more so, every day almost.

Speaker 1:

What was your most challenging moment at the Post Office?

Balbir Bharj:

When I was a manager and the postal workers went on strike. That was a challenging, because me being responsible for the branch and me being responsible for the people who wanted to come and take the money or do their jobs every...whatever they wanted, and I needed that branch open for everybody. It was challenging because it was only two of us, but we worked 9:00 to 5:30 to kept that branch opening for our people.

Speaker 1:

What was your most challenging moment at...

Speaker 3:

You just asked that.

Speaker 1:

Over your working life, what were the main changes at work?

Balbir Bharj:

Like I said, when I started it was all manual work with pencil and pen on paper, and then it changed to, oh I'm so sorry.

Yeah, it's okay, that's okay, I'll shut it down. Okay sorry, excuse me. [crosstalk 00:29:27]

Yeah is that okay? Ah yeah. I won't take it because it will... I'll just click shut. Oh it's Hugh Davis, that's all right.

Speaker 3:

[inaudible 00:29:39]

Balbir Bharj:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Sorry what was the question again?

Speaker 1:

Over your working life, what were the main changes at work?

Balbir Bharj:

Changes, yeah. From paper we saw it called a echo system. Echo was on the computers so it was a big change for us. We didn't know anything about the technology because in our days we had no phones, so we had no computers, well at home definitely didn't, and no technology apart from a telephone. That was the only technology we knew. So it was a big change for the technology side of it, and big change from the jobs that we did. So some jobs went out, we didn't do them and some new jobs came in, obviously what was coming in like government jobs and all that.

So the technology was a big change and we had to learn that difficult way, but we did it quicker. We had to have that training, and I remember the day when we first saw that screen in front of us and we were so amazed we could touch it and it could work. So it was a touch screen. It was amazing when we have that. I know you guys now know it all, but we didn't. We didn't know how to... We were so scared to touch a cable, because we didn't want to do anything wrong, 'I'm not touching it', everybody was like that 'I'm not touching it'. So we had to call the help, 'what do we do now?' So that was a big change we saw, but it's the way forward.

Speaker 1:

In what way...Is it this one?

Speaker 3:

Yeah, top four.

Speaker 1:

In what ways do you think your job has improved?

Balbir Bharj:

It's gone faster, so everything we could do it went very quickly and easily obviously. It was difficult to learn the computer system, but when we got to it it was so easy. So especially with the money, all we had to do was feed in our numbers and then we know how much money we should be having it. We should be having it in our tills, and we have that and then Bob's your uncle, it was that quick. So it made very, very easy.

On the customer sides obviously because they knew the technology as well, they could do a lot more online as well, so it was both sides it was much easier.

Speaker 1:

In what ways has it got worse?

Balbir Bharj:

I think technology again, because a person who doesn't know the technology and they had the difficulty, and I still have those customers who don't have an access to the technology or couldn't learn one way or other, or don't have an access, or can't afford any technology gadgets, they are having a difficulty. And those are the people who we have our pleasure to help them because we know they can't do it, because we know they haven't got it. So those are the challenging parts for us.

Speaker 1:

What would you think if your child wanted to work for Royal Mail?

Balbir Bharj:

A child? I think there is age for limit the child. But a children from sixteen onwards, I call them children, sixteen, eighteen, they can, they're always welcome to. And they, some offices allows...you know when you have job experiences? So some offices allow that. And I remember I trained a couple of school kids in my branch to give them job experience and they were very happy, and I was very happy, it was my pleasure having those kids in my office.

Speaker 1:

If you were the boss of Royal Mail, what changes would you make?

Balbir Bharj:

That's with the Post Office you mean? Yeah, yeah. There was a very glitch in the system some years ago, which proved to be a glitch just recently, so I wish those weren't in because lots of people did suffer a lot. When I mean they suffered, they really suffered. So I'm hoping that this system glitches are no more. But I can't change it because I don't know much about the glitches.

Speaker 1:

Looking back over your working, what has working for the Post Office meant to you?

Balbir Bharj:

Honestly that's the only job I did other than my own business, so I loved it, otherwise I had the choice to leave anytime. I went within the Post Office from office to office and from up to down and then down, because I wanted to. So I had all that flexibility for me. I loved it.

Speaker 1:

And thank you very much for answering my questions.

Balbir Bharj:

My pleasure. Honestly it really is. All those kids, so good I can't believe how good you guys are. Oops sorry. How good you guys I can't believe. At your age I think I didn't know, I wouldn't have known what to do with this technology and how come, and awesome. You guys are so incredible. Super duper people.

Speaker 1:

Is there anything you would like to talk about that we haven't covered in our questions?

Balbir Bharj:

Nice one. I wish I was in your school.

Speaker 3:

I've got a couple [crosstalk 00:36:21].

Balbir Bharj:

You have a couple of questions.

Speaker 3:

Small questions.

Could you tell us what the difference between a Post Office and a sub post office is?

Balbir Bharj:

Yeah. Post Office is... The general Post Office was actually the first Post Office when...The very, very first in 1916 something, and then it became the Crown's Post Office, which was governed by the government. And then the Post Office and the Royal Mail were sister companies and then they split few years back, but they still worked together as an agent for each other, but it wasn't the same company. But then Post Office meant that we work on the counter and we take your letter, so if you post a letter we'll take your letter and then we'll pass it over to the Royal Mail who go and do the deliveries of your letter. So both have working together to deliver one letter.

Speaker 3:

And what about a sub post office then?

Balbir Bharj:

Sorry the question was that. The sub post office. So the sub post office is franchised privately to different people. So it's their own business but they have the Post Office jobs. So it's their own business totally, they run it how they want to but obviously under the Post Office rules and regulations.

Speaker 3:

Also, you've worked in many different post offices. What's the difference between a small one with just a few workers, and a large one?

Balbir Bharj:

Yeah I think they called it...It depends how many people worked in...[crosstalk 00:38:13]

Speaker 3:

No I meant what's the difference for you working there or managing there?

Balbir Bharj:

Ah okay, okay.

Speaker 3:

What was the main difference?

Balbir Bharj:

If you work in a small office it's cozier, it's better, it's nice because you've got friends working in one place. But the pro with the big ones that if somebody doesn't turn up in to work and then we didn't have so much workload on us, because we still have ten people working. But when it's a small person, three to four and one person doesn't come in, that does mean there's one person less, two third of the work we will have to do. And the customers are suffering it because it's slower going. Yeah.

Speaker 3:

And finally, when I was younger I remember pension day. [crosstalk 00:39:12] Talk us through pension days.

Balbir Bharj:

Pension days, yes. The pension day was either Mondays or Thursdays, so it depends on, it was if... so your pension it was a particular day of the week, so it was a pay day for you that day, and it was Thursdays or the Mondays. So in those days we had date stamps and it was books with two perforated checks. So one check every week stamp, see how much it is, check it was the right person to give the money... We knew the faces, so it knew it was her book, we knew how many more checks left in there.

And then all it was giving, giving, giving the money. £87, £54 we knew it, £87, so basically we had fifty, twenty pence coin hopper we called it. We had coins and yeah, so pension, pension, pence so we had the pensioners, it was a hub for them in the branches, be it small branches, be it bigger branches. So they were out there at 8:30 if the branch opened at nine o'clock. So if it's a group of four and one didn't turn up, they will let the others go 'til the fourth one comes in.

So they all got the money from the same time and then they go to the cafeteria or have their tea together or something. So it was that kind of community there and the mothers who came with their pushchairs, so two, three lines of the moms and they had their mummies' talks, moms and toddlers group, they came in for their benefits. So it was a hub, they came together to do that. It was just good time for them and for us.

So if we didn't see one person out of the group of four, even we were worried 'oh, what happened to Arthur, what happened? Where's Betty? Where's, you know?' So even we were missing them. Yeah so it's 'yeah she's all right, she's all right'. Or even when they were far away in the queues is the 'Betty's not here but she's all right'. So it was that. So before we ask them they let us know, you know by the time she comes to us we can ask 'where's Betty? Where's Betty?'. Yes. It really was.

Speaker 3:

We used to avoid pension day because the queues [crosstalk 00:42:01]

Balbir Bharj:

Yeah well we told the younger people, so we had our times because lunch time was for the workers, people who worked. So we knew we were going to have that sort of customers, so they're going to come with a white shirt, they're going to have a pen and paper in their hands, they're going to have some kind of a check to put in or take out, or do the car taxes. I think I did mention that in there.

So everybody was their car tax because we couldn't do them online in those days. So they had to come, so every year, so we knew basically in this month, because it was a monthly thing. So we knew this sort of person, oh he's a car tax, she's a car tax, this is the person for the passport, this person for pension obviously because of the age. Because giro people had checks in their hands, finding them with a giro pen because it was a hot day inside, so really good time, really good time. So many different people and we learned a lot from everybody, because there were some times when we could talk to our customers. Not just 'how are you? What's the weather?', but 'how you're doing?', so with that they'll tell their own stories, 'my daughter came, I'm so happy, she took me out for tea.' And the glory on their face for that.

And then there were times when actually we went out with our customers for cup of tea because we felt that it was nice. On my day off 'would you like to come for tea?', it's only down the

road, 'yes cup of tea', and it was so much they did it for us, but I'm sure it did good to them as well because that's how we felt that we've done something good.