Aisah Naseem – IBM Ignite Program

Would you sacrifice your future for your loved ones?

I have always believed everything in life is written and for that reason I am grateful for every decision that led me to where I am today no matter tough the journey has been.

My story begins in a shared one bedroom flat in Walthamstow, a lot of my friends felt sorry for me as it’s not the nicest feeling having to share a bedroom with 3 other people. That room taught me to appreciate everything that came my way and made my bond with my family unbreakable. I have never had a positive relationship with my father as I barely saw him growing up, but seeing my mum step in and play the role of both parents has always been my motivation to keep working. She not only managed to raise three children mostly on her own whilst working two jobs but also did a fantastic job.

In school I was doing well academically until the bullying started which deterred me from aiming high and affected my confidence badly. The bullying was mostly from people in my classes and as a result I would purposely not do well in exams and complain the work was too hard so I would get dropped to a lower set and it worked! By year 10 the bullying had stopped but that mindset stayed with me for the rest of my school life, which left me unable to achieve the grades I wanted.

Growing up with I had a strong passion for sports. In school I was a Sports Captain and was invited to teach year 3 children how to play different sports. I chose tag rugby and was assigned a class that was essentially a group of 7-year olds running wild apart from one little girl who decided to stand away from the rest of the class. She was the first I picked to be on my team. After a great day of playing that little girl ran to give me the biggest hug and thanked me for making the game so fun for her as she was scared to play at first, from that moment I decided I wanted to be a sports teacher and that was the path I decided to pursue in college.

Despite the struggles I faced in school, college was an amazing experience for me. I was able to engage in the social aspects that I missed out on at school and had the opportunity to write a new future for myself and not allow my past mistakes to dictate what I would achieve again which was a very liberating thought.

During my second year at college I finally felt back on track and had started to investigate universities for the following year when my dad decided to leave again. This left my mum struggling financially to support our family which left me with a difficult decision. After years of my mum sacrificing almost everything for us, I decided to make some sacrifices of my own and left college and started work full time to support my mum and family. Initially I was scared as the school system was all I had known, so leaving that environment to do something completely different made me question my decision at times.

I found a job at B&Q in Tottenham working on the checkouts, not exactly my dream job and at first, I thought leaving college was the worst decision I had made. But a month into my job, I was exceeding targets, I had made friends and my confidence had risen through the roof due to the constant exposure of new people and new situations. After a few months working on the checkouts, I progressed to join the showrooms team who designed and sold the kitchens and bathrooms. I loved the idea of selling, making commission and meeting targets daily so it was the best place I could have been.

In addition to my role at B&Q I wanted to give something back and I was found a second job with a company called Explore Learning as a part time tutor and that was the perfect step forward for me as I was doing my teaching and working with children.

A year later I was encouraged to investigate apprenticeships by my mum and that is when I found the Ignite scheme. I joined City Gateway who promised to help me increase my confidence, work on my public speaking skills and if successful, gain 4 weeks work experience at IBM.

Before I knew it, I was at the IBM assessment centre and a couple days later I got the call to say I was successful despite me thinking I had completely failed the interview stage of it. The scary guy that interviewed me is my closest friend at work now and turns out he isn’t that scary. I started IBM the following Monday as part of the People and Management Operations team who have constant exposure to the head of Global Business Services for UK & Ireland. My experience was far from what I was expecting, I had such a great time and learnt so much that I did not what my time to come to an end. I picked up high level Excel skills, was introduced to incredible people who stayed in contact with me even after I left and was given experience, I personally don’t believe I could have gained if I stayed at college or went on to university.

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 Day 10 at IBM in Hursley exploring the museum.

I imagine Kate (leader of the Ignite program) saw the ‘wild duck’ in me and offered me a role to come back to IBM a month after I left for a Short-term placement as a Foundation Business Administrator for the Ignite programme, which I jumped at! Seeing how the programme changed my life, I wanted to play a part in doing the same for others who may have been in my position or in a similar position to me in life. My short-term placement got extended to a year placement and allowed me to take a leadership role in supporting and mentoring the trainees that came through the program. Though the role came with plenty of challenges and it wasn’t exactly what I had planned to be doing in life, I had the chance to make a real change in other people’s lives and that is something I will always be thankful to IBM for. Working with Kate has its challenges too (you must send an email 3 times before you get a response) but I couldn’t have asked for a better manager who has supported me since I first walked through those revolving doors into IBMs reception. She has helped me progress by providing me with plenty of learning opportunities, events to attend and people to contact who have helped further my career.

 In my Ignite FBA role supporting a Ignite Cohort through their Tech Day in Hursley.

A group of people in a field

Description automatically generated Volunteering at Avon Tyrell with Ignite Cohort

During my time support Ignite I have played a key role in helping to make the scheme better and did my best to make their experience as amazing as mine was. I was a key point of contact for the ignites and helped shape their 4 weeks but that wasn’t enough for me, I decided I wanted to manage Ignite myself and those I didn’t manage, I mentored. I have actively supported over 80 trainees come through the Ignite program and am proud to have been involved in helping support them into their next steps in life.

This role built on my leadership and mentoring skills, but a key thing I gained was how much you learn from the Ignites themselves. Every trainee is different, with their own journey and has their own way of processing information.

In addition to my role supporting the Ignite program I have been an active ambassador for both IBM and the Ignite program.

* I have taken part in mentoring year 12 and 13 students with Pathways (IBM attraction partner) to provide guidance on school leavers options are after sixth form.
* I have represented IBM at internal and external events presenting on the Futures (IBM Gap Year) and Ignite programs, presenting to groups of up to 50 people.
* I was part of this year’s team for the IBM submission for the Princess Royal Training awards.
* I have led sessions and provided guidance on presentations for the Ignite trainees.

I have excelled and grown so much that I have now secured a second 12-month placement at IBM in iX working on a client project in Cambridge as a business analyst. Every day is a new challenge, and this has helped me grow out of my comfort zone yet again into a professional IBMer working alongside a large team and being exposed to a client daily.

Most recently, even though I have moved to a new role I am still actively involved in supporting the Ignite program through giveback in addition to my role. Kate has recently created a new role for me to support the program as an SME for the IBM task managers and mentors giving me the opportunity to share my personal experience as an Ignite trainee and the skills and knowledge I have gained in supporting over 8- trainees complete the program I will now me the first point of contact to support our 40+ Ignite support team.

Every day I feel like I am becoming a better person but don’t take that from me, here’s what everyone else has to say.

 A little thank you from one of the Ignite Cohorts.

“Aisah did not only make my Ignite experience something to learn and gain an insight from, but also made it enjoyable. I felt comfortable and was able to break down barriers I had prior to the placement, along with also building relationship with other IBM employees. I believe that Aisah’s excellent mentoring and advice provided the best possible Ignite experience” – Ehsaan Ali, Ignite June 2019

“Throughout my Ignite scheme I learned a lot on many things I never thought I would have been doing but this wouldn’t have been possible without Aisah. She was always there in times of need, made sure we were doing everything we needed to do, simply guiding us through the whole process and ensuring we were doing our best. Any problems we had she was always there to help with, we couldn’t have asked for anyone better to be there throughout the whole process.” -Sahbaj Khan June 2018.

Kate Ross – IBM Ignite leader

Aisah has shown such a passion for the Ignite program since joining IBM. She has got to know the trainees on a personal and professional level. She has shared ideas and made a real impact in how we deliver the program and support our trainees. This passion has never stopped and even though Aisah has moved to a new role, running the program without her just wouldn’t be the same so going forward Aisah will remain a key member of the Ignite team and will be using her skills and knowledge to support our early professional team of task managers and mentors, offering her another development opportunity to continue to develop and shine!