



September 2003 Newsletter

I have come in for a certain amount of flack in recent months for the appallingly non-politically correct nature of this newsletter. This has cheered me up no end, as I was concerned that nobody was reading it.



Sparkle fades

I was worried that Miss Sparkle was just too good to be true. Now I discover (to my horror) that she has been impregnated with the Revenue's new Empathy Virus. Allegedly, the effects start to wear off after 6 months and I swear I caught her saying "Just pay the tax" at the end of a long and involved client call. We must be vigilant. Please report to me (immediately) any other instances of Customer Service Failure. The ghost of Ms Whiplash lives on.



Warriors & wizards

The Sage of Bishopswood has come up with another startling insight into the level of commitment at work. He suggests splitting your people into warriors & wizards versus worriers & wimps. Warriors have a massive drive, work hard and have the resilience to overcome setbacks. Wizards have wisdom and the ability to make creative breakthroughs. This idea can lead to endless fun at dinner parties. Whilst Ms Whiplash was undoubtedly a warrior, I suggest that Miss Sparkle is more of a wimp. And what about the Boyscout?



Sue gets therapy?

I am not quite convinced about the benefits of life coaching, so I've got Sue field-testing the idea with Graham Solari, a local lifestyle coach. She seems to be enjoying the results so far, but the course has another five months to run before I can legitimately report back. In the meantime, Graham will be running a seminar on the subject towards the end of the year. To be advised: www.sailingthroughlife.co.uk



Crying capitalism

One of my early book recommendations was "Funky business" by 2 Scandinavians with unpronounceable names. I've kept an eye on their website ever since and it looks as though we will shortly be rewarded with Book 2. There is already an excellent article on the site on the impact of prozac and viagra on western society. [Are all Scandinavians sex obsessed?] My professional advice is not to get your tablets mixed up. Trust me, I'm an accountant.
www.funkybusiness.com/funky/

Books of the month

"The new financial order: risk in the 21st century" by Robert Schiller.
 This book is hard. Life is a risk and (at least, according to economists) profits are derived from risk. The 20th century saw a huge boom in the insurance of tangible assets, but the real risks that we all face from day-to-day are generally ignored and certainly never insured, the biggest of which is being in the wrong job, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Given the huge volumes of data that are now available, it would be possible to insure against your career

not providing the economic gains that you thought it should, as compared to the performance of your peers. Curiously, the example he gives is a biochemist working in gene therapy. I swapped from biochemistry to accountancy in 1985 because, after watching a number of very competent people get screwed through no fault of their own, it was apparent that success was not a foregone conclusion, no matter how good you were. In fact, a career in biochemistry requires the same management skills that you need to work in any other hierarchy and I thought I might as well at least get trained properly.

The other major problem with the world of biochemistry was that it lacked a sense of humour. In fact, the only remotely funny story that I picked up in four years went as follows:

One very drunken evening at Cold Spring Harbour, they decided to define a particular DNA sequence as an "autonomous replicating sequence", or ARS for short. Thereafter, it was perfectly acceptable to ask your research assistant if you could look at her ARS. Mind you, this wasn't a guaranteed way of impressing her with the depth of your intellect and maturity.

"Y: The descent of men" by Steve Jones

Having read all of the "How women can't read maps on Venus" books (flowers/champagne/chocolates/listening – I think I understand), I thought I should look at something by a proper scientist. The conclusion is equally gloomy – men will shortly be redundant. Give up now? www.ystevejones.com

100 years of data

With so much fuss about the inadequacies of the state pension system, it is worth remembering that the first pension scheme was introduced in Germany in 1898. This required the development of the biggest database system ever known at that time. Contribution records had to be kept over a period of 40 years and the appropriate pension payment calculated for those who actually retired. All in all, it was a huge exercise in manual record keeping/retrieval. Data-handling capabilities have improved dramatically in the last ten years, and we tend to take for granted (or positively resent) the amount of information that is kept on all of us. Just think of all those supermarket loyalty cards that can tell exactly how many tins of dogfood you bought in any one year. In real terms, big business is still uncertain as to what to do with this data, but, no doubt, they are working hard on the problem.

Fear and loathing

'Consultants' get a bad press. So, they are now therefore changing their names to, for example: Mentor, Coach, Advisor, Development partner, etc.
 Any other suggestions...that we can print?

The definition of partners, at least in large professional service firms, has always been much more clear cut. Non-partners were fired for sleeping with their (or anybody else's) secretary (bringing the firm into disrepute – per the staff manual), whereas such behavior was always admired at partner level. Positively aspirational in certain cases.



International tax

It's reassuring to note that the tax authorities in other parts of the world are as daft as ours. In Seattle, in the US (home of the Starbucks chain of coffee bars), they are introducing a 10c tax on every espresso served. To be known as "latte tax". Meanwhile, in New Zealand, tax authorities have concluded that as sheep produce 37m tonnes of methane every year, they should introduce a "fart tax". It is not clear how the Revenue are going to deal with avoidance issues. Any bright ideas for new taxes in this part of the world? –

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IT corner

Some six months ago, I waxed lyrical about the advantages of speech recognition software. In particular, I had bought the Dragon system and an initial appraisal indicated that it worked quite well. In practice, it still wasn't quite as quick as traditional dictation and I gradually slipped back into the old ways. A sudden burst of enthusiasm saw me upgrading my PC to the fastest chip available with the result that speech recognition is almost faultless. Even for a mumbler like me. I suspect it will rapidly become addictive, although it's unlikely to ever be able to make the tea. You may also remember that I got quite excited about the new breed of contact management software. In particular, we bought the ACT system, which has actually proved to be rather less stable on our setup than I would have hoped. In other words, it crashes frequently, much to the intense annoyance of everybody who is trying to use it. A Linux-based system is now available and we are in the process of evaluating it. So far, it looks pretty good. Anybody interested should try www.pangaea-consulting.co.uk

The various virus attacks have been in the press a lot, but the advice on how to deal with them hasn't changed: keep your virus definitions up-to-date and make sure your backups work properly. With a bit of help from the appropriate expert, we can review security issues with you.

IAS

I hesitate to mention this story, but the accountancy world is in total disarray over the introduction of international accounting standards. This is supposed to make it easier to compare results from different countries. For example, when BMW owned Rover, accounts prepared under German standards showed that Rover was making a huge loss, whereas our accounts indicated a breakeven position. Nobody thought they were making a profit. How, exactly, this is going to be relevant to Herefordshire is beyond me.

Maxwell story

In the exciting world of accountancy, Robert Maxwell stories are the currency of success:

Maxwell was in a lift at the Mirror offices when the other man in the lift started smoking. Maxwell was enraged, wrote out a cheque and fired the man on the spot. Only later did he discover that the man was actually a courier delivering something to the offices.

There must be a moral here?

Swearing at work

Given that this is a politically correct edition of the newsletter, I thought I ought to include an article on improper language. Allegedly, you can actually buy a staff handbook with these rules in place:

- bloody hell/buggar
Fairly innocuous expletives, which can be used in place of punctuation. (E.g., "How the bloody hell are we going to hide this difference?")
- bastard/bitch
Can be tricky to use in practice, unless working with Scotsman/women where it's actually a term of endearment
- F***
The classic F-bomb. Needs to be used with extreme caution, although may prove a powerful bonding experience when used with the boss. (E.g., "how the bloody hell are we going to hide this f***ing difference?")
- French words
For the pretentious only.

A translation of the US original:
www.fastcompany.com/magazine/74/of_ficehandbook.html

CRM gets dirty

In our ceaseless quest for efficiency, the team has been considering that old problem of clients arriving late for appointments. As you know, our reception area is well stocked with various worthy business tomes. So, to liven things up a bit, we've included that modern French classic "The sexual life of Catharine M" (boy is it an eye-opener). Now, even solicitors arrive early for appointments and surreptitiously leaf through the pages. The initial thought was to mark the book with ultra violet ink, but management was worried about contamination. There is clearly a business opportunity to create a "frustration index" and flog it on to Anne Summers. Naturally, the Boyscout is appalled by the whole concept. However, Miss Sparkle is now spending inordinate amounts of time in reception and frequently appears with an anxious frown on her perfectly formed features. For more information about this innovation contact dodgybookclub@chrisduckett.co.uk



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The company disclaims responsibility for anybody acting on (out?) any of the foregoing ideas. But, pictures would be good.



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