



May 2004 Newsletter

Hot weather special. Sweaty and bad-tempered.



Book of the month

There isn't (a business) one. [I've been reading "The Wind Up Bird Chronicles" by Haruki Marukami – distinctly surreal] Any suggestions anybody?

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Barbie gets it on

After 43 years of dating, Barbie & Ken have finally decided to be just good friends. Now, Barbie has had a fairly varied career with over 80 jobs on her CV – everything from dentistry to palaeontology. So, what should she do next?

A US panel of experts was asked this question and the best reply came from the president of the Institute for Women's Leadership:

"Barbie is ready to just follow her heart, follow her passion, forget what other people think about her. She may even gain a little weight."

Do we have a similar organisation in this country? Do we want one?

www.fastcompany.com/magazine/82/career-advice.html



Late tax

A recent report from the National Audit Office indicated that the total owed to the Revenue (at March last year) was £14bn, of which £3bn was over 3 years old. So the Collector will be under pressure to improve matters. On a local level, this is likely to translate into a more aggressive approach, particularly with the PAYE Returns having just gone in and the July self-assessment payment looming. And while we're on this cheery subject, don't forget that Forms P11D (benefits) have to be in to the Revenue by 5th July.

Prognosis unknown

On a more personal note, I can advise that Jan, our payroll lady, had her cancer operation and is now out and about (after 3 weeks and just in time for her 70th birthday), if not moving particularly quickly. I really hope she is back in action shortly as Sparkle is having to cover for her and this is making Sparkle really short tempered and aggressive (tarnished?). Even the (normally un-insultable) Boyscout has been reduced to tears.

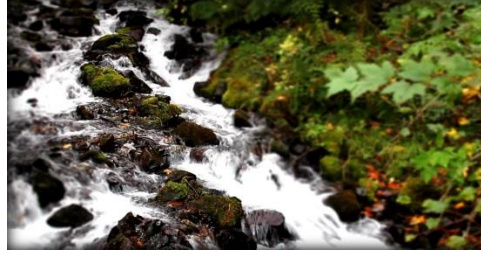
Investigations

Sparkle and I recently attended a tax investigation "workshop" run by PriceWaterhouse. Basically an excuse to swap stories with local accountants. The most interesting issues to come out were:

- The tendency of Inspectors to go out to meetings on client premises with a VAT officer in tow. This is being sold as improved Client Service, but actually means that the Inspector can piggy back the Customs officer's powers of search & entry. 2 assessments in one?
- Inspectors have been known to write to suppliers of the taxpayer under investigation and ask for detailed information. If you receive such a request you should ask the Inspector to issue a notice formally demanding the information. Otherwise, you may be compromised too.
- The new Money Laundering rules have inevitably resulted in a flood of reports to NCIS. They are supposed to pass the relevant reports to the Revenue who screen and investigate the significant ones. So far, the Revenue doesn't have any procedures to handle the information. I'm sure it will do in time.

Incidentally, its not too late to take out investigation insurance.

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Coaching the Alpha Male?

There is a growing trend in the States to (attempt to) make the boss rather more user friendly. [Similarly, the Boyscout is still trying to send me on a small-talk course => www.magicofsmalltalk.com] The problem is that the traits that get you to the top (at least in big organisations) are not always that helpful for the long term growth of the company. For example, the tendency to be rational and unemotional (cool, calm & collected?) leads to laser-focus and objectivity, but can also make the boss difficult to connect with and hard to involve in team plays. Naturally, as this was a US article, there is a 5 step path to correct this:

- Admit vulnerability
Concede that your hair may indeed be considered to be thinning, at least in strong light?
- Accept accountability
But it is always somebody else's fault.
- Connect with underlying emotions
Does crying at the prospect of work on a Monday morning count?
- Balance positive with critical feedback
Praise is manipulation. You did OK.
- Become aware of patterns
If they were useless yesterday, they will be again today.

I don't dare tell you what it said about Alpha Females, but the article was made in California www.workethic.com

Non-audit reports

With the (confused) relaxation of the audit rules, the Institute has been working hard to dream up an acceptable replacement report. The result looks like it's been put together by a committee of solicitors. The most tortured paragraph is as follows:

"To the fullest extent permitted by law, we do not accept or assume responsibility to anyone other than the Company and the Company's Board of Directors, as a body, for our work or for this report."

Allegedly, clients are paying for this? Whatever happened, it wasn't my fault. Isn't failure to take responsibility for your actions the definition of psychosis?

Not/Net users

I've been reading the footnotes again. Whilst the chip-driven world appears to be here to stay, there are differences between individual countries, even in the West. Finland and Sweden rank as high users of Internet, PC and mobile phone technologies. In other words, more than 50% of the population use them, but they do have very long, dark nights. Thank you Nokia. However, other countries have their weak spots. Even the US has relatively low use of mobile phones. Italy is good on phones (presumably to facilitate affairs), but poor on Net use. We rank with the French and Germans as poor on all counts. No surprise there then.

Competitive advantage (again)

In addition to the useless non-audit report, the Institute has recently brought out a paper on strategic planning. In amongst the theory are some quite good stories. This one is a prime advert for the Boyscout's Focus Groups:

An industrial cleaning company had a very successful business which basically picked up, cleaned and returned overalls for employees of small to medium sized engineering firms in the West Midlands.

The directors wanted to expand and decided they needed a new laundry facility and accordingly prepared to take on a raft of bank borrowings. Picking up and returning overalls is time consuming and hard to control, so they decided to outsource this part of the operation. That way, they could all spend longer polishing their nice new laundry unit.

As an afterthought, the company started asking customers why they dealt with the company rather than a competitor. The response was something of a surprise – customers valued the service rather than the cleanness of the overalls. After all, if an overall is clean, you don't care how big a washing machine was used. You do care if the overalls aren't returned on time as this disrupts production. Also, competitors insisted that dirty overalls were bagged, which just made more work for the customer.

In the event, strategy was changed and the company actually outsourced the laundry facility.

Unfortunately, as this is an Institute story, we don't know if it had a happy ending. I hope the company didn't subsequently go bust because it had the wrong strategy, but you never know.



But, I was right

As you might expect, somebody has now come up with a way of measuring just how defensive the average boss can be => a defensiveness index (10 is bad). When challenged, do you?:

1. Show polite interest while inwardly preparing your rebuttal
2. Provide a detailed explanation of your point of view
3. Justify actions with compelling logic and an interpretation of events
4. Interrupt to give your perspective
5. Interpret comments as attacks and feel misunderstood
6. Convince them that you're right and they're wrong
7. Make snipy replies and show irritation by body language
8. Blame or complain about somebody who is not present
9. Intimidate or attack the messenger
10. Appear to comply, with no intention of doing so

On a simple scoring system, full marks would be 55. But, isn't this just the normal male view of the world? Any nominations for Grouch of the Week (other than Whiplash on payroll)? Paranoid@chrisduckett.co.uk

There is also an index for openness and responsibility, but it's nowhere near as much fun.

Chuck a sicky

In Australia, it's perfectly acceptable to use your allowance of sick leave as holiday. Nobody questions it. However, given good weather and a suitable sporting event, you need to come up with some more inventive reasons to be off work:

- *Personal emergency*
This works quite well as it's hard to check up on. The best excuses involve references to children/pets/cars and generally produce a sympathetic response. A "tanning crisis" is one excuse too far.
- *Intraday absence*
It is possible to skip nearly a full days work while nominally in the office. Depart after 10am and return before 4pm, leaving your briefcase in full view and your computer running with a complicated spreadsheet left open. Coming in with shopping bags is a bit of a give-away.
- *Death in the family*
Hard to get right. Just how many relatives can one person have?
- *Personal day*
A US invention, no doubt arriving here shortly? Sure sign of a complete nutter.

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