

CASE STUDY: SIDDIQ JUST SHITS

Jay is a salesman of advanced computer software and systems to corporations. Jay is financially successful, intelligent, energetic, and socially engaged. When he was first referred to me, the products he was tasked with selling had begun to focus on artificial intelligence systems. The purpose of these AI systems, whether unspoken or explicit, is to automate certain types of business process to a degree at which large numbers of jobs currently performed by humans could be eliminated.

The mass job losses that would result were referred to in neutral language: workforce reduction; reduction in force; workforce resizing; headcount management. For Jay, as a commercially motivated technologist (his self-identification), the computational functions and the capabilities of the systems were genuinely exciting; his understanding of and entirely unforced enthusiasm for the products and services he represented was, he was fully aware, a factor in his ability to sell them.

The client companies with which he had relationships became increasingly eager to buy and implement these AI products and systems, integrating them into their operations and, in time, reducing their human workforces.

Jay would, in the course of his work, meet clients not specifically for the purpose of sales, but of verifying that the systems they had bought were in fact functioning as intended, and for the less well-defined but commercially crucial 'relationship management'*. The buyers – typical working groups including a senior technology officer; a director of human resources; a director of the business department in which the software is deployed, usually marketing or an administrative / financial function; and an overseer from 'corporate affairs' or 'global operations' – tended to begin by describing their experience of the system in terms of the ease of managing its user interface, the smoothness or otherwise with which it worked alongside their existing systems, any unforeseen glitches. As Jay's AI systems became more embedded, however, the assessment of effectiveness shifted to other metrics. First, what were described as process improvements, then cost savings, then resource reallocations, then what had always been the true purpose of the exercise: how many people they had been able to make redundant.

In office settings, this phase of the exchanges would typically conform to accepted norms of corporate discourse: bland in tone, outcome-focused in a technocratic, profit-driven context, though with some lexicon borrowed from more overtly physical, male-coded practices.

In less formal settings – a pub, a bar, a golf course – the descriptions became less restrainedly masculine, and tended towards militaristic in their use of graphic euphemisms, in this case transferred from the act of killing to the act of cutting jobs: instead of 'eliminate', *chop, whack, clip, zap, smoke, squash, squelch*. Jay reported a number of executives making the 'gun' hand gesture when talking about the deletion of jobs from payroll.

As his work goes on, seeing this hand gesture multiple times triggers a period of reflection and self-assessment in him, one aspect of which is keeping a personal record of his meetings. After our formal client-advisor relationship ended, Jay posted me these journals with an instruction to do with them whatever I thought was right. Here are relevant excerpts from them:

CONVERSATION WITH MARK, BUSINESS UNIT SENIOR MANAGER, [COMPANY NAME REDACTED]

-Normally we've got two dozen TMs doing accounts receivable. It's intake, database matching, reconciling, chasing, chasing, more fucking chasing, Treasury ledger entry, emulating the Treasury ledger entry in the Finance master system which is a totally different format on a totally different base core, the whole process. On average, one of these bitches* will go from Day 0 which is ticket opening, to resolution on Day 2.5. So we plug in your beast and we decide we'll break it in easy, give it ten days of parallel processing, me and Andy – Andy, an in-house software engineer, nods – looking under the hood every few hours, all in a beta-test not a go-live environment, and guess what it delivered? What did it do in that 0-2.5 time phase?

Mark wants me to guess.

I reach for something implausible, that he'll have to lower. Take some heat out of the discussion.

-Ten, I say. No. Twelve.

A twelvefold increase in output would be, by any standards, a remarkable success.

Mark does a little hop-step, like he's a cricketer at the crease.

-Dude you are *wrong*. Tell him Andy

-Thirty-five, Andy says, like he's talking about the maximum theoretical speed of a new spacecraft.

-Thirty. Fucking. Five, Mark echoes.

I look at them both: they are not exaggerating. From a technology implementation standpoint, what has been done is amazing. We all agree that it is amazing.

-Any QC issues, I ask.

-QC? Fucking *perfection*. Flawless. So I take it to Siddiq – you know Siddiq – [Siddiq is a director in the company's Global Operations department, making him Mark's superior by two job-grade brackets] -and Siddiq just stands there and *shits*. He just fucking *shits*. -We need to get Helen in here, Siddiq says. And Ross.

Helen is an HR director, Ross is a senior vice-president in the Finance function and, like Helen, a member of the company's EMEA Executive Leadership Team.

-Next day, Mark says, -message comes down to me from Siddiq, cc Helen and Ross: green light for 80% clearance. 80 percent. Scorched. Fucking Earth. So I put a line through-

-The hottest ones, Andy says; Mark and Andy high-five each other-

-and the rest, it's up against the wall. Mark makes the 'gun firing' hand gesture. -Bang, head shot. Bang, head shot. Bang, head shot. Bang, head shot. Bang, head shot. Twenty. Gone. Just. Like. That. Let's do the whole fucking village. These fuckers are on 42 plus bennies to sit on their arses doing something your system can do *thirty-five* times faster? Boom, not any more they're not. I've not even had it running two weeks and I've saved the thick end of a mill. This thing of yours is going to go through this company like a fucking *flamethrower*.

I don't tell him what a flamethrower would actually do.

-It is a stone-cold mother fucker. And you, my friend, are a fucking *hero*.

Mark makes a gun shape with both hands.

-BOOM!

We talk about sport, and restaurants and hotels in Dubai, for the next two hours.

When I get home, before I write this, I fill in an online form to join the Communist Party of Great Britain.

MEETING WITH JULIE, MANAGING PARTNER, & BRAN, SENIOR DIRECTOR, [COMPANY NAME REDACTED]

I'm meeting a new prospective client. I've been referred to them by a much larger existing client, who it turns out is the majority owner in this company, a specialist consultancy with offices in Covent Garden. Around the offices, which are spacious, brightly coloured, and well-catered with fresh fruit, nutritious canned drinks, and protein bars in wicker baskets in each room, are screen-printed posters with insights into the company's guiding principles and codes of behaviour.

WE ARE FAMILY, says one in lilac lettering. WE FIGHT FOR EACH OTHER.

BUT FIRST, says another, much bigger, in lime green, TRUST.

KNOWLEDGE AND INSIGHT THAT POWERS HUMAN CREATIVITY

TRUST AND TRUTH RULE OUR WORLD

WE DO GOOD NOT BECAUSE WE SHOULD, BUT BECAUSE WE MUST

This company does not power human creativity and it does not do good. I know what it does do. It's a media consultancy which designs, builds, and uses digital tools to measure the impact of internet marketing campaigns on the popularity of the products and services its clients make, all of which are mobile apps or social media platforms. I'm meeting Julie, who is one of the managing partners, and Bran, who's introduced as a senior director. He looks about 25, and rich in the kind of way that doesn't have to work. Whatever he does, Bran has chosen. He hasn't ever had student debt, or mortgage debt, or rent to pay, or any of the other things that mean people have to do work that they might not otherwise want to do. The three of us chat, then Julie gets to business.

-We're a family here, Julie says, -and we want to find out if there are maybe some members of the family unit who've maybe started to fall behind a little bit with our priorities and deliverables as they evolve.

-We're expanding rapidly, Bran says, - and that's brought us to a place where we need to make some tough decisions. Think of it like, Bran says, looking at me for more than the flick of an eye for the first time. -when a football club qualifies for the Champions League. You've got the players who've helped get you there, and they're your club legends and you'll always be grateful to them, but you're in charge of the team and it's your responsibility to ask whether those players can actually *take* you forward now that they've got you there? Can they be coached, can they be upskilled? Or do some of them maybe need to be upgraded to get the team playing at that next level?

Bran, I realise, has looked at me and decided I would best understand this common business situation in terms of a football metaphor. I hate football, and I fucking hate Bran.

-So we're looking to get a view, from the data up, says Julie, who's Welsh but trying to hide it, -first off if there are any vulnerabilities, if they're aggregated or disaggregated, and if maybe they're a process improvement we can scope and scale. So we're looking for something quite granular. A granular, data-up view of performance across the family unit, benchmarked to an internal norm, and focused on some key family members.

It probably sounds like Julie is talking shit, and she is, but everyone in my industry will know exactly what she wants and how to build it. What she wants is a covert surveillance system that essentially sets a baseline of how much work an employee should be doing, and scans for people who are falling below it. It used to be relatively difficult, or at least relatively expensive, but with AI, it's easy. You just need to specify how you define 'work' – it's usually a combination of keystrokes per hour, hours online, outgoing email count, response time count; sales pipeline metrics if that's the business function; if not, something more abstract about 'impact' which Julie and Bran want to measure by using a weighted combination of who reads the work that their employees do, how long they spend reading it, do they forward it, if so who to, do they reply, does it lead to additional work or repeat commissions.

-I'll curate the precise edges of the parameters, Bran says.

I bet you fucking will, I think.

-Great, I say.

We talk some more about the kind of reports they want the tool to generate, the data they want it to look at, something they call indicators, tripwires, and triggers and which all seem to be the same thing but could fall into several data categories. We talk about development timelines, stretch deployment schedules, service level agreements, compute requirements, server space, various levels of commitment, financial terms. After a while and the offer of a chilled Purdey's, Bran slips his hand into a laptop case and pulls out a piece of paper. I look at it, and look around the room we're in: this is the first and only piece of paper I've seen in the building. It's a list of people who work here. They're sorted by email address, messenger handle, login code, employee ID, and surname.

Alade-Mensah

Bucak

Chan

Chin

Gronkowsky

Kahn

Khan

Nikolov

Obafemi

Olukolade

Owusu

Patel, J

Patel, S

Popescu

Simonovic

Wojkowski

The scope of work is clear: they want to use AI to ethnically cleanse their company.

-Sure, I say. We can do that.

That night, I do some more research on the company. In some of the chat spaces dedicated to the business of online campaign monitoring and evaluation, there's talk that Julie's operation is the subject of takeover interest from a large American advertising agency.

And before I write this, I fill in an online form to join the Anti-Capitalist Resistance. I add a message that tells them about the work I do, and that whatever skills and resources I have, I'm ready to put them to whatever use they think is best.

That was the final entry in Jay's journal. The text that follows is a transcription of a brief recap session we had:

Jay: You have to understand – I like, and I *am like* these people. Your Marks, your Siddiqs. Not so much Julie or Bran, they're dicks, but I totally respect that they've looked at what they want to get done and realised, we can use AI-as-a-service to do this for us. It's my world. I love technology, the power and the capability of it, it's magical to me, human wizardry, something from nothing, lines of code that somehow instruct something else to do something that's real, I've always loved it. It's like I told you at the start, I'm a computer science graduate, I wanted to go on to postgrad, I'd have been happy just writing code, getting deeper and deeper into it, machine learning, LLMs, all of that, but I didn't want to have to borrow eighty fucking grand to do it, you know? I couldn't afford just to do what I wanted, I'm not from one of those families. So I had to get a job, and I thought well if I'm going to have a get a job I might as well get one that pays? And I got really good at it. There's some people look down on selling, fucking grubby business, wouldn't dirty their hands with it**. Pussies. Their cushy jobs sitting doing fuck all wouldn't exist without sales, nothing would.

-So what changed for you?

Jay: Like I told you, I'm one of these guys, that's how we get along, that's why they don't even feel like they're being sold to, more like I'm working with them just in a different bit of the same company. And I know that job losses are what it's all about, it's all normal business. But Julie and Bran, giving me all this shit about family, but they're not even bothering to hide that fact that's anyone with a foreign surname getting kicked out. And the... [here he makes the 'gun hand' gesture] ...'head shot'.... I couldn't...I didn't see why they had to do that.

-You couldn't take that kind of pleasure in it?

Jay: I know they have to do it. But they don't have to enjoy doing it. It makes you think - what kind of people are they? You know? Do I want to be helping them do what they're doing, if that's how they're going to be about it?

At this point Jay discontinued formal advisory work, but we stayed in touch. From communism and anti-capitalism, he journeyed deeper into radical politics, and began to dedicate himself first to understanding, then dismantling, the 'structures of power' that had put him in the position in which he was forced to do work he would rather not have done.

Over time, our exchanges (which I am legally prohibited from including here) showed his growing attraction to extreme theories, and what he described as 'direct action'. My conclusion was that had found a constructive outlet for his intellect and his energies: he was becoming a terrorist.

In his final message to me, he said he was en route to North Africa to enlist in a training camp run by the Islamic State. I had no reason to disbelieve him.

**In this context, 'bitches' is a gender-neutral term. It refers to the process of completing an accounts-receivable transaction. A 'TM' is 'team member', ie, an employee.*

*** There exists a large body of literature concerned with the 'psychology of sales.' I have reviewed a randomly selected sample of this work, and my preliminary conclusion is that all the data and testimonies cited in it as 'evidence' are fabrications.*