

Support

by D.R. Baker

This is where I find myself when the debt collectors won't stop calling. When the student loans need paying, the interest accumulated like snow atop a mountain. When I'd like to stop choosing between groceries and phone. Moreover, when I need some direction other than no direction, something to do with my hands and eyeballs for predetermined slices of the day. Passion does not lead me here, but I find yourself among some for whom this is the world, the sole domain in which their lives find meaning and function. This is an office, and I am not certain I belong here.

The room is open. The lights are fluorescent, but somehow not harsh. This is neither the corporate hell world from the movies, nor the technocratic nightmare of Silicon Valley. There is neither a redundant memo nor a ping pong table to be found. The people are neither overly friendly nor willfully obtuse. I am somewhere in between all of that, somewhere out in the real world of it.

I am a customer support agent. Support, not service. It's a newish term, introduced in hopes of moving away from the negative connotations of interminable hold times and overseas call centers.

A customer calls and I help them locate their invoice. Another asks me how to reset their password. I learn new words like *onboarding* and *workflow*. Phrases like *watch this space* and *let's check in about that* enter my lexicon, absorbed, as by a sponge, from the environment around me. I transfer another customer to their sales representative, but the words *sales* and *purchase* and *buy* are never used—instead, I say *success manager*. The customers are friendly enough, rarely irate, never screaming or cussing.

For the first few weeks I am actually excited to get to work. I am learning. I am meeting new people. I am in charge of your life, because this company is paying me a livable salary to sit in a chair

and click things for forty hours a week. Soon, my savings will grow, my credit will improve, and I can even think about taking a vacation.

I attend meetings. Some are aimless, others confusing. Occasionally they provide a forum for airing grievances amongst my teammates and manager, over things I know don't matter, but which nevertheless boil my blood: the expectation that my team, being positioned at the front of the office, should buzz in visitors; salespeoples' constant need for babysitting, their shrugging off any task faintly resembling work; the VP's fixation on metrics (average call length, percentage of emails resolved on first reply) and total ignorance of the human element of our responsibilities. Regardless of their content or catharsis, I have yet to attend a meeting that seems necessary.

There is food. Snacks: chips, granola, cereal, bananas, apples, candy, chocolate. The office provides a catered lunch once a week, often from an expensive restaurant I'd never visit on my own. I almost always grab seconds. Due to the food and the sedentary nature of the job, I gain weight. There are fitness initiatives, discounts on club memberships, but I never open those emails.

A coffee machine sits in the kitchen, operating at an endless hum between the hours of 8:30 and 2:00. I don't want to estimate how many gallons are brewed each day. Some days, I drink coffee until my fingertips buzz, at which point I drink glass after glass of water in an attempt to calm down. I eventually switch to decaf.

Tepidly, I test how long I can get away with sitting in the bathroom. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Close to fifteen. No one says anything.

The company has something called a culture team, whose sole purpose seems to be to manufacture fun. They plan in-office events, like guest speakers and little contests. One of the design people just won an Amazon gift card for their Halloween costume. There's always food, cupcakes and donuts and the like, at these events, and non-alcoholic drinks.

Twice a year, in the summer and around the winter holidays, there are parties. Some people

in the office treat these parties like prom, leaving work early to get their hair done and to change their clothes. The people who commute in from New Jersey and Long Island come to work with already-enhanced hair, and gym bags with their party clothes inside. These events don't remotely resemble any party I've been to before, but they are fun enough, or at least try to be. The absence of spontaneity—everything has a schedule and rules—keeps genuine fun at least an arm's distance away.

A few times a week, the younger people in the office hit the bar downstairs. I understand, as I sip an okay beer I paid a dollar too much for, that the way I see these people is likely the way they see me.

Despite this, it's here in the bar, when everyone has a beer or two in them, that I feel something might actually happen. Not that I expect debauchery or chaos. These are still my coworkers. There is still a calculated distance. But outside the confines of the office, outside the stoic series of activities that masquerade as fun, this is where the people beside whom I sit and click things for forty hours a week finally start to resemble human beings.

I hope they now see the human in me too.

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