

An IT contract at the Open University

The Interview

The interview was conducted by an anaemic looking schoolboy with long hair, lets call him Soggy Marshmallow. He led me, not to a private room, but to the kitchen area in a large open-plan office. That should have been the first warning. It very quickly became clear that he hadn't read my CV. When this emerged he tried to lie and say that he'd seen my Linked In Profile, difficult, since at that time I didn't have one. This should have been the second warning. Finally, something that made sense, he asked me my experience with a certain piece of software and to give an example of how it could be improved, which I did. Interview over. I had driven for 55 minutes for a single question in a dirty kitchen from an anaemic, lying, school-boy. That was the time to have said a polite 'no thanks'. I didn't...

The neighbour

And here is where you are sitting, next to Satan. Well, they didn't actually say that but they could have. Only in the Public Sector perhaps. The character sat along-side me epitomised all the negative attributes of the public sector worker in the public imagination. He took full advantage of the flexi-time arrangements to arrive at 10.00 am and work after 5.30 pm in the evenings to make it up, which was fine because it seemed he started the extra hour in the evenings by making himself a drink and having a bit of a relaxing time, after all, most people had left so there was no one to see. On more than one occasion he settled down to watch the rugby on some online rugby site. He would religiously take two half-hour tea-breaks a day. Perhaps his contract had been drawn up in some distant past and had stipulated mandatory tea-breaks and he was sticking to it. Lunch was a long drawn out affair; a trip to collect the sandwich didn't seem to count for the time taken because after that he'd take a full hour to go out and do something. When he came back he would 'work' while eating the sandwich for about 40 minutes. (I say eat but it was more like sucking. If you have never sat next to anyone who sucks at a baguette and masticates loudly as if it were necessary to publicly broadcast every mouthful you are lucky). Thus lunch, nominally one hour, managed to be spread into nearly two. It was very clear he had no interest in, no pride in, no love for his work at all. On the contrary, and the most nerve-fraying aspect of sitting next to him, was the constant stream of negative swearing, really nasty, vicious, aggressive swearing that he let loose any time he came across a difficulty in his work. As the stream of bad, hate loaded words oozed out of his mouth the atmosphere filled with a horrible kind of poison. His aggression was uncontrolled and savage. One time Soggy Marshmallow was helping him with his work and he didn't immediately understand. He attacked Soggy Marshmallow in the most aggressive manner possible. I was staggered, amazed. I assume that something was done about that quietly and 'behind the scenes', but maybe not. Anyway Satan did not have a positive attitude towards his work. It was clear he had no interest in it and resented having to be

there. He was set to do the absolute minimum required so as not to be sacked and to do it gracelessly with resentment and hatred.

As someone who cares about his work, who takes pride in it, who sees web coding as a kind of craft, something which benefits from care and passion, this was the single most horrible experience of my professional life. I found it profoundly upsetting to be practising my craft while sat alongside some bastard who hated every moment of being there and clearly loathed and resented this kind of work.

Was anything done about this negative, work-shy, loser? Perhaps he was on a final warning? Perhaps someone had spoken to him about how to behave in an office? It seems that no, on the contrary, everyone tip-toed around him and treated him with deference and kindness. He would ask for help with some aspect of the systems and someone would come and help him. Then it would be "how do you get the bloody thing to work?", said not with any humour but simply with pure aggression. It really was a truly bloody thing for him. And people would just help him, accepting the foulness as if it were normal.

The management

Where was the management? Robert McIntyre, the development manager had presumably simply washed his hands of the problem. There was no sign of any interest. Perhaps this is par for the course in the public sector but why sit a professional, capable, consultant next to your dirty laundry basket?