

Thoughts on work and the office environment

A series of occasional papers

Avis Rent-A-Car ran a famous ad campaign in the 1960s with the slogan "We're No 2 – we try harder". No 1 was, of course, Hertz. This campaign was responsible for Avis becoming, if not No 1, then taking a much bigger share of the US car rental market.

The CEO of Avis at the time was an iconoclast called Robert Townsend who subsequently wrote a best selling book called 'Up the Organisation'. Townsend's big thing was 'If you're not in business for fun or profit what the hell are you doing here?' (though shouldn't this have been for 'fun and profit?').

At a time when management books were weighty tomes, Townsend pioneered a style of pithy one liners later followed by the *One Minute Manager* and *Management for Dummies* series.

Typical 'chapter' headings (the chapters were often only a couple of paragraphs) include 'PR Department, Abolition of', 'Disobedience and its necessity' and 'Killing things, VP in charge of'. You get the drift.

He particularly disliked chauffeurs because they were always hanging around Head Office with nothing to do except spread rumours. He rather approved of company planes on the basis that sometimes they liberated middle management by crashing with the entire top management team aboard.

Townsend made a number of observations about the office environment which are still relevant today.

He disliked reserved car parking for senior management - "If you're so **** important, you get there first thing in the morning!".

He always resisted taking extra office space and wrote approvingly of 'double decker desks'. Under extreme pressure he would reluctantly let a self-contained profit centre move out, preferably under the control of a miserly project manager called, say, Uriah

Heep. If within four weeks of moving, everyone was more or less happy, the building would be called the 'Heep Building'. If they weren't, it would be called the 'Heep Memorial Building'.

He was particularly concerned about the quality of the working environment for telephone operators.

'If I ever design a Head Office, the executive offices will look like the inside of a Trappist monastery and the telephone switchboard area will look like a Turkish harem'.

In those pre-DDI / pre-VoIP / pre-Skype days when only top executives had personal direct lines, the telephonist was almost always the first link between the customer and the organisation. Curiously, it's now gone full circle, with the call centre operator often being the first point of contact.

When deciding on a location for a new Head Office, he used the 'Mars, man from' technique.

'Where would a man from Mars locate the headquarters of an international company in the business of renting and leasing vehicles without drivers?' He concluded that they needed to be between JFK and La Guardia airports in New York City whilst his main competition isolated itself in the middle of Manhattan.

And so on.

Buy the book! It's long out of print but there are usually copies available on e-bay.



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