

## The BOFH-Stories 1997

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### **Just how do you get round that tricky visit from the auditors? The BOFH has a few ideas ...**

Things aren't good. The board of directors is after blood. Nothing's been said yet, but everyone in the building knows what a visit from the auditors means...

They didn't go up to the executive offices first, which means they're primed with all the information they need. Someone's upset the top brass big time, and that someone, judging by the troop of 'yes-persons' laughingly referred to as my 'co-workers', can only be me. Or possibly the pimply-faced-youth...

I remember electronically signing up the entire board of directors to the mailing list of a seedy video parlour, but I hardly think that would qualify for all this attention.

The auditors are a 'good cop, bad cop' team who'd make a VAT inspector look like Mother Teresa.

I've got about a minute before they pay us a visit. So I dial up head office's router and start a packet sniff operation, and then configure some extra phone lines onto the voice recorder.

I've just finished when they arrive.

"This is a secure area," I call out, playing the dedicated worker to the full.

"Company auditors," bad cop sneers.

"You have some ID?" I ask, buying time until I can clear my screen.

Their pictures look rough enough, but I make a point of checking their ID photos under the magnifying lamp.

"They seem OK. Now, what can I help you with?" I ask.

"We're here to audit and inventory your equipment. You're to make yourself available until we've finished the audit."

"How long will that take?" I reply.

"As long as it takes," bad cop says.

Excellent. I write them up in the visitors' book, then swipe them through the door on my ID.

They potter around a bit calling out inventory numbers and making rude noises to themselves. I pass the time by listening to my latest voice recording on the headset. It only takes a few minutes of secretarial gossip to find out that someone noticed that one of our microwave dishes points at the middle of beancounter central instead of the sky. Mind you, it's not as if we're actually transmitting

through it... Still, with the psychosomatic headaches and general illness it'll cause, I guess it's worth the hassle.

"OK," bad cop says wandering back in.

"According to our records, over the past year you have written-off as unserviceable; three televisions..."

"Ah, satellite reception monitors," I quickly interrupt, "very poor quality, yes."

"Two stereo video recorders..."

"CCTV recorders with dual audio channels, again, poor quality"

"A microwave cooker..."

"Short range microwave transmission test device."

"And 112 videos."

"CCTV recording media, yes."

"Bought from the Megastore?"

"At a good price."

"Blank media at 15 quid a piece?"

"Quality costs money..."

"Then why are the titles listed?"

"Invoicing error. Call them, I'm sure the Megastore's records say blank media. Now..."

"And you wrote them off?"

"Corporate secrecy requires us to destroy confidential media after three months..."

"Well, what about these multi-colour indicator lamps?"

"We use them all over the place..."

"Yes, well they could be anything... Hell, Christmas tree lights fit that bill."

Perceptive bastard really...

"I'm sure everything's in order," good cop says, in a manner designed to engender trust. No doubt the same form of trust that preceded the statement: "Watch my back Brutus." It can only mean one thing.

"Just one thing," bad cop asks, switching to pleasant mode. "You DO have the asset disposal forms,

signed by your head of department and co-signed by the head of purchasing?"

Whoops. Things have turned a little grim for the home team.

"Because if you don't, you WOULD be liable for the loss of the assets concerned. With a current book value of about £5,000..." he says, savouring every syllable.

"Of course I do," I smile, indicating a huge pile of miscellaneous papers kept expressly for occasions like this. "In there somewhere. Sorry it's a bit of a mess."

While they wade through the pile, I look up the vehicle associated with the identification cards of our two friends, then e-mail the PFY his mission.

An hour later the auditors call it a day and wander off. The PFY and I follow suit, in time to witness another 'random' security check at the car park exit. We are both shocked and stunned to see a boot-sale-worth of 'written-off' equipment in our erstwhile auditors' vehicle, along with 30 or so 'asset disposal forms', blank but for an incriminating signature and co-signature.

"So that's where all our kit has been going!" I blurt in passing in case security has lost the plot, even after the anonymous tip-off.

Status quo returned, I offer to buy the PFY a beer to ease the cramp in his signing hand.

It's a tough life at the top - don't let people tell you otherwise...

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### **The BOFH's in the mood for a little light fraud, but how to get rid of the boss? Easy-peasy ...**

The boss is, as they say, rabid. I haven't seen him this mad since the PFY and I convinced the beancounters that Windows 95 was two years obsolete and that they needed to upgrade to this year's version - OS/2.

"What the hell's happened at public relations?" he snaps. "I've had their head of department yelling at me. He says you told one of his secretaries to erase the install media and virally infect their machines!"

"You're kidding," I reply, oozing disbelief. "Hang on, I haven't spoken to anyone. Did they ring me?"

"No, they rang the helpdesk, but you picked up the call."

"I don't think so - I was working on the network all day," I reply, bearing in mind our automated network attendant makes a convenient alibi.

"What about THIS then?" he cries, brandishing my virus disk.

"It's a disk with a copy of a virus on it," I say.

"Then why did you label it 'VIRUS SCAN'?"

"It was a note to myself to check it. I found it was indeed infected, then put it in the bin, but someone has obviously and foolishly tried to recycle the disk."

"Well their whole server is infected now and they need to stop users from accessing it and reinfected their machines until it's been sorted out."

"Of course," I say. "The PFY and I will get right onto it."

The PFY is surprised at my eagerness to aid the PR plebs, but it's just the chance I need to get into their machines and make those little changes to the end-of-year report. Very few people noticed the fangs and horns on the Head of IT in the management photo last year, so it would appear that I'll have to have a less subtle printing overlay for the final version this time.

Security has, however, been tightened after some nit-picker noticed the company figures didn't quite add up - not the sort of thing you want the shareholders to see. On the other hand, the bonus from the printing company for the extra batch of reports did put the bastard operator's benevolent fund back in the black.

"Good," the boss chirps, interrupting my reverie. "I'll oversee the operation myself - good for internal morale and all that."

Sadly, the boss is unlikely to top the morale boost he gave the department a few days ago when he slipped on a grease spot in the cafeteria and face-planted the vegetarian lasagne, however this thought is only second in my mind. My creative juices are unlikely to flow with the boss peering over my shoulder the whole time.

Some diversion strategy is called for...

"Good Lord!" I shout, kicking the power plug from the PFY's machine. "Those earth spikes are getting ridiculous."

"What earth spikes?" the boss blurts.

"You know, the spikes from the earthing strip at the side of the building. We've been waiting six weeks for a contractor to go out and look at the connector just up from the window."

"But we've got several earthing conductors," the boss replies, having no idea of the resale value of copper at the moment (or, to be more precise, six weeks ago when the PFY and I were short of cash).

"No, just one - economic downsizing by your predecessor," I ad-lib glibly.

"Oh? Well, let's have a look then."

I lead him to the window and point up at the earthing strip.

"Why do you need a contractor? You could shin up there and fix it in no time."

"I'm only responsible for the INSIDE of the..." I say.

"Oh for Pete's sake - open the bloody window!" the boss cries, obviously switched into idiot mode.

Five minutes later he's at the offending junction giving it the old once-over.

"I've never noticed how high up we were..." the PFY mentions, dreamily.

"Yeah. If you fell from this height they'd need a shovel to get you into the ambulance," I reply.

True to form the boss looks down. The gleaming whiteness of his knuckles indicates he is now locked into place and going nowhere.

After two hours in the PR department, 'fixing' the virus, the company reports look perfect. That is if you like to see a PR chief with a set of Lennon glasses and buck teeth and two of the more right-wing directors holding hands.

Of course, the company accounts don't quite add up either - for the second year running.

I pause briefly to watch the boss being led out of the building in his new and rather attractive strap-round jacket. Security must have found 'his' note about stress and so forth on the window ledge.

Looks like a morale peak on the horizon... not to mention a nice little bonus from the printers.

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**The chief bean counter has a half-baked plan to oust the Bastard and his sidekick. What a very foolish thing to attempt ...**

It's not often that we're 'honoured' by a visit from the chief bean counter.

In fact, the last time he disturbed the peace of the BOFH sanctuary was when he discovered that the 'satellite-based data reception technology' seemed to be pointed at the local bookie's and was carrying mainly racing results.

I can sense that this time he's got something to tell me. He's looking decidedly pleased with himself. His well-fed face bears an uncanny resemblance to a wolf spying a solitary sheep. Pulling himself up to his full five-foot-four, he speaks firmly but with a noticeable hint of nervousness.

"In view of the fact that your idea of technical support is idiosyncratic to say the least, we've decided to install our own server and employ our own network manager."

He pauses as the implication of what he's saying slowly sinks in.

"Can I take it that you're not happy with the support that my assistant and I offer you?" I reply, gesturing at the PFY.

"Him?" gurgled the bean counter. "He's nothing but a psychopath."

The PFY beams at the compliment. The suit from upstairs continues.

"We're going to employ a proper networking person so we don't have to let you two maniacs anywhere near our network again. ANYONE we find is bound to be an improvement on you two."

Foolish words, but hey, I was bored anyway.

A week or so later, the memo is delivered from on-high by the Bean Counter Central office-boy (obviously our previous confrontation used up all his boss's courage). As of 9am today, Operations is no longer responsible for technical support in the financial division.

I pass the note to the PFY, and I detect menace in his eyes. "Since we're not supporting them any more, I guess that means they have their own routers," I point out, pulling a few plugs. Interestingly, the remote probe I built into their coffee machine tells me that they're still getting packets off the Internet ... hmmm ... not daft, this lot.

I bash out a quick message and drop it on the 'pager' icon. Some seconds later my really-terribly-private cellphone blasts into action. The PFY is impressed and worried; only important, powerful people know the number to that phone, and the fact that it's ringing usually means that we're in serious trouble and are calling in some big favours. He has never heard it ring before, and looks decidedly worried.

"Hello? Yes, that's right ... yes, I thought so ... no, we're not allowed to touch anything, it's entirely down to the new network manager up there. Oh, you are, are you? That's nice ... yes, okay, the Victoria in fifteen minutes."

The PFY looks puzzled, and is startled to hear the fire alarm. I point out that the fire alarm might be something to do with the smoke emanating from Bean Counter Central, and he rushes outside to see. The penny drops and he dashes back in and demands to know how I knew that something was amiss upstairs, given that you can't see the smoke or the alarm panel from where I'm sitting.

"Well, okay. You remember Martin?"

"What, that guy you introduced me to once?"

"I've introduced you to so many people..."

"Okay, the one with the pony tail and the alcohol fixation whose temperament and attitude to users makes both of us look like St Francis of Assisi?"

"Yes, that's him."

"The one who you told me last week was out of a job?"

"Hmmm ... more like the one whose name by some chance found its way to the top of the Bean Counter recruitment list," I point out.

It suddenly dawns on him. Now he knows why I spent so much time on the personnel database last week - and why I was so keen in calling in a few favours to that friendly recruitment consultant.

A thought struck me. "Heh, heh ... wait until you see the router they've got upstairs. It's one of these cobbled-together things that you don't see very often. I predict they're going to have a lot of trouble with that in the future.

"In fact there are only two people in the world with the code, and they're the guys who wrote it. And you're looking at one of them."

"And the other?"

"... knows the number of my private cellphone and is now on his way round the corner to the pub. Come on, my expense account has some beer to buy."

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### **Someone's found out where the 'liberated' phones go. Better dial 'B' for Bastard ...**

We have a problem. The boss is to spend large amounts of otherwise useful money on standardising the corporate telephone.

"Why's he doing it?" the PFY asks.

"Because he rests under the mistaken belief that it will have some bearing on the number of phones that are 'liberated' each year and end up in the homes of our employees."

"You mean they TAKE the phones?!" the PFY asks, naively believing that larceny stops just outside our door.

"Of course," I cry. "Good grief, it's an office perk, always has been. In return for our shiny new phone we get their lifelong guilt and another crusty old monster from the year 200 BT, which in turn justifies all the room we have allocated in the basement ..."

"And this goes on a lot?"

"Ahem. Dial a number, any number, any number at all!"

The PFY types a number on hands free.

"Hello, drawing office."

"Hello, networks here. We seem to have an inventory anomaly regarding your desktop phone, serial number 138728."

My monologue is interrupted by the slamming of the receiver.

"What happened?" the PFY asks.

"I dare say they are at this very moment rushing down the stairwell to retrieve the item from their home. Remember to make up a serial number so that they don't just steal one from somewhere else. Great for getting people out of the office..."

The PFY and I watch as an employee bursts from the main entrance and hurtles across the road to

the tube station. I then ring the number again...

"Hello," a gruff drawing-office-boss-like voice answers.

"Pete," I gush. "Glad I caught you before you sneaked out. Say hi to Sheryl from me when you see her, you smooth bastard."

"WHO IS THIS?"

I hang up quickly.

"Well, I'm sure HIS absence won't be noted ... now, let's get upstairs and steal his desk phone. He'll be too scared to take his work one back home tonight and will be incommunicado till payday."

"You really are a bastard," the PFY admits grudgingly.

"Of course. Now, let's get to the boss's office ..."

"... And how do you think this will prevent theft?" I ask the boss, after hearing his phone proposal argument.

"Because they're a special model - slimline with a digital display that are ONLY going to be made for THIS company with the company logo on the front."

"Well, you're way off," the PFY quite rightly points out. "If you want a phone no-one will steal, just make it weigh 20 pounds and sound like crap."

Good lad.

The boss is a little flustered at this because he knows that for such a move he's got to present the proposal to the board for approval. And he doesn't want the PFY and I making his master plan sound similar to what comes out of an unstealable phone ...

I decide to let him temporarily off the hook.

"Well, can't hang around here all day, networks to fix and all that."

We wander off to his relief.

"I don't think the board will go for it," the PFY surmises as we wander back to our room.

"Don't you believe it," I reply. "Whack a company logo on something original and you'll have them drooling - especially if the competition hasn't done it before ..."

I leave the PFY to worry while I duck up to the boardroom to 'tune-up' the boss's presentation. At the appointed time, the PFY and I are hanging out at network central when the boss calls.

"What's wrong with the test line in the boardroom?" he growls, according to plan.

"Don't know," I say, "We'll be up in a second to check it."

"There's no nee..."

Quick as a flash the PFY and I are in the boardroom.

"Wow," the PFY cries, delivering his lines perfectly. "New phones, exactly like the ones the opposition's just got."

All heads turn as the boss reluctantly takes delivery of 'The Shaft' - he knows the board would never copy the idea of a rival ...

"There's your problem," I say, looking up from my test-set. "It's just the RAL of this phone. I'll make a note."

I pull out a personal disorganiser that I liberated from a user early last year with a company logo recently glued to the cover.

"What's that?" one of the board asks.

"Oh, just a personal organiser. I just put the company logo on it to stop people stealing it at conferences."

"I could use one of those," he says. A few murmurs of assent follow.

The boss then realises that as far as 'The Shaft' is concerned this is a two-for-one sale.

As planned, two hours later the PFY and I are downing a couple of pints on our recently transferred 'research fund' while we discuss the new 'Corporate Personal Organiser'. It'd be a challenge if it weren't so easy.

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**The boss cooks his goose with a dodgy microwave dish ... so the Bastard simply out-manoeuvres him yet again ...**

The boss is on the warpath! Never one to take a good moral kicking lying down, he's decided to retaliate for the demise of his corporate telephone plan by making our lives a general misery.

He's enforcing every single safety standard known to humankind. As well as this, he's checking our arrival and departure times and even pulling us up on the creative book keeping that produces most of our timesheets.

It's not good.

Still, you know what they say, the best defence is a good offence.

Sure enough, it's not long before the PFY and I are called into the boss's office for failing to put up warning signs after opening the cabling duct in the basement. My suspicions are confirmed when I

notice the head of personnel sitting in on the meeting. He's never been a big fan of mine or the PFY's - well, not since he got a crossed line with the DP pool while talking to his doctor about a personal and very private problem. He probably would've believed it if we hadn't thanked him for not doing anything 'rash' ...

The boss winds up for the delivery. "Much as I deplore these things, I'm afraid I'm going to have to give you both a final written warning after the exposure of general staff to that dangerous drop," he says.

"The dangerous drop of three or four inches to the cable duct floor."

"A dangerous drop nonetheless," he replies, egged on by the head of personnel.

"Could I just have a word with you in private?" I ask, a picture of piety.

"I don't think that would be necessary," the boss replies.

"Uh, I wasn't actually meaning you, I meant the representative from personnel. Just as we're talking safety issues I thought the PFY and I could have a word about that cheap microwave dish."

As if by magic, the tone of conversation changes. Could it be that the boss has remembered WHO recommended and ordered (against the advice of the networking technicians) the said dish?

"Perhaps I can spare you a minute," said the tight-lipped boss.

"Well, it's mainly a safety concern you understand," I say, once we're in private. "As this is my final warning I can expect my contract not to be renewed for another year, and I'd just like to organise someone to pop up onto the roof every two or three weeks to tighten up the bolts on the cheap microwave dish you recommended we buy last year.

"Apparently it slowly tilts over till it's pointing directly at the roof. We wouldn't have found out except that one of the auditors in the office underneath rang to complain about the coffee in his mug boiling every time transmissions passed 20 per cent bandwidth..."

The boss is, as we in the trade say, up the creek without a paddle user's guide. He tries unsuccessfully to disguise his utter horror at the possible legal action that could result from this. And even more importantly, who would be taking the precipitous fall for it...

"Who was that auditor again?" he said, feigning mild interest.

"Oh you know!" I reply. "Wilson, Wilkins - something like that. You know, the guy who's always off sick with headaches and stuff."

He's now out of the stream and heading out to sea - he KNOWS we'll have kept an autographed copy of the memo (complete with our response) safely stashed in some fireproof location that he'll get access to shortly after Satan starts ordering antifreeze and winter woollens.

52 seconds later we're back in his office...

"Well I see no point in taking this any further," the boss says, to the personnel head's disgust. "It appears the signs WERE there after all, in fact I saw them myself! Now, hadn't you better pop up

and do that maintenance ..."

"Running all the way," I agree. "OH! And look, there's those timesheets that you were querying before. Ah! I see why you were querying it! The PFY and I didn't put in those 10 hours work - we did, uh ... network tuning on two Sunday nights. I'll just fill that in now so you can sign it."

The head of personnel leaves with a burst of language I'm sure isn't approved by company policy while the boss signs away an amount of overtime probably equal to the GNP of a small communist state.

Victory and overtime ours, I foster goodwill in the boss by sending a back-up tape from our off-site storage contractors.

"What was that about?" the PFY asks.

"Oh just returning the boss's memo about that microwave dish he recommended."

"Are you sure that was such a good idea? He'll just destroy it."

"It's probably for the best," I respond. "After all, it's the only remaining documentation about it. And without documentation..."

"I'll get the scrap dealer on the line."

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### **Hungover, roped in to cover the Helldesk - if he wasn't the Bastard, this could be a bad day ...**

It's a slow day in Mission Control and I have a hangover that would have even the toughest superhero whimpering.

I'm not exactly sure how I got home, but I think it had something to do with a very long taxi ride and someone else's credit card...

It was inevitable after spending most of yesterday 'supplier baiting' at a computing exhibition on the other side of town, then trundling off with some slavering salespeople to all night drinkies. The first one to collapse loses - the sale, the initiative and his corporate credit card when he's not looking.

Because of my health, I'd temporarily forgotten that we'd told the boss that the PFY and I would sit in for the Helldesk while they attended a health and safety course on how to type a whole word without dying of RSI or whatever they call it these days. The boss, of course, did not come down in the last shower and is well aware I'm up to something, but lacks the mental capacity to work out what it is. No surprises there then.

Sadly, he shall be wondering about it at the RSI course along with the other mortals as the company's health and safety policy makes it mandatory for all computing staff to attend. His

protestations of already having attended amount to nothing in the light of the fact that there's no record of it in the Human Resources Database (whoops), nor does he appear to possess the 'get-out-of-jail-free' RSI course completion certificate.

The PFY and I, on the other hand, have several of these certificates and corresponding database entries, yet still have no idea what the instructor looks like nor what exactly the course is about.

Knowing he's beaten, the boss goes quietly.

Meanwhile, in the Helldesk area, I'm reconnecting the smoke detectors after the freak fire that destroyed an RSI Course Completion Certificate with the boss's name on it. I blame the heating system - it's been working overtime recently.

"Hello? Is this the helpdesk?"

"Yes it is," I answer, all sweet, fluffy loveliness.

"Can you tell me the number for the modem pool?"

"I sure can!" I gush, then give the number for a fax machine on the fourth floor, which should keep them confused for a couple of weeks.

I hang up and have barely dropped off to sleep when the phone rings again.

"My laptop seems to be running quite slowly. Can you help?"

"Of course I can. Now don't tell me, you're still using the power filter unit aren't you?"

\*DUMMY MODE ON\*

"The power filter unit?"

"Yes, the one that filters the power coming into your machine. It should be a black box about three inches by two inches square."

"Oh... yes, I see it."

"Okay, you want to remove that and put the non-filtered cable onto it."

"The non-filtered cable?"

"Yes, it would have come in the box with the machine. It's probably still there."

"But I threw the box out!"

"Hmm. Well, I can order you one, but in the meantime do you have a spare power cable?"

"Uuuuuuuuuuu..."

"Well, just borrow one from someone else's machine - then it's their problem."

"Yeah, hee hee..."

What a plonker.

"OK, switch the filter off, then chop the cable off halfway between the filter and your machine. Then strip back the wires and poke them into the two holes in the sides of the socket of the new power cable ..."

"OK, done that."

"And plug her in."

"OK, thanks."

He hangs up and I wait for lift-off. About 10 seconds later the fire alarm goes off, which I take to be an encouraging sign ...

At the end of the day the boss wanders in. He's not impressed. Apparently he'd heard about the PFY's advice to a user to change the screen saver passwords on their department machines to completely random text in the interests of safety. News of the post-lunch lockout made it across the building in minutes ...

In the face of the PFY's completely innocent and apparently naive grasp of security issues, he comes into the office and raves for a couple of minutes about time lost, production down, company money wasted, disgruntled colleagues, blah, blah, blah ...

We concur dutifully with his arguments and promise to do much better on future occasions, should they arise.

"By the way," he continues, with a worried little frown, "has anyone seen my RSI Course Completion Certificate? I'm sure I left it on that table over there ..."

He wanders off in search of it while I disconnect the smoke alarms and the PFY makes an update on the Human Resources Database ...

Looks like tomorrow's just going to be work, work, work.

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**The BOFH comes face to face with the ultimate in office bureaucracy. And he just won't wear it ...**

Something smells fishy. Very fishy indeed. Positively tuna casserole.

The boss is in a good mood. Almost radiant, in fact. It can only bode bad tidings, especially as his phone log notes that he's been talking to one of the company lawyers.

Sadly, the text of the conversation was lost due to an oversight on the part of the PFY, who forgot to change the tapes on the voice recorder. A mistake he won't be making twice if the power stapler has anything to do with it ...

It's obvious something's up - he's scheduled a meeting with us at 10.30am, a time normally quite unknown to us.

The smug expression on his face leaves me in no doubt that he feels his position is unassailable.

"Gentlemen," he says, with an uncharacteristic show of camaraderie, "Why don't you take an hour's unpaid leave to go and get changed?"

The PFY is in like a shot.

"And why don't you take an hour's paid leave to go and get f..."

"I'M SORRY?!" I interrupt, saving the PFY from the quagmire of disciplinary action, "As you're well aware, we're permitted to wear attire applicable to the nature of our position."

"Unless", the boss says, holding up a heavily highlighted copy of a contract not unlike the ones signed when we joined the company, "your position involves interaction with ..."

He pauses for a moment, giving us time to fill in the blank whilst simultaneously savouring every millisecond ...

"... begins with C ...", he adds, "... ends with S ..."

Neither the PFY nor I are forthcoming, so the boss finishes.

"CLIENTS."

"Oh," says the PFY. "That wasn't the C word I was thinking of. But I think we're talking about the same people though ..."

I cut through the PFY's bolshiness and come straight to the point.

"We don't deal with clients," I explain, as if I'm talking to a simple-minded child.

"AHEM," the Boss replies, priming the bombshell he has hidden. "As of the initiation of our ISO and Advanced Helpdesk Initiatives, the helpdesk and support staff are now officially your clients." His smug expression says it all. He's been doing his homework on this one.

"And you suggest?" I ask

"Standard client representative dress. Suit..."

The PFY gasps.

"...business shirt, tie..."

I suppress the gag reflex in my throat.

"...and of course hard-soled shoes, preferably leather."

"Well," I rally, "it's not often we agree on things, but I'd have to admit you do have a point. I'll be ready by the morning."

The PFY's widened eyes lead me to believe he doubts my sanity. But the boss is not a complete idiot. Well, actually he is, but I cut him some slack for the moment, as he can smell the rat but just can't figure where it is. We leave him to ponder...

The next day heads turn as the PFY and I stroll into work in the required apparel, and present the receipt for our new attire to the boss, who promptly has some dramatic form of seizure.

An hour later he's revived by the company nurse, but not before the PFY and I have a couple of cracks at the task with a impromptu defibrillator made from pieces of his desktop machine.

"Where am I?" the boss asks.

"In your office," I reply. "You had some sort of fit!"

"That's right. What the BLOODY HELL IS THAT?!" he asks, pointing at the receipt.

"It's the invoice for our clothes. Remember in our contract it specifically states that any specially-made safety apparel is to be provided by the company. Do you know how hard it is to get Italian-made steel-cap shoes with that professional look with only six hours notice? They had to fly them in specially!"

"You won't get away with it!" he snarls, noticing again the large collection of figures at the bottom of the page.

"Now don't you worry," I respond soothingly. "You've had a nasty turn, but we've taken care of everything. One of the nice accountants with a predilection for viewing Internet strip-shows was only too happy to supply the blank cheque to us yesterday afternoon ..."

"Then I'll have it STOPPED!" the boss says smugly, victory in sight.

So much in sight in fact, it obscures the still live remains of his PC from his vision...

I give him a good 10 minutes of heart boosting electricity before I call the nurse back again, during which time the PFY calls our clothing supplier to advise a quick clearance time ...

And they say a blue pinstripe is dressing for success ...

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### **The BOFH is in trouble for not turning up to his training course ...**

Things are bad. The forces of evil (i.e. the huggy-feely brigade) are causing problems. The PFY and I have been targeted as 'politically unsound' for not turning up to some meeting on "harassment in the workplace".

The boss has apparently dipped his oar into troubled waters for a quick stir by indicating that we NEVER attend these compulsory meetings; I put his attitude down to some recent electrical first aid.

Sure enough, a meeting is organised with the Head of Personnel and Head of Staff Counselling (i.e. the Huggy-Feely Dept).

"Ah, yes," the Head of Personnel begins, "apparently you saw fit not to attend your course on harassment in the workplace."

"Yes", I reply, "the truth of the matter is that in our position we are simply too busy to (a) harass people; or (b) attend a course on how not to do it."

"Well, you might think that, but I can assure you that attendance at this course is mandatory for staff and contractors alike. I don't think I need remind you that your contract requires you to attend all relevant training courses", she replies, the steel in her voice reaching the thickness of armour plating.

"I don't think so."

"I beg your pardon?!"

"I'm sure you do", I respond, "but let us suppose, merely for the sake of conjecture of course, that the PFY or I did in fact wish to harass someone. Say someone like yourself for instance. Would I, as a networking and communications engineer, go all the way to your office to make some lewd and obnoxious remark to or about you, insinuating some theme or activity you (and quite possibly I) would find distasteful, OR, would I instead find and publish some image of you in an indefensible position - say in the office of a superior, in less clothing than is normally workplace practice?"

A chill fills the room. The Head of Personnel has taken on the look of someone who would rather be elsewhere and has completely forgotten the axe he has to grind.

"I don't know what you're insinuating, bu...", Ms. Huggy begins.

"Oh nothing, I assure you! I'm sure it was just an air conditioning problem that was recorded on the securi.."

"AH! I don't really think there's any need to pursue this matter", the Head of Personnel stutters, "at least not if the original proof of this could be ..."

In other words he wants the tapes.

"Well, as I said, it was an example", I reply, "and not based in fact. Speaking of fact, is it one that there's a contract rate-round coming up soon?"

He recognises the prompt. "Ah, there has been talk of a ..."

"Excellent. The PFY and I were hoping this was the case."

Negotiations complete, the PFY and I retire to our offices to plan the extra spend. Two days later

the written confirmation of the rate-rise is in our hands and we're happy workers once more. The boss, on the other hand, isn't so pleased. Thwarted again, he's embarked on a one-man rampage through the department in search of the lowest morale possible.

The phone rings. It's the helpdesk.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Is that networks?"

"You know it is"

"We have a ... problem we'd like solved."

"Hardware or Software?"

"Errrrmmm ... Bossware"

"Could be expensive ..."

"A night of free drinks and dinner for four at the Dorchester?"

"Deal. Do you require a call number?"

"Oh! Ok."

"One."

I love service calls. I fill the PFY in on the deal. Later that afternoon the boss storms in looking for the person who took down the mail server.

"That would be me", I point out. "You told us to move it into the Computer Room. But the electricians haven't checked the power-points yet".

"RIGHT!", he shouts. "I'll be back to deal with YOU when I'VE fired it up".

How apt. The PFY and I watch as the server's power-supply emits a burst of smoke as the power point delivers the 400 volts of badly wired 3-phase power instead of the expected 240. It's a credit to our safety systems that the doors lock immediately to prevent anyone accidentally walking into the Halon-filling room whilst the boss grabs for the oxygen mask.

"Well, he must have just cracked! He ran in laughing like a madman and destroying equipment!", I inform security later.

The boss is still appears to be crying (he obviously finds something funny) as they cart him out ...

---

**The BOFH and PFY go on some site visits ...**

The boss, for the first time in his career, has actually done something right! Amazing as it seems, but thanks to odd goings on at the masons, he's managed to arrange a co-operative site visit scheme with a few local companies to foster a frank exchange of networking information and expertise.

Like hell.

We know it's a ploy to get us out of the building so he can search high and low for the three blank, yet countersigned, order forms we extorted out of him under threat of showing the CEO what the boardroom table and a member secretarial staff have been up to in his presence lately. Who'd have thought that adding a low-light camera to the conference recording system would pay off so quickly?

As for the site visits, a skilled bastard recognises IMMEDIATELY a chance to upgrade equipment when it presents itself. The PFY and I set to work slipping the sadly unused false bottoms back into our briefcases, then load them up with outmoded networking kit.

According to plan, by the time the Network Manager on our first site has finished showing me the full beauty of their patching racks the PFY has hot-swapped half a dozen 10/100 5 port Ethernet cards for our old straight 10s. Like taking candy from a baby. And leaving it the wrapper ...

The second site is much more secure and proves to be a slight challenge, right up until lunchtime when we roll on down to the local for seven or eight pints of the hard stuff, with Tequila slammers to follow. A pittance to pay for the latest revision router EPROMS that our support company wanted a small fortune for whilst their erstwhile network manager snores his way through the afternoon.

Being a kind-hearted sod, I'll make sure to drop them back in the mail as a "bug-fix upgrade" after only making a slight change to the switching logic.

I feel sure that the competitive advantage will lean in our favour once the "Use Heaviest Loaded Segment" code cuts in ...

We're only interrupted once when their PFY (so green he needs mowing) wanders in to see what we're doing. A quick flash of my tube pass and he thinks he's witnessing a vendor-initiated hardware service check in operation. It truly breaks my heart to see trust like that go unpunished.

The effects of the lunch are a little too filling for my PFY's limited experience in the alcoholic arts so he enquires the location of the nearest Gents from his counterpart whilst I snaffle the Computer Room cardkey so carelessly left laying around in his pocket ...

Seconds later the power goes out, which can only mean the PFY's rest stop included a visit to the cabling cupboard. Darkness, the true friend of bastards everywhere is interrupted only by a couple of EXIT signs which flicker briefly, then go out. Now that's what I call a good trainee.

Quicker than you can say "High Capacity Storage Downgrade" I'm performing an impromptu one in the Computer Room whilst adding a significant weight to my briefcase at the same time. I get out in time to see hear their PFY trip over a cabling drum I'd accidentally nudged out into the centre of the room on my way into the Computer Room.

The lights come on in time to see the PFY helping their PFY into a chair. The poor bloke seems a little woozy so I try to help out by taking a few of the phone calls that are inundating the room.

"THE BLOODY NETWORK IS DOWN!" A user screams at me in a manner that would have personnel immediately calculating sick-pay entitlement at our site, but seems par for the course here.

"Yes, it's due to the power cut from the surge-current overloading." I ad-lib "You should switch your machines to low-power mode to prevent it"

"How do I do that?" The user asks, bringing back my thoughts of trust and punishment.

"Switch all the machines in your office off, switch them to low power with the switch at the back, then turn them all on at the same time."

"Is 115 the low-power setting?" the user asks.

"You betcha!"

"Thanks"

"Don't mention it!" I cry as the PFY and I make a break for the door.

Our exit is heralded by a storm of sharp *crack!* noises from the ground-floor offices, which brings a small song of joy to my heart ...

The last site on our visit is a surprise. We're apparently visiting the offices of our chief opposition, those who tried to take us over.

Looks like tuna casserole on the menu ...

My suspicions are confirmed when I notice the presence of several sub-miniature camera holes lining the corridors of the entrance, all but invisible to the layperson, raising the stakes somewhat ...

Then again, I love a challenge ...

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### **The BOFH and PFY help sort out a rival's PSIC problems ...**

It's time for the last site visit on the site tour agenda, and this one is the tough nut ..

The control room is straight out of Science-Fiction Land - a veritable security command centre and treasure trove of sophisticated equipment.

My fingers start itching almost immediately, but caution is the watchword The PFY also notices the security overkill and follows suit.

A phone rings next to me and I answer helpfully, planning to use the old FDISK problem solving utility but the telltale beep of the voice-recorder tells me that anything I say can and will be used as evidence against me. I choke out some useless but unhelpful advice, then hang up in time to see my counterpart watching me with the smug expression of one who knows exactly how bullet-proof his

set-up is.

The bastard!

A tour of the comms room reveals state of the art equipment that I'd sell the boss for glue to obtain - which just adds to my general misery.

"Quite something isn't it?" My opposition comments. "I suppose you'll get this sort of equipment ... one day ..."

Double bastard!

By lunchtime I've almost given up hope - It seems that the tide's completely against me. Even in the cafeteria I note the telltale black dots of a micro camera lens. Except ...

The PFY interprets my snatched glance and moves into blocking position for the fraction of a second that it requires to flick the old standby - a couple of laxative chocolates - into my counterpart's dessert. True, it's hardly sportsmanlike, but like they say, all's fair in love and networking.

According to plan, a couple of hours later my counterpart receives a priority one call from nature and the PFY and I get to work. He accidentally trips over a cable and face-plants the CCTV recording console, sacrificing a couple of bruises to the cause. With the security cameras in Alzheimer's mode, I turn on SNMP reporting on every single piece of hardware that will allow me to do so remotely.

In seconds a guy I can only assume to be the counterpart's boss bursts in ranting about horrific network response. But it can't be that bad, or those 400 odd PCs around the building wouldn't be delivering SNMP trap info every second ...

"Looks exactly like that PSIC problem we had with that new kit a couple of months ago." I comment.

"PSIC?" their boss enquires

"Yeah, Pseudo-Standard-Interface-Conflicts" I reply "A lot of the new state-of-the-art kit doesn't actually adhere to any standard, which is fine so long as it doesn't get plugged into a network with anything else. If it does, sooner or later there'll be problems ..."

"... when it gets into protocol loops with standard kit" the PFY finishes, knowing where I'm heading.

"What can we do?" asks the boss-type. "My Network Engineer tells me nothing!"

"You're joking!" I counter in horror "You mean he doesn't fill out daily reports of what he spends his time on?"

"Of course! Good lord, next you'll be telling me he doesn't have any network procedures documentation!"

"He doesn't!"

"But that's a workplace priority! No wonder you're having problems with all this new kit!! Look, I don't like to speak out of turn, but I think he's been leading you on with technical mumbo jumbo ...

Tell you what I'll do - because you know my boss and all, I'll loan you some of our kit and we'll take yours to iron out the protocol problems in your stuff."

"Would you?!?!" he gushes, networking salvation on the horizon.

"Sure! Well, that is unless you think you'll be talked out of it with more mumbo-jumbo, buzzwords and geek-talk?"

"NO, I'm quite capable of making technical decisions. Tell me what we need to replace and you can take it with you when you go ..."

"Well, that Gigabit Ethernet switch did look little dodgy" I reply.

"Don't forget that handheld LAN analyser and tracker" the PFY adds.

... five minutes later ...

"And lastly, that Dual Audio Channel Enhanced Video Display"

"You mean the CEO's new 29 inch Stereo Colour TV?!?!?" he bleats.

"I bet that's half the problem all by itself" I reply

Within half an hour all their comms room is missing is a couple of tumble-weeds. I organise a shipment of networking kit so old you can watch the bytes travelling, then make plans for the negotiation round that's soon to follow.

I can't wait to see what the "vetting fee" will be for each piece of kit we "pass" as being of suitable standard ...

This experience stuff really is worth it ...

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### **The BOFH wins an award from his peer group ...**

It's a calm Monday morning when the Boss strolls into the office with the air of the cat with the proverbial cream.

"How did that router sale go off then?" he asks, unable to disguise his smugness at managing to sell off a piece of kit that was so crap that it wouldn't even pass the self-tests needed to become a boat anchor.

"They came and got it" I reply, referring to the poor bastards who bought the kit from us and who are no doubt now in the process of trying to extinguish the fire, "but I still think it was a little on the nose selling it to them".

"Sounds to me like a case of Caveat Emptor" the boss chuckles smugly.

"Really?" I respond, "I thought it was a router! Mind you, I don't trust those foreign wines - After Chernobyl you never know if they're going to be radioactive ..."

The boss looks at me as if I've been mentally demoted to the using classes, but the PFY knows the big plan and keeps quiet.

"How DID you manage to convince them?" I ask appealing to the boss's need to gloat.

"Oh, just told them that it was one of the original units and still as good at the day we bought it," he sniggers, mentally convincing himself that he's the brains of the outfit ...

And that's one thought that I'm not going to challenge because today is April 1st - Bastard Boss Day - and I have my eyes on a certain prize that has eluded me for many years.

This year I've decided to sell the boss on using the network as a storage medium. I casually drop a couple of remarks until the boss decides to channel his massive intelligence away from tying his shoelaces and onto the matter at hand.

"It's simplicity itself!" I cry "We've got these Gigabit Ethernet switches all around the place that we just aren't using! Instead of letting them go to waste we could be sending data continuously around them until it's needed which would actually cut down on the amount of physical disk storage we would need! And just think of the time we would save with read and write latency when the data's already on the net!"

"It would never work," the PFY counters, all according to plan. "Our networks are too short - the data would be back before it had finished leaving the machine."

"Not," I add, "if we were to make the network longer to add a short delay. Why, 10 drums of Cat-5 wired together would be sufficient".

"Hey!" the PFY smiles. "That's right - I never thought of that."

Our interplay has been enough to sell the Boss. Had I put forward the idea and the PFY agreed, the Boss would have trodden with caution, fearing the worst. With the PFY "on his side" he now knows that the idea is a sure thing.

Like lambs to the slaughter ...

"Excellent, I'm sure that the head of department will approve!"

"Would you be sure to mention that I thought of it?" I ask, placing the last two nails in the Boss's coffin. Now he's sure that it's the real thing and there is no way on earth he's going to let me take credit for it.

He toddles off to the Head of Dept while the PFY and I try to stroll nonchalantly back to the office. I fire up the CCTV recorder on the microcamera in the Big Boss's office.

This little recording is sure to earn me the Trophy I have desired for so long - the coveted "IT Idiot" Award for Least Intelligent Supervisor - at the Bastard Boss Competitions at a Central London pub

later on tonight ...

We get the recorder going just in time ...

"Anyway... " the boss bumbles in simulated intelligence mode, "I was just wandering through the department today and a thought struck me. What with the rising cost of disk it might be an interesting plan to use our networks as a storage medium ..."

He goes on to paraphrase the food-waste-product that we fed him, while commenting that he's fired off an order for 20 drums of Cat-5.

The explosion is inevitable. The head of department, whilst in practical terms about as useful as loopback plug for an electric type-writer, did spend about six years teaching networking fundamentals to first year university students.

The PFY and I capture everything in case there's some question of 'doping' ...

Later that night as I guzzle a pint or two from my latest acquisition, I can't help but feel a twinge of remorse. Maybe I should have convinced him to use lift cables as emergency UPS power distribution wiring instead.

Ah well, there's always next year ...

---

### **It really hits the fan as the tables turn inside the walls of Computer Central ...**

Things are getting worse and worse in Computer Central. It looks as if a career change could be in the wind. I get summoned into the boss's office to answer a complaint about my 'attitude'...

To make things 'fair' the Boss arranges for the head of personnel (his friend and my mortal opponent), to attend as a witness. Although I have, on occasion, had the odd difference of opinion with him, I depend on his professionalism. I'm sure he really just wants to bury the hatchet, which is why I'll make a point of not turning my back...

"Simon," the Boss begins, "we have a formal complaint about you from one of the new system programmers. He claims that you are being unnecessarily offensive to him."

"I'm afraid I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"He claims that you told him to do something with your faeces."

"I beg your pardon?" I reply, shocked. "There must be some mistake. The last time I spoke to him I told him that I had a system crash core that I'd like him to examine. I cannot possibly be held responsible for the strange way in which he interpreted that."

"You were leaving the toilet at the time."

"Purely coincidental. I simply mentioned it when the opportunity arose."

"Mentioned? It was more of a shout wasn't it? I believe I heard it myself from in here."

"I concede that it may have been slightly more than a whisper, but that was only because of the deference that I feel for his wealth of professional knowledge..." (Well, it was worth a shot).

"The words 'sniff my dump' do not engender in MY mind a feeling of professional respect."

"Well of course I'm completely apologetic if this has caused a major department disruption - I'll go and apologise immediately!"

"You know as well as I do that he's resigned."

"Not at all. How did this come about?"

"It appears that he is a little disconcerted with the frequency of explosions of his peripheral equipment."

"Really? Perhaps there's something wrong with his UPS system again. There's been a bit of that going around recently..."

"Yes, I noticed the IT divisional accountant has resigned, citing workplace stress as a reason."

"Well, I blame the makers of the equipment," I reply. "In the old days things were much more tolerant of slight faults."

"By slight faults you mean the odd 400-volt supply spike that the electricians can find no excuse for?"

"Really? I wouldn't know. Someone has stolen my multimeter."

"You mean the multimeter set to the 10-amp scale and plugged across a mains device in the boardroom so that the circuit breaker for the floor blew every time the overhead projector was switched on?"

"Really? Who would do a thing like that?"

"Any reason why security found your fingerprints all over the machine?"

"I have to check a lot of floppies in my job."

"I see. Well, it's out of my hands now anyway. The CEO wants to speak to you personally."

Personal interviews are rare in the company, and quite often precede a 'resignation'.

The Boss and I get the nod to go in...

"What's this about all these problems downstairs?" the CEO barks.

"Would you like the technical answer or just layman's terms?" I ask, respectfully.

"Layman's terms will do for a start."

"Myself and my trainee are the only people in the company who really do know what we're doing."

The Boss shakes his head, smiling humourlessly.

"Yes, I'd heard that was the case," the CEO replies, having been primed during extended family get-togethers by the PFY. Oh, the beauty of an insider...

"Ah excuse me!" The Boss blurts anxiously. "But I believe you're overlooking something here."

"Of course I am." The CEO smiles benevolently. "We are, of course, sorry to see you go."

"What? I'm not bloody resigning, and there's no way you'll get me to sign it."

"But you already have," the CEO replies, confused, holding up a piece of paper with the Boss's freshly scrawled signature on it. "But who could possibly replace me?" the Boss bumbles.

"You're looking at him," the CEO smiles.

"You're going to take over Networks?!" the Boss cries.

"No..."

"Then wh..." Disbelief and horror fight a little war for supremacy on his twitching face. "You can't be serious!"

"Of course he is," I respond quickly. "Now, I hear you're looking for a job and it just so happens that there's a vacancy in our network operations section. You'll be reporting to me, of course..."

You know sometimes life can be a bastard, but when it's good, it's REALLY good.

---

### **The Bastard puts his newest protege through a rather nasty baptism ... and sees him blossom**

...

So I'm in the enviable position of being management material. The extra income as a contracted manager is more than enough to brighten my day.

The opportunities for channelling funds from less worthy areas (the helpdesk upgrade) to more deserving ones (the network operations upgrade) abound. And having my former boss as an employee is the icing on the cake...

Still, mustn't bear a grudge. I decide to share my recent good fortune with others. The PFY has always wanted a junket to New Orleans. I browse the Web and find a plausible conference and enrol him in it.

He's overjoyed because he's never been to New Orleans before. The ex-boss expects a similar

favour and I can't bear to disappoint him. I show him where the vacuum cleaner is and point out the map of every comms room in the building...

A week later they're both back, the ex-boss looking a little peaky, possibly from spending all that time in the dark. I blame myself for not reminding him that some of the comms cupboards don't have door handles on the inside. Whoops.

Still, at least he had the presence of mind to pull the power cable to the comms rack so someone would come to investigate. Although it probably would have been better if it had occurred to him before the Bank Holiday weekend. But, like they say, it's all a learning experience. It's terrible what dehydration drives you to, though.

Once everyone's back at Network Central, I allocate the jobs. The PFY, because of experience, is placed into my old role of installation, monitoring and maintenance. The ex-boss, because of his greenness in operations, is placed on the phones. I even plug it into the wall socket for him.

It does not disappoint, ringing within the first half hour. As he's in training, the ex-boss is required to answer all calls on hands-free so that he can receive instruction from me or the PFY should it become necessary.

"Hello, Networks," the ex-boss answers.

"Hello, is that Networks?" A quick glance at the caller-ID confirms her familiar voice. The PFY flees the room in fear.

"Yes, how can I help?"

"My network's stopped going again."

"I see. When did it stop working?"

"Just now. I tried to print and it just didn't work."

"OK, I'll just look at our network monitor and see if there's anything wrong with your machine. What room are you in?"

She gives her room and he trawls through the networking database looking for port information. Unsuccessfully. Not wanting to ask for help so early in his new career, he decides to perform the old 'hands-on' approach and go and see her.

Once he's gone, the PFY returns.

"He didn't go to see her did he?"

"Yep."

"The poor bastard!"

"Yep."

Every company has at least one computer-phobic paranoid. The ones who think that computers

secretly change their settings as soon as they turn their backs. The ones who always ring to complain that their passwords have been changed by someone. (Every time they leave the shift key down). The ones who haven't changed anything, yet now their networks don't work. (This happens twice a year, when they change the position of their PCs in relation to the sun and pull the network cables out...).

Except in this case it's worse. The 'network' she's talking about is an RS232 cable between her genuine XT PC and its dot matrix printer.

She's never trusted the newer technology (which doesn't work and secretly conspires against her) and prefers to remain disconnected from the real world. Except to call twice a year when she pulls the cable out of her printer.

An hour later the boss is back, a changed man. Having been subjected to an hour of conspiracy theories and general X-file type mindlessness, he now realises what is lurking out there at the other end of the phone lines.

Gone is the air of helpfulness. Gone the feelings of goodwill to the using-classes. The PFY and I exchange knowing glances - we've seen it before and we'll see it again.

He's been bastardised.

The phone soon rings.

"Networks," he snaps.

"Hello, is that Networks?" the familiar voice asks. The phone makes the slightest of sounds as it's yanked from the socket and thrown into the bin.

"So I suppose I'm fired for ripping that out then?" he asks, resigned to his fate.

"Well, impromptu de-installations are usually something we teach you later on in your training, but it appears that experience is the best teacher after all..."

I wander off and leave the PFY to show him the rest of the ropes...

And the cattle prods...

And the 'video surveillance' consoles...

Who would have thought he'd be such promising material?

---

**Who said management was easy? Still, there's nothing that can't be sorted out with an axe ...**

I CAN'T BLOODY HANDLE IT ANY MORE!!! I was doing so well with the managerial position - allocating funds to worthwhile projects (stereo colour video monitors hooked into state-of-the-art satellite receivers) when the bomb dropped.

I find out that I'm expected to attend around six 'planning' meetings EVERY week! My former opinion of management dropped even further...

There's only so many times someone can ask what 'those byte things are again' before you find yourself dreaming of the company improvements you could achieve with a simple axe and a heavy duty wood-chipper.

Speaking of wood-chippers, the first priority meeting had the highly important topic of, should we hire our office plants? Given that we already own office plants I felt that the issue was somewhat redundant - but obviously my mind wasn't attuned to management. I'd forgotten that this little group had requested not one, not two, not three, but FOUR department restructures (to reflect the company's hierarchy restructures) in the past 18 months.

So after only two hours of deliberation, it was decided that we'd go with the rented product because then the rental company would be responsible for making sure the plants got watered. (As if the taste of the company tea and coffee didn't ensure that already).

And after that two hours there was another half an hour deciding what to do with the plants that were already in the building and had been since the building opened - the ones in the open areas upstairs that are far too large to move anywhere. Which is where the minor brainstorm of the wood chipper comes in. The plan is to hire a chipping machine, take it up in the freight elevator and perform some on-the-spot organic recycling.

By this time I'm pining for Network Operations. Things were so simple then - a user rang with some problem that they'd caused in the first place, you tortured them for a bit, then solved their problem in the most convenient way possible. Simple. Effective. Quick. I need help, so I go to the one person who might make head or tail of it.

The ex-boss. The ex-boss is a changed man. He now treats users with the thinly disguised contempt of a networking professional who has heard one time too many the ubiquitous question why is the network is down? He's seen what we've seen, he knows what we know.

He IS a bastard! I track him down in a comms room where he's sending 240AC down the phone lines to cremate the phones of certain users. I tell him my problem and he listens sympathetically.

"There's nothing you can do," he replies. "You just have to do it. Just keep your head down or they'll tell you to restructure your department."

A thought occurs to me. "Do you want your old job back?" I ask.

"Nope!" he replies, without pausing. "Go on," I plead (being a manager, so it's not beneath me).

"It'll cost you," he says. THE BASTARD! I knew I shouldn't have hired him.

"How much?" He mentions an extortionate amount of dosh with the air of someone not open for negotiation.

Sadly, I sign a, >sob!< personal cheque >sniff< for the amount he asks. He whips off to cash it after giving me some very good advice.

The arrival of the wood-chipping machine is apparently a company photo opportunity that none of

the meeting group wishes to miss - being yet another new era in company policy.

I, of course attend, and stand through a set of "okay, one with you pointing to the chip catcher. Another with all of you looking into the feed funnel" requests.

When all of the photos are finished, I sidle up to the chairperson and mention what a coup it might be if he were to appear in the photos with an actual piece of wood being processed. I tap on a plastic bag I'm carrying which gives a chopping-board-like clonk.

He smiles. We wait till everyone has gone then get the photographer to set up for the shot because once the machine starts the other managers are going to sprint for the chance to be in-shot, so he has to be quick.

He sets up and I start the machine, emptying my bag into the chipper.

To be fair, he takes the grinding to sawdust of his yachting trophy quite well, only dismissing me from my position on the spot.

A day later I get a call at home from the once-ex-now-current-boss offering me a job as a network operator with a very reasonable salary.

I accept of course. The new position is GREAT. The boss, with his experience, makes everything worthwhile. Life cannot get any better.

"YOU'D BETTER COME QUICK!" the PFY yells as he bursts into the room.

"It's the boss! He's locked himself in the management meeting! Apparently he asked the secretary to bring his axe up and now they've heard the wood-chipper starting!" Bugger.

I knew it was too good to be true...

---

### **Not quite the smell of Napalm in the morning, but a burnt server gets things off to a good start ...**

I wander into work after a hard night on the pop. My senses, however, are not so dulled that I fail to notice the smell of burning coming from the computer room. This and the PFY's jacket slung across the back of his chair can only mean one thing. He wants another promotion.

True, it is more than overdue, given that the last time he got a rise was over six weeks ago, but personnel has recently decided to put its foot down.

The PFY emerges from the computer room with a fire extinguisher and what appears to be a major part of the cooling system from one of the Human Resources servers. As per training, he seems to be putting his best foot forward - straight into the groin of anyone in the way of his plans.

"Good lad," I think, my chest swelling with pride.

I prepare myself for the inevitable call. Moments later the phone rings and caller ID identifies my 'client' as none other than the deputy head of personnel, a person with whom I've had more than one previous 'joust'.

"What the hell's up with our server?"

"Well, I'm not sure yet, but I believe that it has suffered from thermal runaway..."

"You set our bloody machine on fire?" he shouts.

"No, of course not. It's a common fault - as machines get older the collection of dust internally can combust, caus..."

"The bloody thing's only three weeks old!"

"Hmm, it happens sometimes. You can't expect the PFY to babysit the thing given the pittance he earns," I continue.

"That's it! We're running our own system from now on," he cries before slamming the phone down.

A couple of days later my fears are realised when a new server appears in HR, complete with customised operating system and no operator access. The boss fails to grasp the enormity of the potential problem - if departments purchase their own machines there's a good chance they'll find out that there is a slight disparity in what they paid us for servers in the past and what they really cost. A slight disparity of around 200 per cent.

I leave history to run its course - after a little God-like meddling from the PFY and me. Sure enough, a day later the deputy head of personnel calls, deep in grease-mode.

"Hello," he smarms.

"Hi."

"We're having a little trouble with our server and wonder if you'd give us some advice."

"What's the problem?"

"Well, we need to be able to list all the files in a directory, including their creation dates," he replies.

So, he's started with a trick question, has he? He's obviously testing me to see whether I'm going to give good or bad advice, using his extremely limited knowledge as a benchmark.

"Sure," I say. "Just 'ls -l' the directory concerned. You might want to pipe the output to something."

"Oh yes," he continues, expecting the ubiquitous 'rm' response.

"Yes, the 'more' command."

"Oh." He's obviously disappointed because he didn't catch me giving duff advice. Stupidly, he decides to trust me... "There was one other thing. We've got some problem with our system having very slow response."

No surprise there, considering that the PFY cranked up the ping-polling on their server to about 30 per cent of the network bandwidth.

"I was wondering if you could recommend something to speed it up?"

"Not really, the newer machines are usually fairly well tuned. Oh! Hang on a moment - I bet you haven't applied the Memory Expansion Patch to the kernel have you?"

"Ahhh... no, no, I don't think we have," he mumbles, attempting to feign advanced knowledge.

"Ah well, you'd best do that then, hadn't you?"

"Good idea. Refresh my memory - how do we do that again?"

"You know," I respond casually. "Echo 'MEMORY-EXPANSION' > /dev/kmem - it's usually the first entry in your /etc/inittab file."

"Oh, of course it is. I think I removed it for tuning," he replies, lying through his teeth.

A quarter of an hour later and he's back on the phone, a little more excitable this time...

"The bloody server keeps crashing!" he cries, panic-stricken. "It won't even bloody start."

"Well I guess we could take a look. What's your root password?"

There's a moment of indecision before he blurts out the word "morepay". Quick as a flash the PFY and I start trolling all their other machines to see if this password is used elsewhere. Hit rate: high.

A day later the new HR server is back under our control, the deputy head of personnel is firmly back in his place and the PFY back into the well-worn saddle of 'recently promoted contractor'.

In fact he's in such a good mood he wanted to tell personnel what we've been putting in their water cooler. I persuade him to save that for another day...

---

**It's show time, folks, and the Bastard goes along to do some, err ... research on the latest kit ...**

"I think it's time we looked at some of the newer technologies."

I can't believe my ears. The Boss buys new kit about as regularly as Thatcher votes Labour. It was his idea to forget this Pentium nonsense and get a job lot of XTs that he could acquire very cheaply. Fortunately I'd got wind of it and managed to 'accidentally' let slip to the CEO that the vendor was in fact the Boss's second cousin and the plan was abandoned. Quite right too - I can't believe he didn't include my mark-up in the equation.

However, since his spell on the hell-desk the Boss is a new man. His mind is permanently alive to the possibility of a scam.

"There's a research lab having an open day," he said. "I think you should go along and see what's new."

Actually, he may have said "steal what's new" - it's hard to tell since his recent bastardisation.

A few days later, the PFY and I find ourselves on a train at an unearthly hour of the morning chugging through the countryside with the trusty false-bottomed suitcase at my feet.

We finally make it to the concrete research-park jungle and into the show. As luck would have it, we're given a reconnaissance mission - sorry, guided tour - before being let loose to find our own way around. The tour is boring but at least the guide is too thick to see what we're up to. Eventually we're left to our own devices (and some of theirs that haven't been bolted down).

It's interesting to see the mass of toys scattered round, but my attention is drawn to the myriad security staff lurking around the areas where the smallest and most expensive gadgets live.

The first section seems to be about teleworking, something I relate to since the Boss paid for SMDS to my living room.

"So, tell me about teleworking," I say enthusiastically to the young suit on the ISDN gizmo stand.

"Well this unit enables you to connect invisibly to the office from home. All the network protocols go down the line, looking just like you're connected to the LAN," he gushes.

"Looks like an ISDN router to me."

"Er...yes it is. But it does have a nice blue box and extra flashing lights."

I look at the box disdainfully - not even worth nicking.

"Anything else you'd like to try to convince me is new?"

"Well, we have a router on a PCMCIA card."

"Why?"

"So you can connect your laptop to the office network via a router rather than a dial-in server."

"Why?"

"So that you don't have to install a dial-in server beside your routers."

"Of course. Using an expensive router instead of a cheap dial-in server. How economical."

My musings are interrupted by a nudge from the PFY. "They've got an iris-reading authentication system like ours."

"Not quite - ours doesn't do semi-permanent damage to eye tissue and isn't linked to the sprinkler

system like theirs is."

There's still so much for him to learn.

The lunch is much better than expected, mainly because we skipped the canteen and slipped into the VIP eating area instead. The card reader takes mere moments to fine-tune so that it will accept our business cards. Watching real VIPs attempt to gain access afterwards makes interesting lunchtime entertainment, while ensuring that seconds are available.

Suitably fortified by the chateaubriand and the rather decent claret we are ready to tackle the rest of the exhibition. The false bottom of the suitcase is only heavier by a bottle of excellent Cognac carelessly left locked in a liquor cabinet.

Our progress is impeded by one of the security droids. While he's telling me why we have to wait for access to the good stuff, the PFY slopes off through the shadows.

Section six suddenly opens way ahead of schedule, allowing us to see this power-free optical cell device.

"...so as you can see, there is no power cable to the base station," drones the techno-bore on the stand, obviously trying to figure the intense interest in the video stream that's going down this seemingly power-free network gizmo. "As you can see, we've put a gap here in the fibre, so if I put this piece of card in the gap it'll cut the stream off to prove that we're not cheating." He places the card in the gap and turns to the screen for the first time to smugly point at the frozen image. His expression turns into that of a man who has just encountered a water buffalo in his jacuzzi.

"Debbie Does Dallas. Nice touch," I congratulate the PFY.

Time to make ourselves scarce...

Halfway to the corner pub, all hell breaks loose. Klaxons, fire engines, people running from buildings, the whole caboodle.

The PFY's puzzlement is directly proportional to my smugness as I adopt a leaning position at the bar.

"Five quid says the chairman of the US parent company has just been required to iris-authenticate himself," I comment, noticing the water pouring out of their office doorways...

"No bet," the PFY replies. "Pint?"

Funny business, this new technology...

---

**The Bastard Operator From Hell is off to the movies, thanks to the marvellous advances in everyday technology ...**

The people upstairs want to play with some new toys again. Just because the CEO has seen an

article about videomail, he feels that the company is not complete without it.

Naturally, I'm delighted as the opportunities for mark-up are immense. The finance director was concerned however, but then he wouldn't pass an expense form unless it was signed in blood. Of course, it was the FD who tried to block the part I play in the purchasing process, it seems he got suspicious when I junked the wreck I drove in favour of a brand new BMW.

With the boss's instructions ringing in my ears I dial our network suppliers.

"Hello, Network Express."

"My name is Farquarson. May I speak to Jon, please?"

"Please hold."

>Click<

"Good morning, Mr... errrrrrrr... Farquarson. Is the line secure?"

"Yes, it is. Morning Jon. I need a couple of servers."

"No problem. What kind of load are they likely to get?"

"Pretty heavy. We're going in for videomail. You know, you have a graphics tablet and a camera and it stores all your words as phonemes and stuff."

"Neat. Twin Pentium Pro 200 then?"

"Errr... it's not my cost centre."

"OK. In that case do you want eight, 10 or 12 processors?"

"12 should do it. Plenty of disk too."

"40GB each?"

"Pardon?"

"Sorry, dropped a zero there."

"OK. Half a gig of RAM should do, too:- nothing too extravagant. What's the damage?"

"Hmmm... list price is £62,995 each."

"And after our bean-counter discount?"

"£124,999 before VAT per unit. I take it you want the commission to the usual account?"

Two boxes duly arrive. The PFY has them rapidly installed and whirring away, and connected up to the couple of dozen videomail tablets we scattered among the senior executives last week.

We go back down to Ops and the PFY fires up the videomail console next to his Quake session. A quick e-mail to the admin assistant at our other office brings up the remote execs on our console and we start to see words flying around the WAN. I sit back smugly and concentrate for the moment on psychopathic murder, albeit unfortunately in a virtual world.

"They seem to have the hang of it - I think they're competing to see who can send the longest mail with the most difficult words in," comments the PFY, neatly dodging behind a wall.

"Well", I reply, "they are kiddies with new toys. Hopefully we'll have enough material soon," I muse.

"Material?"

"Oh, don't worry about it."

>BAMBAMBAMBAMBAM<

"Ha! Die, sucker."

On returning after a brief hour's lunch, I inspect the videomail system. I'm rather surprised that they've managed to fill 40 per cent of the disks on the servers in such a short space of time, but it's all for the good. I run up my trusty copy of Premiere and start picking at the filestore.

"What are you up to," inquires my pimply colleague.

"Making a movie, what's it look like?"

"A movie of what?"

"Our CEO. Loyal, huh?"

"Very. That's what worries me."

It takes a while to remember my way around the controls in the new version, but soon the phrases are coming together nicely. The PFY is wearing his look of utmost puzzlement and goes off to nuke someone's server in the hope that it will ease his mind. An hour or so later he's just sweeping the last few bits into a bin-bag and I sit back, satisfied.

The PFY sees my contented smile and wanders over. He spots my notepad beside the PC and notices the phrases scrawled there.

"Annual bonfire night supper... financial director... rumour has it... security department... audio interference... had goat's cheese as a starter... what's this all about?" he asks.

"Just wait; the phone should ring about... NOW."

He jumps as the telephone springs to life.

"Hello, operations. You want whose account removed immediately? But isn't he the FD? OK, OK, I'm not arguing, I'm just surprised. I thought he was unsackably married to the CEO's sister. Who gave the authority? What, himself? Oh, by videomail... how apt."

The PFY bids farewell to our remote-site admin assistant, who needless to say is on a percentage and is therefore totally tame, and looks suspiciously at me.

"Care to give me a private viewing of your new movie?"

"Sure."

I hit 'play' and the PFY is presented with an extremely convincing image of the CEO telling the rest of the execs that some of the FD's extra-curricular habits just aren't in line with the company's requirements of directorial behaviour and that he's going to have to let him go. A couple of variants contain the instructions to the admin types and security to implement the logistical side of the person-disposal and police-calling. Of course simple voicemail would never have sufficed, but with videomail you can actually see the CEO himself saying the words. And we all know that you can't forge videomail - don't we?

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### **The PFY is hardly the life and soul. Would you be if you had to endure a visit from slime central?**

I could be over-reading the signs slightly, but the PFY seems to have all the symptoms of an advanced case of the blues. Questioning him on the matter is fruitless.

His work is suffering because of it - yesterday I caught him refilling the paper tray in one of the fax machines in response to a user's request. Also, password-change logs note that he's helping out users who forget their passwords by changing them to words like 'temporary' and 'changeme', instead of the usual 'goshiamaplonker' or "'imaginebeingso

stupid'.

The final straw comes when he does a complete recovery of a hard disk after a user accidentally erased it.

A serious talk is required, so I corner him and the truth comes out.

It appears that the PFY's favourite piece of firmware in the DP Pool has chucked him in favour of a newly contracted Internet Policy Consultant who's so smooth he's ready for varnishing. I'd seen the signs of course, but thought the PFY was more than up to the challenge. Looks like there are still some jobs you have to leave to the experts.

It's a sad state of affairs for the PFY, made worse by the fact that we've been directed from above to aid Mr Slimey's 'Internet Political Correctness' investigation - a thinly disguised attempt by the boss to justify the persecution of those who invest hours in company time perusing the screeds of Internet porn sites.

I try to divert the PFY's depression with a little light-heartedness...

"Perhaps you could do with a trip to Dr Bastard's Lab?" I call, unveiling my latest gadget.

"It's a mouse," the PFY responds.

"Not just any mouse," I say. "A remote

controlled

mouse, see?"

I twiddle with the arrow keys on my infra-red enabled personnel disorganiser. The mouse moves accordingly.

"Neat," the PFY comments, unimpressed.

"And what about that?" I ask, pointing at a recently modified office item.

"A briefcase?"

"Yes, yes - but with a customised addition," I reply. "Bring it over."

He grabs it, straining under the unexpected weight, and starts to my desk.

With the press of the key on the disorganiser the latches burst open, freeing a couple of bricks which fall onto the PFY's feet. Sometimes you really do have to be cruel to be kind.

"What the hell did you do that for?" the PFY cries.

"Education," I respond. "You're suffering under the misapprehension that life is fair. It is not. Which is why empowered individuals like you and I make it so."

"I don't understand."

Wearily I explain. "Picture if you will an Internet Policy Consultant-like individual, tired out after a hard day's work of warming his office chair."

As he boards his tube train, his briefcase - full of homework on how to annoy Network Operations - suddenly springs open, emptying its contents onto the line."

"Ah, so he's taking the tube home today then?" the PFY responds.

"I don't know. I'm merely outlining options here. And speaking of options, I believe we don't have one about attending his Internet policy report this very afternoon."

The PFY, at one stage, lapses back into pseudo-depression.

Time for a reserve plan that I was hoping to save for another occasion.

A little tinker in SNMP-land later and the fire alarms go off in response to an undetermined smoke detection.

Later that afternoon we show up at the boardroom for Internet Policy suggestions from the slimemonster. The presence of the PFY's erstwhile companion does nothing to improve his spirits.

Slimey starts off on the offensive, playing the 'sensitive new age guy' role to the hilt, while simultaneously down-playing the 'caring unbiased networking type' that has been the cornerstone of my many years of service. Within minutes, he has the audience eating out of his hand as he outlines his plan for an isolated network, his laptop pumping out one intranet proposal after another.

The boss looks on smugly as things look to be going his way.

"I think you know what to do," I whisper to the PFY.

He looks blankly as I pass my disorganiser to him.

"Something on his hard disk perhaps?" I prompt.

Deep in the recesses of the PFY's psyche, meglomania awakes from its deep sleep.

Half an hour later I'm sipping a pint with the PFY as he forgives and forgets with his DP attachment.

The shock and outrage that followed the display of a few still lifes from the ladies' powder room didn't enhance the credibility of our so-PC consultant very much and his exit from the building was rather rocket-like. Still, it was probably for the best.

"Another?" the PFY asks.

"Well I can't really. I'm just off to teach the boss the dangers of stashing his house keys in the brand new briefcase that was anonymously sent to him."

Experience, as they say, is the best teacher...

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### **Members of the new stripy shirt brigade are full of beans and raring to go ...**

One thing that has been bugging me for some time is the continued existence of the separate bean counter network. /P>

The stripy shirt brigade took exception some time ago to the level of support they were getting from us, and no matter how hard we try to make them see the light, there's always some rebel faction which strives to maintain at least some separate systems.

I can't understand it myself. We've put ourselves out for them over the months, stress-testing their notebooks and all that. The anvil business was a pure accident. And we still haven't figured how transactions with the local bookie managed to get a paragraph all of their own in the annual report, but I'm certain it wasn't Ops-induced.

Yet despite these tremendous efforts, the beancounters still insist that they need their own technical department. What's worse is that they seem to be making a decent fist of it. The guy they hired to

run the network does seem to have a strange attitude to users, though - he genuinely believes that is duty to help them.

What's worse is his presence means that the accountants know the real value of the all the kit we've been buying over the past few years. It took some fancy footwork to ensure that the CEO didn't receive the information that the multi-directional, electro-magnetic, mobile communications devices that we'd billed at L1,200 were in fact cordless phones that the PFY's mate was flogging off at knockdown prices down the local market.

It's imperative that we bring the bean counters back into our domain for good. Not only are we missing our 'bonuses' that comes as part of Cap. Ex., but there are also rumblings around the building that other departments are getting bright ideas about our support efforts.

Fortunately, our boss has a vicious streak in him since his brief spell on the hell desk, so he's right behind us on this one. He's had it in for the accounts department since his own expenses claim for the 'wherever you want' hostess service was rejected as a genuine business expense.

It doesn't help that the bean counter's network manager is one of those irritating individuals who walks around with a smug smile on his face all the time. He looks like one of those alligators that you see when you're cruising in the everglades, except with a slightly worse complexion.

He guards his territory jealously, which presents something of a challenge.

"I see your network's down again," he muses in passing.

The network accidentally crashed during an upgrade that we carrying out, just before the big race was about to start. "It's amazing that people are prevented from working on the network every time there's a race meeting or big football match, isn't it?" He smiles knowingly.

"Yes, we're having a lot of trouble with bottlenecks," I find myself saying, before politely slamming the door in his face and pouring another Espresso.

A few days later I find myself 'broken down' in front of Smiley's car on my way to my parking space. He leans on the horn, but my vehicle's illness is looking terminal - or at least it is after I pocket one of the spark plugs.

"I can't see what's wrong with it," I shout from under the bonnet.

"I'll go off and get help."

I know that the car park attendant is not likely to spring into action; partly because he's about 90 and partly because I left him the tapes I happened to have of the head of personnel talking to the deputy sales manager about some new high performance techniques they wanted to try out - in the hotel down the road.

"Quick," I shouted to the PFY. "We've only got a few minutes."

We know that the board meeting is about to start soon. A few minor adjustments to the server and they're ready to roll.

Back in my own office, I switch on the audio-monitoring device - OK, bug.

We hear the CEO's dulcet tones. "Now, I'd like to give you a demonstration of our latest product. I'd like to thank the technical whizz-kid in the financial department, Anthony, for his help in this demo. I believe we have a live feed to our RD labs."

Live feed, yes. RD Labs, no. The 3.30 at Newbury, definitely. Gasps from the board cause Smiley to be quickly summoned. His protests of innocence are to no avail as security, having emerged happy (and in my debt) from the car park attendant's hut, 'discover' the receipts for the local racing service in his desk.

The CEO is soon announcing the disbanding of the finance network, completely and for good. "I think I'd better bring network support back under one roof - at least departments can't pursue their own activities that way."

Networking - there are winners and there are losers. And I always seem to get such good odds ...

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### **Local culinary delights with the Bastard lead to the rapid disappearance of the latest recruit**

...

"You bloody nobbled him, didn't you?" the boss snaps at me and the PFY in a fashion that betrays his pent-up frustration at losing yet another 'client services liaison manager' candidate. Four in one week - at this rate we'll never get to improve customer relations, sadly.

"I beg your pardon?" the PFY responds, pausing only briefly to display an innocent expression.

"He's not going to show is he?" the boss asks.

"Au contraire," I reply. "I saw him just this morning. In fact the PFY was with me. He was looking a little seedy however - apparently he went late-night drinking with a couple of his soon-to-be workmates."

"You took him out drinking?"

"Well, I might have had a couple of lagers last night, purely in the interests of better understanding," I admit grudgingly.

"So where is he now?"

"Well, that's the funny thing. The last I saw of him was when he was in the lift with me and the PFY when we were trying out those tasty new one quid cigars they sell at that stand down the street. He really did look ill. Next thing I knew he was rushing out of the lift and away." "Why?"

"No idea. I think it was just after the PFY offered him those bacon fat sandwiches."

"Ah no," the PFY counters. "I think it was after you showed him that jar of pickled livers."

"Really? Oh well, I'll take your word for it."

"I suspected this might happen," the boss replies smugly whilst fingering the intercom to reception. "Send in the next applicant will you please?"

Ah... the old double-up-on-the-applicants trick.

Sure enough, the new applicant ("Call me Dave") takes his place at the desk and the boss gives him the standard glossy-brochure, entirely fictional account of what we do here, then asks what Dave's relevant experience is...

"Well," he blurts. "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

My hand involuntarily tightens on the seat armrest as I consider the horror of working with somebody this geeky.

"When can you start?" the boss asks, anxious to fill the position before the head of IT has another downsizing-binge.

"Well, right away - I like to think I'm dynamically configurable."

The PFY's armrest creaks dangerously in tune with mine - great minds think alike.

Later that morning our new 'representative' is ensconced in the comms room to 'get a feel of our operation'. The PFY and I enhance the tactile experience by lowering the temperature and starting up all the noisy kit that we save for special occasions.

By lunchtime he's starting to get the blue-lipped, sleepy demeanour that only exposure can give, so we slip an empty vodka bottle into the comms room rubbish bin and mention the 'sly-grogging' to the boss.

He breaks the habit of a lifetime by not being fooled. The next day our co-worker has recovered and is back on the job, getting a rough introduction to the network hardware area when the cabling tray he was crawling along had some form of unexplained earthing problem resulting in a 'potential difference anomaly' between his torso and feet. Shocking!

I'm disturbed in my work a short time later when the boss comes wandering by.

"Have you seen Dave?" he asks.

"Not for a bit," I reply. "Why?"

"Oh, someone tripped after one of the removable floor tiles was left unsecured."

"Yes," the PFY mentions. "He left one open in the comms room too - could've been a nasty accident - still, all screwed down securely now."

The boss smiles uneasily at the proof of our safety point while trying to slip a piece of paper onto the desktop unnoticed.

"Oh," I cry, snatching it up. "An official safety memo designed to alleviate employers' responsibility for workplace accidents - in the area of... oh, securing floor tiles left open? Dated yesterday? I don't remember receiving this yesterday - do you?"

"Nope," the PFY says. "Not part of the official safety policy as of this morning."

The boss puts on his 'we're all playing on the same side' face and appeals to our better nature to prevent his looking bad at the next occupational safety review.

"That'll be 20 quid each," I reply, cutting him off. A deal is struck and the boss goes off with the knowledge that the buck is not stopping with him.

"Notice," the PFY mentions. "That nowhere on this memo does it say that you should check that there is no-one underneath the said floor at the time that you secure it."

"You didn't," I cry.

"Well you didn't think that banging was the air conditioning playing up again did you?"

"But that's terrible, I can't believe you'd do such a thing!"

You can never be too careful when it comes to networking.

---

### **The Bastard Operator From Hell and the Paintball session ...**

I love the smell of burning components in the morning. Smells like victory.

I skip victory and concentrate on the voices entering the radio mike in the desktop calculator on the Boss's desk. (First rule of bugs, pick something in plain sight that isn't going to get used)

"I think it's a FANTASTIC idea!!" the CEO burbles excitedly.

"It's BRILLIANT!" the Boss sucks up, "A game of bloody paintball war! It's sheer genius!"

I tune out. The fruition of months of subtle hints, endless misdirected web pages, countless spammed email messages. The gauntlet has been taken up...

..Sigh..

"PAINTBALL WAR!" the PFY cries queasily "They wouldn't dare!"

"Oh yes they would" I respond "Us versus the Beancounters! It would appear that the CEO, \*YOUR\* flesh and blood however indirectly, has been got at by some slimeball in accounts and decided that it would be a wise and proper thing to end the apparent inter-divisional war between us and accounts on the paintball field of honour - no hiding behind technology or purchase approval rubber stamps!"

"You sound like you're looking forward to it!" he cries, still not at all happy about the idea.

"Well, given that it is fairly much inevitable now, 'looking forward' is perhaps a little strong, but yes, I admit I do relish the opportunity of meeting our opposition fair and square on the field of

honour, harbouring no grudges (like them docking my petrol allowance simply because I sold my car and hadn't been called out to work for the past three months) in a free-for-all"

"But they'll cream us!" he bleats "They've got weekend soldiers on their side!" he snuffles, coming to the point at long last.

"And we have subcontractors! I'm sure I can rustle up one or two who know how to point a gun! Besides, it's all booked from above. The best we can hope for is to do our best, take our medicine like men, and charge double time for weekend work... Oh, and take some of them with us."

The PFY is unconvinced..

"Oh, did I mention that in the interests of morale, the boss - you know, the one who gave out your cellphone number to the helpdesk - is going to find out on the day that he's a member of the team?"

"Really?" the PFY says, doubt now a thing of the past...

A week later the fateful day arrives and we exit the bus to the smug countenances of the opposition - they having had both extensive education and practice in the past few days...

My own education in the arts is sadly lacking, having only read a couple of posts to a usenet newsgroup on the topic. Sigh.

The paintball guy issues the rounds and weapons to the troops and the game commences. Our recently ordered library book tracking system is getting a bit of testing "in the field" with detectors sewn into the lining of the opposition's combat suits.. Looks like a worthwhile investment...

A buttock presents itself to my hiding place so I fire point blank with my reserve weapon - one that has just a tad more pressure than the standard issue and happens to be loaded with frozen pellets...

The resultant scream does two things to bring a smile to my face: (a) Confirms newsgroup accuracy, and (b) alerts the rest of the team to a sitting duck..

..

Half an hour later we've surrounded the beancounters in their makeshift fort.

"We surrender!" they cry, coming out with weapons raised.

"Now you see" I say to the PFY "In a real war-time situation, we would now be taking prisoners. Sadly, however, the Geneva convention does not extend itself to the paintball sports.."

The resulting massacre is needlessly quick.

"Quick!" the PFY cries "They're heading back to the bus!!!"

"You mean the one currently parked at a quiet country pub 4 miles away.."

The CEO pops in to see how things are going and if grievances have been solved.

In the absence of the enemy, the boss has taken on a definite hunted expression with the team

seeming to be made up exclusively of people he's annoyed in the past few weeks.

"Friendly Fire" I comment to the CEO over his protests "A documented wartime phenomenon. Purely Accidental.."

...

The following Monday we're back at work and, true to the CEO's expectations, interdivisional bickering is at an all-time low.

True, with most of Accounts apparently suffering from some form of "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" - the aftermath of the ambush in the snug of the 'quiet country pub' apparently - there isn't really anyone to bicker with.

Accounts isn't the only one to suffer from this. We're snowed under writing proposals for equipment purchases for the boss to sign - apparently he's heard there's a rematch on in a couple of weeks and wants to curry favour with the masses.

Looks like time to order that Stereo 29inch Video monitor for my telecommuting from home....

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### **The PFY scores top marks in the all important 'how to be a Bastard Operator From Hell' test**

...

"I don't think you realise who I am."

The PFY pauses for a minute. "Hmm...Carter, accounts. Room 402, extension 6473, date of birth June 22, 1963. Married, one child - not yours. A cider drinker. Drive a red Volvo with a faulty rear light and collect beer coasters. Your password is...ahhhhhmmm."

"Something to do with fish," I hint.

"Driftnet," the PFY cries.

"Excellent," I respond, turning to our latest visitor. "Can I have a sports question please?"

"But...I..."

"No, sports," I reply firmly.

While our user wanders off, I fill out the practical section of the PFY's final exam sheet.

"Let's see. Yes, you achieved the correct amount of disorientation and demoralisation. You also get a couple of bonus points by planting the seeds of doubt with the 'not yours' comment. Now, onto the theoretical section. The hard disk on your personal machine fails out of warranty period. What would you do?"

"Swap it with the boss's so he gets it replaced immediately, then, when the new disk arrives, format

the boss's old one and reinstall it in his machine."

"Yeeesss. But remember that you're being marked for proactivity too..."

"Oh of course!" the PFY blurts guiltily. "Then swap it into one of the consultants' machines so that you always have a standby disk for the future."

"Excellent. Now, you're helping users out in your spare time, when..."

The PFY laughs out loud.

"Correct. Next question: the boss has bought a piece of kit that is so old that even the engineers understand how it works. How would you get rid of it?"

"Drop it down several flights of stairs?"

"Too suspicious."

"Flick the mains switch to 115 volts for a little while?"

"He'll replace the power supply."

"Umm... I know, direct a heat gun into its cooling vents."

"Correct. Complete this statement: all power corrupts, absolute power..."

"..is even more fun!"

"Correct. Your boss and a client are plummeting towards the footpath after cornering you for two hours with their thoughts on the future of computing. Who would hit the ground first?"

"Who cares?"

"Correct. Judging solely by his attitude, how does the boss believe our network is managed?"

"By FM management."

"Be more specific."

"F\*\*\*ing magic."

"Correct. How long would it take an engineer to change a flat?"

"It depends on how many replacement flats he brought with him."

"Correct. Still on that topic, an engineer happens to mention the words 'that's interesting'. What has happened?"

"Uh, he's either broken your computer, lost his screwdriver inside it somewhere, put it back together with lots of parts left over or encountered some error that he's never seen before."

"So?"

"Oh, he just says it to pass the time because he's not allowed to say 'bollocks' in the presence of a customer."

"Precisely. One of your users brings his home computer for you to fix. You..."

"Solder the circuit breaker shut, crank the voltage adjustments to full power, swap out any good memory chips for crap and install a virus on their hard disk."

"And?"

"Whoopsy - charge them mates' rates of 20 quid for your time."

"Yep. Complete this: the meek shall inherit..."

"...what they're bloody well given. And be thankful for it."

"Correct. You have scored a total of 10 out of 10 in the theoretical section, passing on none. As your final task you must generate, then deal with, 50 user complaints in two minutes. Your time starts now!"

An hour later we're observing the smoking remains of the beancounters' comms cupboard.

"Freak wiring mishap?" the PFY asks the fire investigating officer.

"Looks that way," he replies, much to the annoyance of the head beancounter, who is not as stupid as he looks. "It seems that someone had replaced the five amp plug fuse on a portable lamp with a piece of nail resulting in a small fire when the cord insulation became pierced when it got trapped in the door. Just an accident waiting to happen."

"Yes, and how particularly tragic that accounts were storing all the historic purchasing records for the IT department in this very cupboard, even though we warned them of the fire risk," I add.

"Very tragic," the PFY concurs.

Later at a pub in the heart of Soho I congratulate the PFY on his promotion to the position of 'master bastard' by buying him a lager for a change.

"So that's it then?" the PFY comments.

"IT?" I cry. "This is just the beginning. Starting tomorrow it's time for graduate studies."

Even at this level, the poor guy still has so much to learn. Like how easy it is to slip a laxative into a lager for a start.

---

**The BOFH is given lessons in how to be a shiny happy IT manager. And he can't wait to start**

...

It's mid-afternoon, and we're in the middle of our annual 'improve the perception of IT' fortnight. Things are going just great.

The boss has a bee in his bonnet about my liberal interpretation of the promotional slogan 'delivering what the client needs'. Apparently, my helpdesk instruction sheets on how to deliver 'a damn good kicking' weren't within the intended scope of the motto...

He was in an even worse mood after the hand-proximity sensor on the line printer failed to operate while he was attempting to stop said instruction sheets from printing. The fast moving paper gave him a large and deep paper cut that he won't be forgetting in a hurry. And the PFY and I certainly don't know how that heavily salted water got into the first aid antiseptic bottle.

But his irritation began after spotting a publicity photo of one of the members of the company's football team (sponsored by the IT division) walking around with his football jersey untucked. Beautifully crafted, and costing enough to make a beancounter weep, the jerseys have a lovely little IT crest (a couple of crossed keyboards on a burning PC background, emblazoned on the left breast). The words 'IT - giving you more' are in large letters on the back. When untucked however, the words 'of a shafting' become visible. The boss was not impressed.

The PFY and I make no attempts to escape his wrath knowing full well that he has to pass the head of IT's room to get to us. He's not so keen on doing that since some complete bastard uploaded a new ring sound to the head's cellphone - a sound not dissimilar to that made by a lentil casserole after its trip through the digestive tract.

Accordingly, the IT department managers' meeting he attended this morning was a swift affair, and certainly not one that really should have been 'aired' as a live video conference and PR opportunity. Even the cafeteria staff saw it and wouldn't serve him the onion bhajis at lunchtime.

Not that I feel sorry for the boss. The whole 'improve the perception of IT' initiative was all his fault in the first place for mentioning that it 'must be about that time of the year' to the head of IT.

No-one likes these PR weeks because the bosses like to answer all those stupid user questions such as: 'Can I send 1,000 copies of my CV to the printer? Can I talk to one of your network guys for an hour or two?' and 'Do you know who set my car on fire?' with 'yes', 'yes', and 'no' instead of the far more appropriate 'not if you want to see another birthday, not if you want to see another birthday', and, 'us, we thought it was your birthday.'

But the thing that really puts the boss under the gun is that he's invoked a 'response time' clause in our contracts that was meant for call-out duties which says we have to respond within a reasonable amount of time to a user's problems.

In PR week, 'reasonable' means 10 minutes. Now perhaps the boss can have a good game of MDK in 10 minutes, but a networking professional cannot!

Sure enough, I'm just firing up MDK when the phone goes.

"Hello?"

"Yes?" I ask, expecting the worst.

"I've got a problem with my network."

Here we go...

"Hmmm?" Why waste words on these morons? They're much happier with a bit of grunting and a few soothing clucking noises.

"It's a little difficult to explain over the phone - could someone come up?"

Sigh.

I flip the PFY for it and am stunned when I lose. Then I realise that the little bastard has switched my double headed 50 pence for a double tail model.

It really does me proud to see him turning out so well.

Of course, I still won't be telling him that I removed the safety grille from the whirring blades of the cooling fan at the back of his PC, but there you go.

I get to the user's office and it's the same old thing. They moved the PC and the network stopped.

"But it never used to do that."

"No, but now that we don't use thin wire network cabling it does."

"That doesn't sound like a good move."

I manage to extricate myself an hour later (after the story about how technology was much more reliable in the 1950s) and get back to the office.

The PFY chuckles maliciously.

"He rang back - the lead's fallen out of the computer and he's scared to plug it in."

"A separate call," I cry, "that makes it your turn!"

"Toss you for it?" he asks, not understanding where the line should be drawn.

"I'll go for tails for a change."

"Bastard!" Sensibly, the PFY doesn't admit to anything.

"Oh, by the way, make sure to mention how reliable IT is nowadays, especially when compared to the 1950s..."

The PFY grumbles a bit before slouching over to the door.

"Have you seen my access card?"

"Yeah," I reply, "I needed it to get into the comms room this morning. I think it fell down the back of your PC. On the cooling fan side..."

---

## **A little sabotage is in the offing as the BOFH scuppers the systems department and the boss ...**

It's the final week of the PR fortnight and things have calmed down. People don't call us for the 'guaranteed response' so much. Perhaps it's something to do with the type of response they're guaranteed.

The geeks in the systems department are miles ahead of networks in the popularity stakes after blatantly bribing the users by shoving a terabyte of disk at them and electronically yelling "help yourself." Nothing short of upgrading everyone to 100 Meg Ethernet is going to bring us up to their level. The systems department must be brought down.

The terabyte of disk space is the first to go - about 20 in-depth 'treatments' with the rapid-freeze spray then the heat-gun along the drive electronics is sufficient to introduce the fabled 'random factor' into file safety.

The boss, meantime, is trying to curry favour with the masses by announcing a massive memory upgrade to the applications server to give it some real performance, disregarding completely the bottleneck analysis software pointing to desktop network speed. There's no helping some people.

Sure enough, a few hours later we have an engineer outside our office trying to edge into the computer room.

"What the hell's he doing here?" I ask.

"What do you mean?" The PFY is momentarily confused.

"Shouldn't he be stuck in a lift somewhere?"

"Oh of course! It completely slipped my mind. You'll be wanting the 5th floor." He indicates a lift only ever used by operational staff and very stupid people.

Ten minutes later, the engineer is back.

"There's no bloody server up there," he snaps, a little agitated at the nasty delay caused by the lift problems.

"Server?" the PFY responds, "I thought you'd come to fix the girder up on the 5th floor."

The engineer looks at him unkindly, then enquires about the processor needing the new memory.

The PFY swipes his card through the computer room reader and receives the much feared 'denied' beep. I try my card and a similar thing happens.

"Security must be having a problem again. We'd better wait for a bit until the system comes on-line. Coffee?"

"Sounds like a bloody dodgy system," the engineer says following the PFY out.

As soon as they've gone I break out the scalpel and the roll of tamper-evident packing tape.

Five minutes after that I try my real card on the reader and we all enter the computer room.

"So, two gig into this baby," the engineer says reaching for the apps server off switch.

"Hell no," I cry, panic-stricken. "We don't want that upgraded, we want that one upgraded." I point to a system so old it makes a 286 look state-of-the-art.

"You're joking."

"No. Why?"

"Two gig for that would take up half this room, if it could address it, which it can't."

"So why did your guys sell it to us?" The PFY elbows in on the act.

"We bloody didn't. I'm here to install memory in this." The engineer is getting agitated now - the little veins are sticking out on his forehead.

"But that doesn't need memory."

"Look, there's obviously been some mix-up here," the engineer says. "I'll need to talk to your systems guy."

"He's off sick." I don't think I need to tell him about the poor guy's skin inflammation, which is completely unrelated to that consignment of tanning machine lamps which was mistakenly delivered to our department a week ago, just after his terabyte of disk battle plans were overheard. The PFY just happened to be monitoring his phone line for clarity. Purely in the name of good service of course.

Suffice to say a few of his brighter staff have taken to wearing sunblock and heavy jumpers, even when the central heating accidentally came on for four hours the other day.

"OK," the engineer crumbles in the face of resistance, "I'll get my boss to contact you."

Ten minutes later he's gone, leaving with a couple of MFM hard disk controller cards sealed with tamper-evident tape in his memory upgrade box.

"I think it might be time that Kamakuza Memory Systems 1997 gave the boss a call with an offer he can't refuse, don't you?" I say to the PFY, wielding a couple of spanking new memory cards. "While I'm about it - couldn't the two central routers do with a processor upgrade?"

By the end of the week network's goodwill stock is high, with the surplus memory upgrade dosh going into 100 Meg Ethernet cards for the key players in the PR stakes. Meanwhile, in the pub, the CEO of Kamakuza Memory Systems 1997 meets with the CEO of Kamakuza Router Upgrades 1997.

"Whose round is it anyway?" the PFY asks. "It's yours isn't it?"

"Yes, I believe it is," I sigh as I go to the bar. It's not all fun and games, this CEO business.

Bankruptcy looms at every bar corner, if you play your cards right that is...

---

### **The BOFH goes on a trade show outing ...**

"There's that smell again!" I cry to the PFY, happily recognising that all-too-familiar scent in the air ...

"What, onion bhajis?" he asks, his senses dulled by years of soft music and educational films.

"No! \*THE\* smell".

"Fear?"

"No!"

"Burning Equipment?"

"NO! Can't you feel it, in your bones?"

"Rhumatism" he replies sarcastically.

"No," I respond, "But there could be a fracture in the wind if you don't tune in your senses ..."

"Well I don't feel anyt... oh yes!" he cries, suddenly enlightened.

"TRADE SHOW!" we cry simultaneously.

"Now we're going to need a convincing excuse to go as the boss is a bit against trade shows for some reason".

"Could it be because of the last time you went to one?" the PFY asks.

"Which time was that?" I ask. "I don't remember anything out of the ordinary?"

"You mean the time you spent a couple of weeks prior to the event at the tanning clinic, then turned up at the trade show calling yourself Sheik El Al Hand Kebab and claiming to want to network up every home in your Emirate State, no expense spared?"

"I can't recall such an inci..."

"When you drank two suppliers into receivership, disappeared for three days along with the boss's car, secretary, Visa card and nude holiday snaps - only one of which ever turned up again - you - claiming you'd been in a skiing accident on the M25?"

"Well now you come to mention it, the skiing accident rings a bell. Yes, I remember now, it was on work time and so technically they were responsible for my rehabilitation ..."

"At the Betty Ford Clinic?"

"Only the best for the company's contractors, I'll say that for them. Anyway, there was no proof I was linked to the car, Visa, secretary or holiday snaps"

"The ones in your second to top drawer, in the envelope marked MFM Disk Formatting Instructions?"

Hmm. I appear to be slightly outflanked by the PFY's skills at determining the truth no matter how low he has to stoop. Taught him everything he knows, you know ...

"Well, anyway, that's all water under the bridge," I cry, attempting to change the subject.

"Along with the boss's car if rumours are to be believed," the PFY interrupts. "Still, at least you obviously didn't pull a complete Ted Kennedy, as you're still getting those postcards from Spain ..."

Things aren't working out quite the way I planned. The PFY seems to be holding the upper hand in the conversation - something I'm not altogether used to, or comfortable with.

"ENOUGH!" I cry. "I admit, mistakes were made, not least of which was getting laged the week after and possibly divulging more of that which transpired to you than you needed to know. "

"I'll say!" the PFY cries. "You could have left the bit about you, the boss's secretary and the train in the Underground Museum right out of the conversation, as far as I'm concerned".

Sadly, I'm all out of verbal conversation modifiers. The use of unnecessary force is mentally approved and I give him a taste of the negative ion generator, dangerously modified to put out a few more amps than is safe in an office situation. And sure enough, the PFY does seem to be a lot calmer afterwards.

"BACK ON TOPIC!" I cry. "We have a trade show to go to, and I don't want any more interruptions!"

The PFY nods obediently.

"Now, we need some foolproof plan to enable us to go".

"I could ring my uncle".

"Yes, yes, but cashing in favours with the CEO isn't the plan. A far better plan is to give the boss absolutely NO power of veto for technical reasons".

"After last time nothing short of an earthquake is going to shift the boss's views ..." the PFY chips.

"OF COURSE! AN EARTHQUAKE! GENIUS!"

"You're going to cause an earthquake??!?!"

"No, no, of course not! Well, not if I don't have to anyway. No, the reason of reasons! The excuse of excuses!"

"What would that be then?" The PFY asks, unenlightened.

"DISASTER RECOVERY! It's been YEARS since anyone tested our DR kit, and a large percentage of it would probably catch fire if we powered it up anyway! BRILLIANT!"

The PFY calls uncle and starts the ball rolling.

"Ah!" the boss clucks as he enters the office some minutes later. "You know, I was thinking it was about time we tested our disaster recovery systems!"

"Do we have any disaster recovery systems?" I add, paving the way, "as there's an exhibition on that very topic in two weeks that the PFY and I are keen to go to".

"UNLIKELY!" the boss replies harshly. "We already have two DR rooms upstairs, ready to be fired up. I think we would do that now".

No sooner said than done. About two hours later, as the fire brigade is leaving, I'm taken aside by the CEO to answer the boss's outrageous claims of sabotage.

"Ridiculous!" I cry. "The fire was caused by dust accumulating in the equipment over a period of three years. We were lucky the whole place didn't go up. It's information like this that you find out at DR Trade Shows like the one coming up in tw..."

Two weeks later the PFY and I enter the trade show for a 3 day tour of duty. It's a harsh job, but someone's got to do it. We're greeted immediately by a charming young woman working for a popular supplier.

"Good Morning and Welcome to our Show, Mr, um ..."

"Sheik Ali Mohammed, " I reply "And my son, Ahmed Mohammed. We're here to get some computing for our palace. Only the best will do, naturally ..."

---

### **In the aftermath of the trade show the PFY is forced to dip into the favour bank ...**

"So what the hell happened?" the PFY asks, looking a little worse for wear.

"I take it you don't remember locking yourself in the comms room with your friend from DP Pool for two days with a carton of salt and vinegar crisps, a crate of lime cordial and two flagons of alcohol-based tape head cleaner, claiming you were going to 'clean some heads'?"

"Uhhhh no," the PFY answers confused.

"No, and neither do I," I reply. "I woke up nailed into sickbay with that woman from the router company. I had to look at the security tapes to see how we'd made it back."

"Did you e..." he blurts nervously.

"Sure did, every copy. Suffice to say you owe me one."

"Yes, I suppose I do," the PFY admits with a touch of embarrassment and guilt.

"Still," I say, "bloody good trade show."

"I'm not really sure," the PFY replies. "I'm a bit grey in places. I seem to remember a red strobe light."

"That wasn't actually a strobe light. That was a router that you bet me five quid didn't run on three phase."

"And it didn't?"

"No no, it did - just not for very long. You know what they say about 'the candle that burns twice as bright burns half as long'? Exactly the same principle, except a better wording would be the kit that works at thrice the voltage works for about 2.5 seconds. Oh, and you owe me five quid."

"That's hardly fair."

"A bet's a bet, we never said how long it would run continuously for. Hell, if that were the case half the world's software companies would be out of business."

The PFY hands over the dosh while we wait for the boss to storm in. And speak of the devil, Hurricane Halfwit rounds the corner at that precise moment.

"Uh-oh," says the PFY. "He looks worse than he did last time when you took his company car and stuff."

"That might be because you took his company car this time."

"I don't remember that at all."

"That could be because you passed out once you'd got the handbrake off and backed it full-tilt into the basement wall. Which is why you locked yourself in the comms room..."

"Ohhhh yes, I do remember the basement bit now you come to mention it. So I'm in it quite deeply, aren't I?"

"Well," I reply, "to use an analogy, you've ridden the lift of the Tower of Turd to its lowest floor and are still pressing the down arrow."

A crash interrupts our conversation as the boss, fuelled by pure, concentrated anger, bursts into the room.

"Get out!" he shouts, voice breaking slightly under the strain. "Pack up your stuff and bugger off. Now. I want you off the premises immediately, no ifs, buts or maybes."

My attempts at placating him fall on deaf ears, and his tirade is only interrupted by the ring of a phone. The phone, the red phone. I press the hands-free pickup.

"Hello, Gotham City."

As per usual the CEO eats this up with a chuckle. It's the small things that keep them amused.

"I've just been casting an eye over this disaster recovery evaluation you sent me," he says. "It's very interesting, especially the bits about simulating a comms room lockout, and a basement ram-raid as an evaluation of our vulnerability to disenfranchised groups in the community. In fact I've passed it on to the board members and it seems to have been well received all round at this stage."

The boss appears to be having some form of seizure related to dangerously high blood pressure so I rush to his aid.

"Away," he shouts, then calms down sufficiently to address the CEO. "And may I ask why using my company vehicle was part of this simulation?"

"Well I was told you'd volunteered it to make up for the mess you'd made with the fire in the disaster recovery room last week. Is that not the case?"

"Oh yes, that's right," the boss crawls. "But I think the board might be interested in seeing exactly what occurred, as captured by the security cameras."

The PFY's eyes indicate that he once more has that sinking feeling. Whereas I might get off with a reprimand for the unorthodox nature of my actions, the CCTV wiring the comms room has and the sick bay lacks might not reflect so well on him.

"I think my documentation covers everything," I respond. Sadly however, the CEO is unconvinced, so we all troop to his office for a viewing.

The boss savours the moment as he presses play on the executive video machine.

"What the bloody hell do security do all day?" the CEO snaps, as the opening titles of Emmerdale pop up on the screen.

"Did I say one?" I murmur to the PFY. "I think I meant you owe me two."

"As I was saying in my summation," I say, "with the slack security around here, disenfranchised groups are a very real threat."

"Smell that? That's a DR budget with my name on it."

---

**The disaster recovery budget proves to be a sore point, until the BOFH and PFY stage a little one of their own ...**

The Pimplly Faced Youth and I are poring over computing catalogues when the boss bursts in. His

mission today is to reclaim some of the budget that the PFY and I have allocated behind his back to the white elephant of disaster recovery.

We've been especially good about it too, recommending that we install a 'redundant' satellite dish on the rear of the building, selflessly proposing a test angle that saves the company money by using an established 'test-signal' generated by a Dutch TV company.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" he blurts, waving the chunky wad of disaster recovery proposals recently given to all and sundry by the PFY and my good self.

"What do you mean?"

"Recommending another satellite dish. We don't even use the first one."

"Yes, but with one at either side of the building, we have a redundant path in case the comms risers at either side of the building lose connectivity - as could happen in an earthquake..."

True, this is less likely to occur than the boss buying a round, but planning demands scrupulous attention to tiny, albeit improbable, details.

For a few seconds he struggles to absorb this. "Don't be ridiculous! We don't have a UPS on the rear of the building."

"Yes, I believe I mention that on page two, between redundant espresso machine with battery back-up and emergency response centre with complete

living facilities."

"If you think for one moment that the company's going to pay for you two to have a city flat to drag women back to, you've got another think coming," he snarls, "and as for your bloody coffee machine..."

"...go with the three spout model I think," the CEO finishes, entering the room.

"And while you're still at the planning stage, I was just thinking that this would be a good colour for the carpeting of your emergency response quarters," he holds up a swatch of Axminster with a street value well in excess of most controlled substances. "It's just the right tone to reduce stress in a tense situation."

And just the right tone, if I'm not mis-taken, to reduce the chances of the PFY or I getting a look-in at occupying the room outside the CEO's holidays. Still, sacrifices have to be made for the greater cause.

And this week's greater cause is the pursuit of excellence. True, the city flat would have been nice, along with the 'rooftop coolant storage facility' (complete with

diving board), but the PFY and I are going to have to be happy with upgrading

equipment.

The boss trundles off - years of experience helping him to recognise defeat when it rings his

doorbell - to peruse our proposals further.

"What the bloody hell is this?" he shouts about five minutes later, fingering the proposal to eliminate thin wire cabling. "It'll cost a fortune. And it's not even a disaster."

Strangely enough, seconds later it is. A nasty termination error occurs two floors above us, isolating the human resources server from the rest of the network.

"Ah, we'll be needing someone in for some overtime," the boss says, feigning a casual attitude.

"It'll have to be the PFY. I have a doctor's appointment in half an hour."

"Oh," the PFY replies right on schedule. "I've got a migraine coming on and I don't think I can manage."

"Someone bloody has to - the HR

server's gone off the network!"

"But it's happened before," I say, playing innocent.

"But not when the pay cheques are due the next day! The last time this happened the staff went on a rampage and wrecked the place. It was a disaster area." The boss shuts up when he hears the distant tingling of that doorbell once again.

As a networking professional it never ceases to amaze me that the combined bandwidth of FDDI, CDDI and ATM is but a snail's-pace when compared to the speed at which bad news can find its way around the company.

The boss gives in. "How much?" Warily, he reaches for his wallet.

"What, for our silence, or for the repair?"

"Both."

"Just pass it over. We'll drop off what's left tomorrow."

One length of thin wire and a loss of memory later, the PFY and I are looking at several 'approved' stamps with accompanying signatures on our proposal. Amongst city flats, Dutch smut and new coffee machines is the dream I've had for years. The end of thin wire is nigh.

"Let's celebrate. Waiter, your finest champagne and when the money in that wallet runs out, start on the credit cards."

---

**The PFY has accumulated a number of complaints in his new role - and it's up to the Bastard to sort him out ...**

It's a sad day for networking professionals everywhere. I, as the senior networking consultant, have been allocated the task of investigating a few complaints against the PFY and recommending some form of censure for the events concerned.

Apparently the boss has attended one of those 'progressive management' courses and come back with armloads of manuals on how to increase work levels and reduce stress in the workplace. Personally, I'd feel happier if he stuck to the literature of the same genre that mentions the seven dwarves and three bears so as to allow him to get on with the real tasks of management.

Still, it's a slow day on floor two, so I decide to give it a crack. Sure enough, I get a call from one of the human resources people - almost as soon as I get in at 11am. Apparently, all disciplinary actions require a representative from personnel to be present, so we organise a time and agree to meet in one of personnel's wastes of space on the fifth floor. Oh, I mean interview rooms.

"Right," I start, upon my arrival. "I think we all know why we're here." I turn to the PFY. "Apparently there have been three complaints against you in the past month and it is our task to investigate these to their fullest and decide on the appropriate action."

"I understand," the PFY replies.

"Right, first up we have a complaint from someone in accounts who says that he ordered a software upgrade that you'd agreed to handle."

"Yes, I remember that," the PFY responds.

"In your own words, what did he ask for?"

"Well he called the office at 4.50pm and said he wanted WYSIWYG, and he wanted it before I went home."

"What did you do?"

"I downed the lights and powerpoints on his floor."

"And he could see?"

"Nothing."

"And he got?"

"Nothing."

"So you filled his order to his requirements?"

"I thought so."

"Excellent," I cry happily. "I don't th..." the personnel guy starts, only to be stopped by a stony stare.

"My show I believe. Now, onto this ATM business. "

"Well, one of the beancounters wanted ATM in his room."

"And what did you do?"

"Well, I got the company architect to move his office to the ground floor next to the cash machine."

"Well you did your best then."

"I think he meant he wanted better networking," Mr Personnel said struggling in the deep end of technology. "After all, that's what you do."

"Really? Hmm, you could be right. But we'll never know because he's left the company. Apparently the machine's beeping drove him mad within a week. I can't think why he asked for it in the first place. Apparently he never got around to finishing those reduction proposals to IT spending..."

"Worse luck. Oh well, chalk one up for the client not being specific in describing their needs. But you did your best despite the odds stacked against you, well done. Lastly," I continue, before personnel can interrupt, again. "There's something here about problems with someone being locked in the comms corridor."

"Well, that was my fault," the PFY admits.

"One of the database guys demanded to check that his room was patched into the FDDI and must have let himself into the corridor by accident. I couldn't see him in the comms room and thought you must have let him out."

"An easy mistake to make," I reply. "As I have done on occasion myself, which is why we really should deny any access to the room in the first place."

"This is bloody ridiculous," Mr Personnel snaps in what could be called an annoyed manner. "There's no bloody way that could happen."

"It could," I respond. "Because there are no windows in the secure corridor so you don't know anyone's in there. We've mentioned it to the safety officer more than once and asked for CCTV, but so far no such luck. "

It is a great source of sadness to me that he doesn't trust our word on that.

"Well," I say to PFY later. "I think there's no grounds for censure here. How about we nip down to the pub for a quick pint?"

"Excellent," the PFY responds. "Should I check the secure corridor?"

"No, I'm sure someone let him out while we were at tea. Just make sure the temperature's low enough in there in case there's an overnight heatwave."

Basic law of networking No.4: Opportunities, like the boss's cigars, are there for the taking...

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**When the boss tries to out-bastard the Bastard it's time to bring on Plan A, sit back, and enjoy the fireworks ...**

I'm concerned about the boss. I just can't explain his attitude - at least not since he slipped on that section of thickwire whilst carrying a laboriously prepared OHP presentation last week.

Sadly, his slides on 'contractor versus permanent staff - ways to increase value for money', lost a little in the presentation after being delivered in a random order...

It also didn't slip my attention that he failed to appreciate my comments about the prudence of numbering OHP slides, nor the PFY's suggestion of using presentation software that does it all automatically - and cheaper.

One would almost think that he'd prepared it all off-line and on permanent media to ensure that no-one was aware of the topic of his talk in advance.

In which case using the transparency printer - dormant for 98 per cent of its life - wasn't a good way of diverting attention from yourself.

Strangely enough, one of his disjointed points did lodge in some moth-eaten corner of the head of IT's brain, and since then our lives have been a misery.

In an effort to suck up to the beancounters while justifying yet another yearly bonus, he's agreed to the proposal of the PFY and myself doing chargeable work for outside organisations...

Sure, after the first few

network outages and the odd security breach, demand for our services tapered off slightly - to nil. But credit is due to the boss for not letting a minor setback like that deter him from trying to make us pay. We'd barely got back into the office when three large boxes were deposited at our feet.

My eye for hideously expensive equipment twitched slightly as my gaze alighted on the vendor name and product code emblazoned on the side of one of the boxes. Nor was the PFY slow in detecting the presence of equipment that was the networking equivalent of the Holy Grail.

The boss sauntered in casually and addressed us in our stunned silence.

"Yes," he said smugly. "It's what you think it is. Top of the line switching and routing gear from Teranet, fully propagated with a card for everything in use today, from RS232 to ATM to Gigabit Ethernet. You name it, it's on it. And you two are lucky enough to get to test it!"

"Test it?" I ask, looking at enough power to run a small telecomms provider.

"Hell yes. You don't think I'd buy it do you? You're being paid to run it and

produce an independent report for a networking rag. Then we'll send it back to the supplier - once they've checked it against the shipping docket of course..."

The bastard.

"The bastard," the PFY whispers as the boss leaves.

The boss, dare I admit it, has done the unthinkable - he's delivered a blow for the managing class. He knows full well that going back to our equipment after using this treasure trove will be like trading a Rolls Royce in on a Robin Reliant. A mental kick in the goolies from anyone's point of view.

A day later, unable to resist the temptation, the PFY and I play with the kit in question. Sadly, it's not as good as it claims to be - it's better.

The boss just eats it all up - filing our review and our recommendations for purchase in the same shredder tray before wandering off, chuckling, to lunch.

"It can't be like this," the PFY wails,

eyeing the vendor's packing crew who've come to decommission the tested kit.

"It's all right, I'm sure we'll get some kit like that some day."

"When it's so bloody obsolete it'll be a cooling system load."

"OK," I mutter. "Tell you what, how about a couple of lagers at lunch. You like lagers at lunchtime remember?"

"I can't," he blurts. "I told Sharon I'd meet her for lunch and she's only got half an hour."

One pull of a piece of string later, all is revealed to the PFY as hundreds of confetti-like pieces of paper are released into the underfloor cooling system. The underfloor smoke

sensors do their magic and back up Plan A roars into action.

After securing comms central, the PFY, Sharon, and I file out along with the rest of the sheep, while on the other side of the building the freight elevator, true to it's fire alarm configuration, returns to ground floor.

The three boxes inside it marked 'Christmas decorations' are sure to be filed away in the appropriate place by stores as soon as the alert's over.

I shouldn't think we'll see them again until long after the boss has accepted responsibility (and organised payment) for some recently lost very expensive on-loan equipment.

"Right," I cry as we step out into daylight. "To the pub. I believe there's a sales rep from Teranet who has several pints with our names on them."

---

**The boss tries to oust the BOFH and the PFY again. Enter George, some lager, a shredder and several PFYs to-be ...**

I'm feeling a little seedy this morning after I put several hours (and lagers) into finding out just what the hell's going on.

It appears that George from Cleaning and Maintenance has overheard some startling conversations between the head of IT and the boss. They are plotting on winning the CEO's favour with the result of getting shot of the PFY and I.

A small amount of dosh later, George tells us how they intend to accomplish their aim...

So it comes as no surprise when the CEO and IT brown-nose crew (the boss and head of IT) enter the office.

"I'd like to ask you a little favour if I may," the CEO begins benevolently.

"What can I do for you?" I ask, getting a little naso-trouser action in myself.

"Well, it's my grandchild's computer applications class," he says.

"Surely you're too young to have grandchildren?" the head of IT blurts.

The CEO continues: "Well, apparently they'd like to see some of the theory in action and I thought..."

"...that we could show them how a real computer centre works," the PFY finishes.

"Exactly."

"No sooner said than done," I say,

taking the lead in the brown-nose hurdles.

"And I'll sort out some souvenirs, lunch and transport," the PFY adds, winning by a length, closely followed by me, and the boss.

Two days later the group of Slightly-Pimpily-Faced-Youths shows up at IT Central. Half the department is on the alert as word's got around there's some form of benefit to be had from this sort of activity.

"Before we start, I'd just like to quickly cover the topic of safety in this building."

The CEO smiles gratefully, knowing I have the best interests of his kin and class at heart.

Five minutes later our attentive students are preparing themselves to enter the Comms room when a loud shriek is heard from outside Mission Control.

"And lastly," I say, removing the cable between the step-up transformer and the door handle, "a sincere thanks to our boss for his practical demonstration of the dangers of electricity." I open the door to reveal the boss, with a more vacant expression than usual, sitting on the floor outside the office with a pile of IT ID-cards scattered about him. "You can never be too careful."

The boss is ferried away to sick bay for a quick once-over (and a change of undergarments if my nose does not deceive me) while the head of IT spots an opportunity to join the class as we take them through to the Comms room. He gazes on in awe as we identify the various bits and pieces therein (half of which he signed for) and ask for questions as we wander into the tape and document safe.

"What are they for?" the CEO's descendant asks pointing at some of our equipment.

"Those are for document destruction. This is a bulk eraser and that's a shredder. Would you like to try?"

A couple of students are keen to try their hand at it so we give them some old tapes and a stack of paper and leave them to it.

"What's that TV set for?" asks one of the students, pointing at a 29in monitor.

"That's not a TV set," the head chuckles. "That's a security camera monitor."

"But it's got a stereo video attached to it."

"A security recorder with dual audio channels, isn't it?" the head asks me.

"Well, it looks like a TV and video to me. I still don't know why you ordered it."

"Ordered it?" the PFY pipes up. "He asked me to get stores to deliver it to his home."

"You requested it." The head is losing his calm.

"What on earth for? Anyway, I keep copies of all requests. Until they've been filled, at which time they get shredded..."

The head, in Superman mode, attempts to leap a high tape stack in a single bound, faceplanting the shredding machine. A nasty sight for the young and impressionable, but not as nasty as what follows when his tie slips into the shredder blades... The PFY switches it off at the wall saving the boss further injury, but also disabling the reverse switch.

"Once again we see the dangers of our workplace," I lecture as the boss thrashes around trying to free himself. "Even a shredder can be dangerous. Even this bulk eraser could cause problems especially if you weren't wearing an anti-magnetic watch like our head here."

**BZZZZZZZZZZERT...**

"Oh. Or if you were wearing one that said it was anti-magnetic, but wasn't, like the boss here. Thank you very much for demonstrating sir."

The CEO smiles, happy in the knowledge that the class has learned something.

Situation restored to normal.

---

**When the PFY shows compassion to a user, the BOFH suspects a Mid-Job Crisis and takes emergency action ...**

It's a slow afternoon at Mission Control when the phone rings. It's an external call, which is more welcome than the internal variety.

As luck would have it, it's my slave-trader come to take me out for the twice-yearly drink-up , food-stuff and pep-talk to guarantee my custom in the years ahead. True, I could go back to contracting direct as I used to, but this way someone else has to foot the bill for a six-monthly night of excess. The PFY and I arrange to skive off early and meet him in a local drinking establishment. The night promises to be interesting...

Sure enough, the next day, the PFY and I are somewhat slow on the uptake. Whilst the idea of doing the Monopoly-Board Pub Crawl sounded like a good idea under the influence of lager at 10 past 5, at 10 past 10 in the morning, enthusiasm has tapered off somewhat.

So much so in fact that the presence of a user in our office provokes only a minor response.

The PFY reaches half-heartedly for the power stapler, only slightly modified with extra torque on the firing spring, a 'rapid fire' setting, and the removal of the safety guard.

"Hang on!" I cry, not wanting to endure several hundred CLACKs and miscellaneous screams in my current condition. "Can I help you?" I ask the user.

"I'm after a UTP cable for my computer," the user asks, displaying an education in networking that's generally prohibited at user level. (For their own good of course.)

"How long would you like it?" I ask tiredly.

"Well, I'd like to keep it if it's all right with you," he adds, chuckling away at a joke that's so old Noah used it buying wood for the Ark.

"Sure, just grab one from the brown cardboard box in the corner."

The user contentedly wanders off with a cable and the PFY corners me.

"Are you all right?" the PFY asks in a strangely caring voice. "You helped a user?"

"By giving him one of the dud cables that we sell for copper scrap? I was just buying time till my hangover goes. Mark my words, he'll be back."

"Oh," the PFY responds, realising that even on a bad day the old CPU's still ticking over. He pauses for a moment - something plainly on his mind.

"Don't you ever worry that we lie to users too much?"

A Mid-Job Crisis. I should have seen it coming. All the symptoms were there - the care for others, the slow-draw of the stapler. "Don't be ridiculous!" I cry, wanting to nip the surge of conscience in the bud. "Users expect to be lied to, like Insurance companies and the Inland Revenue. It's your right - no your duty - to misinform in the interests of technological advancement."

"Well, I've been thinking - I don't know if I'm really cut out for this job."

It's worse than I thought. Before the PFY can go on, I ring the helpdesk and give them his number for 'problem calls'. Surprisingly enough, they start putting users through almost immediately.

"Hello?"

Two hours later the damage is done and the PFY's back to normal. The user who wanted to know why the 'follow-me' service wasn't working on her phone was probably the straw that broke the camel's back. It took a while for the PFY to realise she was carrying her desk phone around the building with her, but as a veteran hand at these things I expected no less.

He's back on form by the time my amateur networker returns to the office.

"That cable you gave me is broken!" he cries in a distressed manner.

"I don't think so," the PFY says calmly. "We ran a cable check on all of them."

"That's true," I respond. "Except of course we didn't do the humidity differential test because our multimeter's broken."

"Of course," the PFY gasps.

"That'll be it," our user cries, feigning knowledge.

"Tell you what," I say to our ardent amateur. "You grab one end of the cable and go into the comms corridor and just hold the plug in your mouth. You'll feel a slight tingle if the humidity differential's OK and nothing if the cable's broken."

Seconds later the silence of the comms corridor is punctuated by a scream and a series of thuds.

"Whoops," the PFY blurts. "Plugged it into the 90V AC Phone-Bell test transformer by mistake."

The thuds next door stop, which can only mean our user's managed to bite through the cable to disconnect himself.

"Good to have you back," I say as the PFY unplugs the evidence. I mean cable.

"Good to be back."

Isn't it funny how things work out for the best?

---

**It looks as though the Bastard has overreached himself, but the PFY comes to the rescue with a cunning plan ...**

If I hear the words virtual boardroom one more time, I'm going to hurt someone.

The bloody boss, stepping out of character, has rekindled the CEO's interest in videoconferencing. Normally this would have me smiling at the thought of spending more company dosh, but we don't have the bandwidth to support the system company-wide.

"Why?" the PFY asks, smelling a rodent-like creature.

"Ah. Well, I'd been meaning to tell you about that..."

"You've sold our bandwidth to a third party haven't you?"

"Not exactly, no."

"You've cranked up the company's ISP service?"

"No, I sold that off ages ago."

"You sold it off!"

"Yup, cashed in the client base and ISP domain name to another supplier. Very lucrative."

"And didn't pay me off?"

"Nope. I didn't even pay me off."

"So what did you do with the dosh?"

"What did I do with the 'venture capital' you mean?"

"Come again?"

"Suffice to say that we are the sole partners in InterTelecom Internationale, supplier of cheap telephone calls to the world..."

"Uh?"

"And our latest client is a company with offices all over the world. One of which you are standing in."

"You're selling our bandwidth back to the company? Why the hell did they buy it?"

"Well, if you remember the time of the big falling out of beancounters and networks..."

"Which one?"

"The one where the head of accounts said that our overheads for providing international calls were too high and that we'd be better off going through a public supplier."

"Ah yes, but I thought you'd engineered that because you had some master plan..."

"So I did. And you'll be pleased to know that InterTelecom Internationale outbid all the other companies by virtue of its low operating overheads."

"Meaning we're stealing bandwidth from the company!"

"Stealing's such an ugly word. We're simply maintaining one hundred per cent usage of the existing links - something the company should be rewarding us for. And they are, every time we collect our bonuses through InterTelecom Internationale."

"Sneaky," the PFY grudgingly admits. "So what's the problem?"

"If we whack in this conferencing stuff we're bound to get congestion problems."

"True, but we know it's a toy and not going to be used all that often after the first time."

"I expect so," I reply.

"Then I have a plan..."

A week later some very expensive kit is brought into the company under the boss's vigilant eye. The PFY has gone to our US office for the testing, and a part-time contractor is to do the same in Rome.

The testing is completed just as the CEO wanders down and electronically greets the PFY and part-timer. Response is good, and the boss and CEO seem fairly pleased with themselves.

"Now I'd like to speak to the rest of the offices please," he says.

Over in the comms room, the telephone exchange suddenly pops a circuit breaker and goes down.

The offices concerned are switched into the picture - and very grainily if I say so myself. The assembled staff listen as the CEO gives a short speech about the wonders of technology. A few comments pass back and forth before the CEO 'rings off'.

"What did you think sir?" the boss asks.

"Well, the testing bit was OK, but the office response wasn't so good."

"Yes," I admit "it's a problem with Heisenberg's certainty principle of video compression."

"You what?" the boss gags.

"Heisenberg's certainty principle of video compression. It's a famous quantum physics experiment which videoed cats in boxes. The more cats, the more certainty that you'll get quantum disturbance in video compression."

"That rings a bell for some reason," the boss blunders.

"How do we fix it?"

"The only way is to eliminate the compression, which would require larger telecomms links..."

"Make it so," the CEO says, having watched far too much Star Trek during office hours.

The boss signs a couple of orders there and then and shuffles the CEO out.

I go next door and show the PFY and part-timer the orders while I reset the breaker on the exchange.

"Shall I call the telecomms providers now?" the PFY asks.

"Yes, and tell them InterTelecom Internationale wishes to expand..."

Fish. Barrel. Shotgun.

What could be easier...

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### **The scent of restructuring is in the air, as the BOFH advises a little CD scratching to remove viruses ...**

If I had five quid for every time the head of IT thought he'd disguise managerial incompetence with a 'departmental restructure', I'd be a rich man. It's not like he's being tricky about it. In fact, I'm sure the board only ever complains to him when they want to see an arrangement of staff they haven't seen before.

This weeks masterpiece is a set of Client-Solution Buddypersons - that is, everyone in the department gets a group within the department to help.

And being a spiteful and vindictive bastard, the head of IT gives me the distributed consultants group - people with the technical competence of tree tomatoes and social skills to match.

The PFY gets off lightly with the DBA group, who already know that you only call us if you enjoy third degree burns.

The calls start rolling in - something like "The user's printer isn't working so the network must be down," and step through fault resolution only to find the paper tray is empty. At lunch my personal cellphone rings with a consultant problem and I realise the head of IT has been giving out, my private number. I make a mental note to avenge this indiscretion.

Meantime I have a consultant to deal with.

"The application I'm trying to install for a user just comes up with a write error," he moans. "Do you think their system's run out of disk space?"

"Hmmm," I respond thoughtfully, "What have you installed?"

"Office, voice dictation software, 3D design and the Online Encyclopedia. Is that too much?"

"Hell no!" I cry, "That's just a smidgen of the space that must be available on the user's 386. No, I think it's a little worse than that."

"Worse?" they ask, worried that this could be outside their technical expertise (hitting return and floppy insertion).

"Yeah, it sounds like we've got another one," I say ominously. "Another backward masked CD-ROM."

"What happens?"

"Well, it slowly but surely makes the software on the system only operate with software made by the same manufacturer. Attempts to install other manufacturers' stuff results in errors. All the big companies do it these days - it's a marketing tactic."

"Wow! What can I do?"

"Well, what CD-ROMs have you got?"

"Loads. All our software's on CD."

"Hmmm, it's probably worse than I thought. It surprises me you haven't had problems before now."

"Well, now you come to mention it, the encyclopedia was slow to install. Do you think that was related?"

"Undoubtedly. It's obviously the anti-installation virus at work."

"What should I do?"

"Well, I don't know - are you familiar with what happens to computer tapes when we want to remove data from them?"

"You scratch them?"

"Exactly. And that's what you do with CDs, except you want to keep the data but not the anti-install virus so you only scratch a tiny bit of the data, the bit that indicates which programs the software won't work with."

"How?"

"Well, do you have a micro-surgical ceramic scalpel on you?"

Dummy mode on.

"No?"

"Oh well just use the blade from a pair of scissors. You want to put two scratches, as close to each other as possible, running around the disk in what we call the 'index band' of the CD. That way the

software can't look up the stuff that it won't work with."

"Really?"

"Sure," I respond, pinocchioing for all I'm worth, "Trust me."

"Should I do all the disks then?"

"Every disk you can find."

"But there are hundreds in the media store."

"Do it after hours and you could be up for a night's worth of overtime," I suggest, going for the greed jugular.

"Yeah," he gushes, mentally counting pound notes.

"But remember," I add, "If you tell anyone, they're all going to want a piece of the action. But if you were to surprise the head of IT with it tomorrow morning..."

"Mum's the word then," he cries.

"And while you're at it..." I mention

"Yes?"

"The head of department has been having problems with his personal audio CDs as well - you might see if you can fit them in if you've got the time."

The rest, of course, is history. The wailing, the gnashing of teeth, the impromptu dismissals - not to mention the destruction of several collector's edition boxed sets of live jazz.

I smell a reorganisation on the horizon.

---

### **A run-in with the company cafeteria leaves the BOFH porcelain bound and the boss regretting an onion bhaji ...**

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. And unfortunately, the company cafeteria served it up to me as lunch. I'm not a well man.

It would appear that the friendly 'jousting' between myself and the fifth floor cafeteria has been brought to a head by my chance remark to the PFY (within their hearing, unfortunately) that their new motto, like the airborne military, was "Death from Above".

Admittedly, the menu du jour is no worse than one would expect on death row, but perhaps I shouldn't have modified their 'Healthy Eating' intranet Web menu page to main courses of Hungarian Gluelash and Chicken Tikka Diarrhoea. Some people have no sense of humour.

The boss is loving it of course, knowing that any self-respecting contractor would be at death's door ringing for service way before they'd ever call in sick. Legitimately, that is.

No, if I'm going to be spending all day on the porcelain peripheral, I'm going to be doing it on company time. His frequent visits leave me in no doubt that he's gagging for a chance to cross a few hours off my time sheet. My attendance, though uncomfortable, continues.

The only thing I don't understand is how they got the lethal dose to me. Normally quite cautious with my food (prime directive - avoid fish, chicken and pork), the method of my dispatch escapes me.

The smug glances and sincere concern for my health by the cafeteria staff confirm my doubts as I head straight for the bread counter for a low-fibre lunch. A battle plan is called for. And hatched.

As soon as the boss has vacated the area after his usual four buckets of everything, I put phase one into action. "Well I don't really know..." I mouth, as one of the cafe staff passes, seemingly unnoticed, "...but apparently the boss reckons it's this place that did it to me. He said there's better hygiene in a Soho alley."

"Really?" the PFY asks, playing Dr Watson to the full.

"Well, I dunno," I reply noticing an attentive ear in the background, "...but the boss hates the place. Reckons the staff would be lucky to get a job cleaning the toilets of a kebab house."

The next day, whilst nature is calling me for the 11th time, the PFY cranks up the CCTV kit, today's source being the 'thermostat sensor' beside the cafeteria servery.

The boss stops by to see if anyone's up for lunch, but the PFY tells him, without a word of a lie, that I'm supervising some emergency downloads.

I get back in time to see the boss in the cafeteria, negotiating his tray around the obstacle course that is the servery area. "All normal so far," the PFY comments.

"Yes, nothing out of the ord..." I mutter, as something catches my eye.

Under the guise of replacing a bucket of wallpaper paste and beef stock (labelled 'gravy') one of the caff staff has palmed an extra onion bhaji onto the boss's plate. Oblivious to it all, the boss powerlifts his tray to a table and straps on the old nosebag.

"Should we tell him?" the PFY asks.

A cynical glance answers his question.

Culprit Identified, Phase One Complete.

The next day is one of the few that makes this job worthwhile. The boss has called in sick. Word on the street has it that he made it to the tube station before bringing up his breakfast.

The cafeteria staff meantime, are busy with an impromptu Health and Safety check (after an apparently anonymous tip-off), which discovered, amongst other violations, that the ratatouille had real rat in it.

A week later I'm almost back to my usual self, though still food-shy, whilst the boss appears to have made a miraculous recovery after his time away. He gloats for a while about the benefits of the company health plan, sick pay, the benefits of not coming to work, etc., etc.

At lunch he gloats some more as he packs his plate, waxing lyrical about the health entitlements of being a salary-earning company man.

His entitlements don't stop there though, as the PFY helps him bag his quota of onion bhajis.

That afternoon, the PFY talks to him some more through the jammed doors of one of the company lifts. In my hurry to release him, I've accidentally snapped the door release lever off in the keyway, so we've had to call out the lift repairman.

"How much longer are they going to be?" the boss whines. "Shouldn't be much longer," I cry, signalling to the PFY to make the service guy another coffee whilst I take the last entry in the lift-violation sweepstakes.

I give him 10 minutes max...

---

**The boss has been 'encouraged' to relocate to Tonga, but his replacement is a nightmare. It's time to get serious ...**

"What'd you do?" The PFY blurts, after arriving to work to find the boss packing his bags...

"Me?" I ask innocently, "Nothing!"

The PFY's waits in silence until I come across with the truth.

"Well, I think I might have worried him slightly..."

"How 'slightly' do you mean?"

I detect a smidgen of annoyance in the PFY's tone which I guess I'll have to deal with later. True, the boss had reached the malleability of fresh putty, however one must always bear in mind that change is good.

"Well, I might have mentioned that living in Tonga would be a better long-term prospect than the UK."

"Come again?"

"Well, it all started when the boss wanted to know the status of our year 2000 project. I think he's suspected the truth - that it's a foolproof plan of locking yourself in your office for five months then coming out at the end with a smile, the words "everything is OK now", and bushels of consultancy fees."

"And?" the PFY asks

"And so I happened to mention that there really wasn't any point in worrying about it anyway."

"Why was that?"

"Because I told him that the world had the Year 2000 virus. That it would all be over in 1999, just like Nostradamus and multitudes of religious groups predicted."

"And he believed you?"

"Well you know how likely he is to believe me straight off..."

"You mean since you suggested he take the toaster into the shower with him to save time on making breakfast in the morning?"

"That and using a magnetic strip as a floppy holder, yes. Anyway, so I directed his attention to the fact that some of the oldest Cold War nuclear defence systems are computer controlled, including the ones that are primed to initiate launch if they lose connection to the Pentagon."

"And?"

"And it would be quite likely that shortly after 11.59pm on 31 December 1999 the time since last successful contact value will go, via date arithmetic, from one minute to thousands of negative minutes..."

"Integer wrap-around, and launch!" the PFY finishes.

"You got it!"

"And he believed you?"

"Well, I happened to notice, after cruising the Web cache logs, that he was a frequent viewer of certain Web pages."

"You mean the Lycra Lovers home page?"

"Amongst other things, yes, but more importantly he was a frequent visitor to the 'Nostradamus Says' and 'Nuclear Danger Awareness' pages. Armed with this information, it was a simple matter to play upon his fears."

"So now he's moving to Tonga?"

"That, or some other absolutely non-strategic target which is unlikely to receive a circa 1960s warhead around 10 past midnight on 1 January 2000."

"But you don't really think it'll happen do you?"

"It might. But who cares? I'll be drunk as a skunk at a New Years party - besides, my consultancy goodwill will be right down the tubes thanks to my well-financed answer of 'it's all OK now.'"

"So you are working on our millennium project then?"

"Full time since this morning."

"And what have you come up with?"

"I'll let you know in just under five months..."

A week later, things are much worse. The old adage 'the devil you know is better than a kick in the groin on a cold morning' holds true. The boss's replacement is far worse than he ever was, and has canned my year 2000 project out of hand, preferring to go back to our software and hardware suppliers. It's enough to make you weep...

...If you didn't have the root password, control of the telephone exchange and an almost psychopathic hatred of management.

In a matter of days, the new boss seems a little peaky. Apparently some power spike or other set half the dialback numbers on the modem pool to his home phone number and the other half to his cell phone.

If that wasn't bad enough, his phone was already running hot after his paragraph in the weekly IT bulletin Web page about the 'Version Control Server' was misspelled as 'Virgin Control Server' - apparently a lot of the younger beancounters were concerned about what form of control he was talking about...

The PFY and I pass the time by setting the clocks of equipment forward to 31 December 1999 to see what happens. After the trouble we caused with the e-mail server I feel we should be in with a chance for the tender for the resurrected seven month Y2K project...

Change really is good.

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### **The new boss discovers that sometimes learning can be painful, especially when the BOFH is your teacher ...**

Normally the appointment of someone to middle management is accompanied by all the pomp and ceremony you'd expect from the changing of a vacuum cleaner bag, but today things are different. This new boss is supposedly a cut above the rest because unlike those before him he has a university degree in management. So now we have a lean, keen and completely green boss on our hands.

His first green and keen move is to organise a meeting between himself and some global network providers to obtain a better bandwidth pricing system - a group of individuals who'd sell their own grandmothers for five quid. The boss is so far out of his depth he needs a diving bell.

To save him from the feeding frenzy (and the company from bankruptcy) I force my way onto the negotiation team. Judging by the voicemail I receive from the various players this isn't a popular move.

"Call me Alan," the new boss gushes as he meets with the various potential suppliers for the first

time. He's obviously been on his share of huggy-feely team building weekends and believes that the informal approach will enhance negotiations.

If I had my way, we'd enhance negotiations by locking the suppliers in a room with several half bricks and only deal with the last one standing - a policy that's served me well in the past.

"The proposals all seem to be a little on the steep side," is the boss's opening gambit. He doesn't realise they're about 50 per cent more than we're paying now - what suppliers call the 'initial-shaft' position.

"Well that is with increased bandwidth potential," one responds.

"You mean it's exactly what we've got now, except it has more potential?" I reinterpret for the boss's benefit.

"Potential for growth without extra carrier installation, yes."

"And as we already have over-spec carriers installed it means we'd be paying 50 per cent more for no reason?"

"Potential does cost money," another supplier chips in. "And I believe that our plan provides the maximum potential."

"While still actually delivering nothing extra..." I add.

The meeting goes on like this for a while with the boss doing his horse-trader act, fooling no-one. Eventually he manages to think up the final offer masterstroke.

"Well what can we get for this?" The boss asks, being sneaky and writing down a figure which is about 40 per cent of our networking budget.

"I'll give my grandmother a call," one of the supplier responds, reaching for his cellphone.

From then on it goes downhill. At the end of a couple of hours of negotiation the boss is a broken man and liable to replace our current bandwidth with a bank of 300 baud modems via some BT-call boxes.

Strategically, I call for a lunchbreak, and get the boss out of harm's way as quickly as possible.

"It's all quite technical isn't it?" He blurts once we're out of earshot.

"It's a snowjob!" I reply and proceed to educate him on the ins and outs of price fixing - apparently a topic that isn't covered under the Bachelor of Parochial Management Degree. I bring him back to the comms room so the PFY can back me up.

Our comments fall on deaf ears.

"But I'm sure they know what they're talking about," he mumbles naively. "After all, they've been in the business for a long time."

"Because they take advantage of managers," I respond. "Honestly, you can't believe anything

anyone tells you in this business."

"That's a terribly cynical attitude," he responds, as expected.

Looks like it's time for Plan B.

"Well it'll cost a fortune to upgrade the potential of our comms risers."

"Why?"

"I think it's best if the PFY shows you the problem we're talking about."

Ten minutes, a scream, and a plummet of one floor later, I'm flying solo in the negotiation processes as yet another boss fails to check that the grating is securely in place on the 'floor' of the comms riser.

Oh dear.

"Gentlemen," I begin upon returning to the boardroom. "Due to a workplace accident Alan is unable to be with us for the rest of the negotiations, which puts me in the position of having to make a decision about our next sole global-network provider. I feel it is best that you come to an agreement among yourselves as to who that sole provider will be while I wait outside for your decision. Oh, you'll find the bricks at your feet under the table."

Sometimes you've got to pay a little extra for customer satisfaction.

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### **Several months of beer swigging has left the Bastard feeling a tad run-down, so he takes a trip out of town ...**

I decide to take a couple of weeks off to get a well-deserved break from the stresses of work (ie alcohol poisoning) with a trip to the seaside.

Being the cautious type I leave instructions with the PFY to e-mail me daily on the events that have occurred. Sadly, my laptop is currently pending upgrade replacement (signed by the Boss in one of his more lax moments) so my only form of contact with the civilised world is via an Internet Cafe.

Like 90 per cent of the cultured e-mailing world, I prefer to read personal communications in the privacy of my office or home without the distraction of Quake playing in the background. There's plenty of time for that during chargeable hours. I'm also not a big fan of waiting for a condescending ponytail-type to log me into the slowest PC on the face of the earth, with so little memory that it has to page just to let you enter your password.

I mention that I'd like to use my favourite e-mail package, only to get a smarmy response.

"First time is it?" ponytail chuckles smugly. "No-one uses that program any more."

I could beg to differ, but what the hell.

"Well, yes it is," I answer, anxiously. "What do you recommend?"

He bumbles on about some Alpha release of GeekySoftwareCorp's latest bugpack, and types in the password ('connect', I happen to notice) to enable the desktop machine. He then begins a well-practised 'there's nothing to be nervous about when you've been using computers as long as me' monologue. I restrain my impatience. Eventually he finishes, turns back to the machine and discovers that all is not as it should be, perhaps because I pushed most of his applications into the recycle bin while his attention was diverted.

Couldn't help myself - old habits die hard.

"That's funny," he comments.

"Oh, it's not working is it?" I whine in a manner so familiar to me from my helldesk days. "Computers never work for me."

Convinced that I'm a first time loser, he, as expected, logs into the file server with his own user ID, depending on his 'lightening-fast' typing speed for password security ('girlbait' - tasteless and wildly inaccurate).

While he's performing the reinstall, I shell out L20 and get myself a debit account for access time from another greasy ponytail at the watered-down espresso counter. This one logs me into a desktop and advises me to 'browse a bit' to get the hang of the system. When he's going and no-one is looking I change out of loser-mode and download my e-mail from work.

Yet another ponytail comes by and chuckles as he monitors my incoming e-mail over my shoulder as it surges in at about 2,400 baud, thanks to a school party watching some real-time video behind me.

A quick scan of my e-mail tells me the Boss is still causing trouble by appointing a temporary senior network analyst in my absence. Definitely something I'll have to get him to keep an eye on.

In the meantime I have smaller fish to fry as one of the ponytails spills an espresso down my back as he waddles past to some unsuspecting customer.

I login to the fileserver as ponytail1 and peruse its contents. To pass the time I find the desktop login script and make a couple of modifications.

While I'm at it I decide the cafe's homepage could do with a bit of jazzing up.

A shocked gasp from behind me moments later informs me that someone's got the new improved version complete with recently uploaded non-real-time video clip.

A little taste of Sweden never hurt anyone - especially not when a quick glance tells me the gasp comes from the teacher of the school group who's trying to drag her students from the display. Methinks that the page was a far cry from the Dangermouse TV homepage they expected.

I tickle the keyboard a moment longer, adjusting my account information then wander over to catch the tail-end of the educational experience that the youngsters have been exposed to.

"That's disgusting," I cry, horrified.

By now a generic ponytail is in situ making profuse apologies. "It's true what they say about the Internet," I mention to the young tutor. "Full of perverts."

"It's just a tool," ponytail responds defensively to the teacher.

"Yes, I saw that," she responds.

It's funny how you can warm to people you hardly know.

A quick cellphone call to the local media later and I'm helping the alluring young teacher and her charges through a bunch of cameramen and reporters. My only stops are to collect a refund of the L200 account balance, and to make an appointment for dinner later that night with the young educator.

Holidays? They're nothing but work, work, work!!

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### **While the Bastard's away, his replacement sees a career opportunity - forcing the PFY to deploy shock tactics ...**

It's a dull day on holiday. My newly befriended educational contact is working, so I duck back to the city for my daily intake of e-mail, (seaside Internet cafes are a little difficult to get into at the moment - what with concerned parents picketing them).

Logging-in from home I notice the latest correspondence from the PFY appears to be a long one, so I crank up my espresso machine and set it on stun. I open the PFY's dispatches. It's an epic document depicting the struggle of the competent network engineer in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

Apparently the boss's temporary network supervisor moved quickly from the 'humble and unassuming' persona to 'sneaking and conniving' persona in a few short days. True, this is pretty much par for the course and expected of the position, but he could have waited until I'd been fired.

The PFY realised quickly that the new boy's networking and Unix server knowledge was second to none - even nearer than that in fact - none whatsoever.

The PFY's well-tuned nasal instincts detected hint-of-rodent so he slipped a call monitor on the boss's phone. His instincts proved correct - his new supervisor and the boss were mates from way back when electricity was invented.

Further investigation revealed startling similarities between his CV and my own - word for word apparently.

Almost like the boss had e-mailed it to him. Having identified a position worth coveting, my stand-in invested every working hour brown-nosing support and managerial staff, playing up his role to the detriment of my memory. From the PFY's observations, he was either after my job, a Nobel Prize, or both.

Operations resumed with the new me wanting to distinguish himself by discovering evidence of negligence on my part, leading up to a stirring half-hour that will long be remembered. I have to rely on the PFY's version of events...

"Something strange has happened on the mail server machine," he blurted to the PFY, smelling glory, "There's a process running the pop program coming from outside the company. I think we've got a break in."

"Where's it coming from?" the PFY enquired, already suspecting the answer.

"A machine called bofh.DieGeekDie.com."

The PFY, recognising my domain name and penchant for keeping abreast of e-mail, knew it was best to defuse the situation before it got out of hand.

"Yep, it's a hacker all right," he confirms.

"What should we do?" the temp boss gagged, already thinking about the book rights for his Internet crime detection novel.

"Should we disable logins on our machines?"

"Hmm no" the PFY advised. "That'd just annoy them. Best run a disinfectant across the network."

"How?"

"With the spray command. Use spray: HOSTNAME minus c one million minus l two thousand, AMPERSAND. Do it for all hosts in the hosts file. That should disinfect the network while I get a coffee."

The PFY returned to anguished cries. "The bloody network's down."

"No, no" the PFY commented "It's still up and running, just very slow, for some reason."

From then on, it was all downhill. Convincing him that configuring all the 10/100Mb Ethernet switch ports to 100 non-switched, "for improved performance reasons", was a masterstroke - although the 10 per cent of 100Meg capable users were quite pleased with the performance that a 90 per cent network outage provided.

In an effort to win back some client goodwill, he proactively upgraded the router firmware with some new-release software clearly unaware of the firmware golden rule: never trust an unpatched release of anything.

That accounted for another hefty outage when some obscure bug caused the slip lines to have the highest priority path to the network. Which came as a surprise to the PFY as he hadn't had time to login to the routers to do it manually.

I'm just about to disconnect when a late-breaking news report comes in. Apparently, there's been a nasty workplace accident involving my phone. It appears the receiver cable had been rubbing up against a power cable and had worn through the insulation on both causing my replacement's professional looking headset to become a boost not only to his ego.

Luckily, it's always been networking operations' policy to have earth leakage detectors on desktop mains, but unluckily one of the PFY's extremely heavy manuals was inadvertently leaning on the reset switch at the time.

The ambulance crew eventually managed to coax him from underneath the desk with a couple of chocolate biscuits and a warm blanket, but it looks like I'm going to be called back early. No rest for the wicked. Or their supervisors.

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### **The failings of a clever new purchasing system brings out the Bastard's hitherto repressed vindictive side ...**

The systems guys are really getting on my tits. Not satisfied with having the run of the machine room in almost the same manner as the PFY and I reign the comms room, the pricks have now stuffed up our purchasing system as well.

Now, instead of identifying a piece of equipment that's smoked its last and shoving a well-stocked replacement purchase order under the boss's nose for his 'X' of approval, we have to e-mail all purchase requests for any computing products to the systems purchases software for the systems geeks to peruse, approve and source a competitively priced alternative to...

I'm fit to be tied. The PFY is chainable. Perhaps it's because we received a 'Crisco' brand switch instead of the 'Crisco' one we ordered - straight from Silicon Back-Alley in Venezuela. Judging by its face value the country should have stopped exports at the Miss World Competitor mark. I blame myself for the personal note to our product-of-choice sales rep of "plus all the fruit for 100base-T x20" which appears to have been interpreted literally. At least the cafeteria won't be short of bananas for a year or two.

I confront the boss as soon as possible.

"We can't accept delivery of that," I cry. "The voltage supply settings only have two options: 12 and 24."

"It's obviously a switch printing error," he says. "They left the zero off the end."

As I confront one of the purchasing system's operators with the smoking remains of the aforementioned piece of crap, the boss says defensively: "Well, we can't send it back now! After all, the switch did say 12v and 24v... We'll have to get it fixed! And anyway, you didn't specify that you wanted a 240 volt AC device when you sent your order through to the purchasing system.

"They're not mind-readers you know."

"No, but then I didn't say 'avoid buying thinwire cabling with it' either, did I?"

"Oh, the thinwire cabling's still in the basement," the purchasing geek interrupts, "Actually, we made a killing on Crisco's winter special - 'thickwire-for-thin'."

"See?" the boss says "We're saving money already."

"You bought 4,000 metres of thickwire cabling for office wiring?"

"Yep, and it was dirt cheap," he beams.

In an extraordinary change of character, I take a sick day because I really am feeling ill. The next day, when I tell the PFY, he does too. The following day, we're back at work and determined to make a go of it. I show the boss some thickwire, cabling duct and a large diameter masonry drill.

"Where do we start?" I ask.

"Umm," the boss mumbles, knowing his popularity will be inversely proportional to the noise of the drill slowly whining from one side of the building to the other. "Perhaps we should send the cable back then."

"Perhaps we should," I reply.

"Can't do it," the purchasing geek says. "We have to pay a restocking fee and the system's not set up for that."

Right. It's war.

I write a script to order 20 floppy disks, one at a time. I also set my e-mail return address to the in-mail address of the Purchasing System.

Five minutes later, when the system runs out of memory, the PFY and I have an impromptu meeting with the boss and systems geeks.

"He ran our server out of memory and crashed it!" the combined geeks whine.

"Ran it out of memory?" Clickety-click. "There, I've ordered you some more... uh-oh, looks like it's crashed again. You must be really low. Tell you what, as soon as it comes up I'll re-order some more, just to be safe..."

"Don't!" the boss snaps.

"But we have to put it through the purchasing system," I say.

"OK," the boss sighs. "Put it through in writing to the systems people and they'll enter it into the system themselves."

The PFY chirps up: "But they'll just miss out or abbreviate bits they think are irrelevant and we'll end up with another non-brand piece of crap!"

"No. They will enter it word for word as you request," the boss decrees. "Is that understood?"

The systems geeks nod, and the PFY and I grudgingly concur.

As soon as they're gone I get the PFY to write out a new switch order.

"What should I put, 240 Volt AC 20 port UTP Switch...?"

"Put whatever you like, just make sure it goes past 256 characters because that's the limit of their description field."

"That's a little childish."

"Not as childish as writing, 'A dickhead is typing this in', in the description field of an order."

"You wouldn't!"

"Did. Will do again, and planning on documenting it for the rest of the department. Any questions?"

"None whatsoever."

"Right, then get scribbling. And make it as illegible as possible."

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**As far as the BOFH's concerned, the season of goodwill doesn't run to the systems men. Quite the opposite in fact ...**

It's Christmas time and brown-nosing is at record levels as tomorrow the Xmas bonuses are announced and everyone is seizing the opportunity of enhancing their standing in the head of IT's eyes. Of course they're completely forgetting last year's bonuses, where electronic calculations of customer satisfaction to bonus size produced only two, extremely large, bonus cheques. I must admit that they came as a bit of a surprise to the PFY and me, but as we all know, computers never lie.

Worse still, the head is himself brown-nosing for a Christmas party bonus from one of the mail room women by offering her a technical position in the department. Far more technical than the one he'll be offering her if he manages to drag her to the photocopier room mid-party.

As I'm stalking past the helpdesk to avoid the throng outside the head's office, a phone rings. So, full of Xmas cheer, I answer it.

"Hi, it's Bryce from marketing. Someone's worked out the administrator password for the company Web site and has been modifying our Web pages. I'd like to secure it so that it's safe from hackers during the break."

"Really?" I ask, remembering how easy it was to replace the inline product graphics with ones guaranteed to excite the customers' enthusiasm. "Well you should change the password then."

"What to? Should I make it just a string of characters and punctuation marks?"

"No, don't be silly, make it something no-one will need to write down. The company name for example. I'm sure that'll be secure."

"Really? Because one of the systems bods is saying that we should make it as complex as possible."

"They would do," I remark, remembering all too well the system purchasing nightmare of recent

weeks. "They love it when you have to ring up because you've forgotten it."

"Yes, they do don't they," he blurts, remembering the shame all too well.

I swing by and check how the PFY is coming along with the 'customer satisfaction survey' results. A bit of data massage never hurt anyone.

All that remains is for me to cover up a particularly nasty bit of fiddling that the Boss might catch wind of. I arm myself with the IT operational balance spreadsheet, corner him, then regale him with bizarre terms like accounts payable, inwards and outwards goods, trial balances and the like until his eyes glaze over, then point him to the creative bookkeeping in question.

"And that's where I converted our holdings into standard European monetary units, as we'll be required to do in 1999. I thought it best to trial the software as soon as possible to see if there were any bugs - so that we could get them fixed well in advance of the changeover."

"Yes of course," the boss responds. "Good idea, and what's this?"

"That's where I converted it back from EMUs to pounds as it all went well and we're not actually trading in EMUs yet."

"But the start and end figures are different by about ten thousand quid."

"Yes, well, with the exchange rate, commission, stamp duty, poll tax and Inland Revenue all taking their cut."

"Oh dear," the boss cries. "Hopefully you won't be running too many of these tests in the future then."

"Well I can't be too sure. I know that there's one more due just before I take my Easter break next year, but apart from that it's anybody's guess - who knows how many tests the auditors might require us to do."

"Hmmm, well, in the interests of the company perhaps we should put a hold on auditing our accounts until the changeover - you can't see any problem with that can you?"

"None springs to mind immediately." I respond.

"Good. But what's this?" he asks, looking at the only figure on the spreadhseet in red.

"That?" I ask, "Oh, that's the money in the systems budget that no-one seems to have accounted for. It seems to have been allocated out in two lump sums which just happen to coincide with the holidays of the two systems guys."

"Oh," says the boss, having cached my excuse for monetary discrepancies and brought it back into memory.

"Funny how it seems to have disappeared just prior to their holidays," I say, clearing his mental cache.

"You mean they've been stealing?" the boss asks as the sun of knowledge comes up over his mental

horizon.

"I afraid that's what the facts lead me to believe," I sigh, sadly.

"Shall I call the police?"

"With what evidence?" I ask. "This is just a precis of the accounts. To prosecute someone you'd need a complete audit, with auditors' fees, possible EMU translations, poll tax, compound exchange rates and commission, concession allowance."

"Concession allowance?"

"Auditing overtime concession," I ad-lib "For working over the Christmas break. You're probably looking at about 15K, and there's no guarantee they'll be prosecuted."

"So I'll fire them," he cries.

"And without prosecution, be liable for an unfair dismissal action."

"Well something's got to be done."

"True," I comment, "and before the next birthday, which is second week in January if I'm not mistaken."

"What can I do?"

"Well, you could just pay them an end-of-contract bonus and not renew as of 1st January," I suggest.

"Excellent. But ..."

"But?" I ask.

"Who'll look after the systems?"

"Well, there's not that much to it. I mean hell, we could probably handle it if we took on another trainee. We'd probably be up to speed by mid-January."

"Really?"

"Of course you'd be looking at a new contracting rate."

"Oh..."

"Which would be much less than you stand to lose on the 10th of January given the current situation."

"All right then," The boss cries, and waddles off to make it so.

I let the PFY in on the latest developments at the booze-up while the systems guys help themselves to a punch - the new security blokes are like that when you refuse to leave the building. Ex-army

chaps apparently.

"More bloody work?" he blurts.

"With pay rise attached."

"So?"

"And you get a new trainee."

"So bloody what."

"Of your choice."

"And?"

"And isn't it time you started 'interviewing' applicants from the DP pool? Once the head of department finishes his 'photocopying' of course."

"Eh?" The PFY cries, getting a little dose of enlightenment UV himself.

"Ah well, just call me a sentimental old Santa type..."