

inside the
matrix | *The (Un)reality of Corporate Life*
ROSE MICHAEL

For Sam, my white rabbit

I've only been here three years, so what would I know? I've only worked in four areas, how much have I seen? Enough, surely—if the average tenure is eighteen months, as they said when I joined, then I'm practically an old hand. Enough to tell my story like any traveller, write up my notes like a true anthropologist. Or so I thought, until I started. Then I began to wonder. You could spend your whole life here and never get your head around how it works. Indeed, if you spent your life here you'd have no hope of ever getting your head around it: the longer you're inside the Matrix, the harder it is to see.

Maybe the question I should be anticipating is not how deeply I've delved but whether I've really re-emerged. How objective am I? Is this just what I'm doing for now, or is it who I am? As I analyse and re-analyse this place I can't decide whether I'm trying to make myself like it, or hate it. At first I thought I was trying to understand it better in order to fit tighter in, now I wonder if it isn't a way of keeping my distance.

I want to tell what it's like, what corporate life is *really* like, but I hardly know where to begin; I'm afraid if you don't already know you'll never understand. Let me start at the end, or what I thought was going to be the end. There I was, flying in low under the radar, a kind of cultural tourist who'd parachuted into enemy terrain. I was Hunter S and this was my ride with the Angels. That's how I saw myself anyway, as I carved a path through an environment disturbingly similar to the private girls' school I'd escaped years before. Only this time I was getting ahead: pay rises, bonuses, promotions. Being liked—although

still considered a little weird, with strange views about make-up and relationships for a woman. Winning according to their rules.

But then the next redundancy program rolled out and my name was on an Excel spreadsheet listing those to be let go. And I realised I cared, which was never part of the plan. Suddenly I saw how blind I'd been: my anti-corporate attitude was still nicely intact but I was one of them. The company didn't even care about my attitude, definitely didn't try and change it, just absorbed me anyway. I was inside. For the first time I wondered how many others there were like me, thinking they were subverting from within, getting out of it what they wanted, and then waking one day to find that such a strategy meant they were already converted. Complicit. Corporate life is insidious and seductive. Resistance—not that I've ever tried it, unless that's what this is—is useless.

— THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING COMPANY

While I'm far from alone in having had my eyes opened by a round of redundancies, most people I've worked with haven't been so surprised to find they care; in general, people here do. Stories circulate of employees begging to do the same job for less money, of others taking the company to court, rejecting offers of financial settlements in favour of a chance at 'justice'. I particularly like the one about the boss who said sympathetically, before HR could stop him; 'it's nothing personal, we're just paying you too much'. Him too, presumably, if such a textbook case of unfair dismissal is anything to go by.

The extent to which people care—and not just about having a job, or even their job in particular, but about the company itself—continues to amaze me. It's not unusual for someone to introduce themselves at workshops by saying 'I'm here to make a difference' or 'I really believe in what I do'. It's obvious why they would expect better of the system, but why should I?

Everyone knows downsizing—improving the cost-to-income ratio—is increasingly become a fact, possibly one of the defining facts, of corporate life. Everyone knows someone whose job's been made redundant. Everyone knows someone who's made a mint out of being retrenched, and probably someone who's made a mint out of being retrenched more than once. Or being retrenched and hired back as a consultant. In these post-dotcom days it no longer means what it once did. It's nothing personal. Companies are focusing on cost cutting, rather than value creation, because that's what the stock market responds to. Businesses are getting rid of staff, outsourcing services, selling off support areas. Where once a strong share price meant more work and more jobs, now it's almost come to mean the opposite. The bigger a corporation grows in terms of wealth, the smaller it seems to get, in terms of size.

We all know the drill: information and communication technologies are offering economies on an unprecedented scale and businesses are racing to realise them. Finance, human resources and customer-facing staff are being pulled out as fast as the new self-service tools can be pushed in. ‘The longer you stay the fewer people you know,’ one of my colleagues once told me, and already I’m beginning to see what he meant. Not that he’s around to share the joke with. If you want to know who’s hiring, try recruitment, along with consulting firms and specialist services like law.

Most staff are actually okay about this—they know it’s a business and business decisions make sense to them. And, after all, they’re leaving with a golden handshake; it can’t be all bad being paid to move on if you were going to anyway, although the size of the cheques suggests eighteen months isn’t the norm ... it soon might be though. But what gives everyone the shits is when managers say it’s not about the numbers, which means either they’re lying or they’re fools. Or both. It means they’re making it personal. Next comes the speech about cutting away the dead wood, getting those who aren’t on board, off. It’s about you, they may as well say. You’re fired.

That’s when people get scared, and angry. Although, ironically enough, it also seems to be when the company goes up in their esteem (and investors’): the harder a club is to join, the more people want in. Everyone longs to work for a business that’s succeeded in streamlining operations, flattening the hierarchy, paring back the layers of middle management. The problem is most redundancy programs don’t come anywhere near achieving that. Most purges don’t purge.

So they try again. Annual sweeps are fast becoming the way of the future. I’ve heard of firms where staff are force-ranked with the bottom ten per cent being sent on their way every year, to be replaced with new recruits if necessary. Such a practice would surely breed an environment of high, albeit paranoid, achievers. But if I trusted those making the decisions I’d respect such a system. If ... Because that’s the predicament at the heart of all bureaucracies: every process is as weak as its weakest link. Every redundancy program as biased and personal as the lowliest manager asked to make a decision about their team. ‘I’ve always thought’, a friend once confessed, ‘that it’s just superstitious really: our sacrifice to the gods.’ Every purge is a hunt for scapegoats, whether they be employees over forty, cardigan-wearing number-crunchers or part-timers with family commitments that are suddenly too difficult to accommodate.

And I’ve heard fantastic stories of how the slaughter has been carried out. There’s the managing director who called two-thirds of his staff into an off-site and said, ‘those of you who are in the room still have a job’. The employee who was advised to make sure he attended an afternoon briefing session only to find out that those who attended the morning one were told not to come back the next day. The manager who got a phone call

on the eve of her wedding from a friend who saw padlocks and a bankruptcy notice on her firm's front doors. At the six-monthly performance appraisal for my second job they said, 'last in first to go', and escorted me off the premises. People say 'things were different then' when I tell them, but it was 1998.

Regardless of how they're handled there's a fundamental problem with regular, large-scale redundancies: the good tend to go along with the bad, which is why such sweeps only work as a solution to a numbers problem. And it's a vicious cycle: the more good people go the more good people go, because good people want to work for and alongside good people. And with reason: in the end your boss may be all that stands between you and the axe, believe me I know. At my induction an executive confirmed, 'you don't work for a company, you work for a person', but the head of our division said otherwise when the area was restructured and reporting lines changed.

When my turn came this time round my boss had no hope of fighting for me, she didn't even realise there was a fight to be had, so I was given my letter of redundancy with a letter of retrenchment to follow. Then, between one day and the next, I was offered two positions. Apparently at my old boss's exit interview he told his boss of my situation. She asked which area I should be working in, spoke to the head of that area, as well as the head of the area I'd previously come from, and suddenly I had two offers. That's how the game works: it's all about who you know or, rather, who knows you. Sure, I was grateful, I was saved, but it left a bad taste in my mouth. And in others' too I imagine.

At the end of the day corporate culture is the same as any other: it's all about survival. So frequent purges are liable to result in companies filled with people who've learnt how to survive such purges. It may be because they're good at what they do, or it may be because they're political animals: expert at making the right friends or making themselves invisible.

Even those who are safe because of their performance and reputation will be a certain kind of person if they choose to stay on in such an environment. It can be pretty unpleasant, and pretty stressful. In the months between hearing my name was on a list and being officially told I developed conjunctivitis repeatedly. I'd stay home, lying prone in a darkened room while sympathetic colleagues assured me it could be worse, telling of times when their jobs had been taken away without actually being made redundant—presumably because it was hoped they wouldn't wait round for a payout. One friend said he'd spent his days working on his MBA. In Japan, he went on to tell me, when employees' roles are made redundant they're moved off the main table to a desk against the wall. Every day they have to come in and sit there doing nothing. 'Sounds like torture,' he said, meaning it sarcastically but sounding all too serious.

Even as corporations shed people by the thousand, more and more of us seem to be working for them. Until quite recently I thought this observation was just a reflection of my own age: that more people work for companies as they get older; that once you're in this environment it's more likely that the other people you meet will be too. While there is some truth in that, there are other factors too. There are more and more *larger* companies internationally than ever before. There are more 'white collar' jobs and less 'blue collar' ones in developed countries like Australia, more middle management positions and less alternatives as manufacturing and processing move online or offshore. And as more and more staff are laid off, more and more temps and consultants are brought in, which means a greater number of people are touched, albeit for shorter periods of time. Life in the corporate sector is, for an increasing number of us, the reality of what work is. I am one of many. More and more people are joining the game. Clocking on. Plugging in.

Or could it be that identifying this trend is just something those on the inside do to gauge whether I share their worldview? Maybe these are the stories we tell ourselves to justify our own choices. Personally, I would've expected fewer people to be choosing company life now job security is such a thing of the past. But then, security need not mean longevity and if you're interested in making money this is certainly the place to be. Or if you're interested in power. The power big businesses wield has historically come from being big employers (think of the old company towns where the local plant or mine provided most of the industry). But this power has grown, even as its foundation has diminished, until it's even been said that some corporations are superseding governments. My colleagues agree: we, they tell me, are the ones who fork out millions to charities, respond to public outcry, pressure politicians to sway this way and that. Perhaps. I have heard of European supermarkets responding to shoppers' concerns about genetically modified foods when governments don't, of American manufacturers making some attempt to address the issue of child labour in Third World countries while governments hesitate ... but these are exceptions. Even if individuals do, ultimately, have the ability to effect such change they all too rarely get together and exercise it. More often than not the only 'consumer' being heeded is the stock market.

If it were true that big business is supplanting government this would certainly explain my own interest in corporate life—why I've become a mole—but I'm wary of the note of pride in their voices. And I can't quite accept that such power is really passing, unnoticed, into unelected hands.

Regardless of its reach, the concept of corporate rule is generally agreed even if the nature of its reign is not. Ultimately I'm not interested in *why* company life is, so much as

what it is. The constantly escaping everyday experience, captured expertly in Dilbert and Doomsbury cartoons and stray jokes that fly over the wires faster than the latest virus or juiciest gossip. We laugh in recognition, pass them on and return to work.

— THE NATURE OF WORK

You might think that the truth at the heart of this place, the literal bottom line, was work, but there's nothing harder to pin down. Dead wood abounds despite, or perhaps because of, the many attempts to cull it. I have never before seen people work so hard at doing nothing. 'Don't just do something,' my mentor used to caution me, 'stand there.' I thought he was advocating a Zen approach, maybe he was just lazy. But it's almost impossible to resist. I make a point in a meeting and they request it in writing. I provide an action plan and they ask for it as a table. I produce a one-page summary, situation analysis and proposed solution, and they want a strategy document. And then a longer strategy document; one that 'covers everything'. It reminds me of when I used to show my dad a drawing and he'd suggest I add a background. Colour it in. Why? Why not? Time is killed a minimum of 7.6 hours a day.

When I point this out everyone agrees with me, laughing, no idea I mean them and me as well. I used to think it was just elaborate bludging. Then, when I saw how much work was involved—at least as much, if not more, as delivering the task in question—I figured they had to be stupid. Surely you'd only engage in such laborious avoidance if you couldn't work out what it was that needed doing? I began to wonder if they actually thought this was what they were being paid to do. After all, it is very much like a lot of hard work. Then it occurred to me that maybe I was the one who'd got it wrong and this was what we were being paid to do. Maybe our work is not about outcomes, but process: job creation, job justification. Perhaps this is not the negative side effect but the quintessence of corporate life.

The insularity that enables companies to operate like city-states—with their own communication channels, politics and laws—exaggerates the focus on processes and internal dealings over core business objectives. 'We're forever doing business with ourselves,' people say in a tone usually reserved for onanism as they bitch about dual reporting lines, responsibilities without accountabilities, managing a cost base with no revenue stream. 'It's every individual's responsibility to push back against bureaucracy,' said a senior manager not long before he left, but everyone took him to be talking about the sign-off procedure for computer acquisitions.

The larger a company grows the more bureaucracy proliferates but 'due process' underpins most businesses, which means qualities such as attention-to-detail, meticulousness and pedantry are disproportionately rewarded. (Thinking outside the

square is what consultants are for.) Indeed, work is often understood to consist solely of such tasks: the first synonym my thesaurus offers is 'drudgery'. Which makes me wonder whether my colleagues take pleasure in what seems to me to be so pointless. Are they just creatures of habit, corporate drones, or do they actively enjoy what is so aptly called the daily grind? Perhaps the difference between them and me is that they think what we're doing matters. Is worthwhile. To them there is no outside the Matrix. Many have nothing else to compare it to and think this is reality: the frontline, the dealing room. But isn't it me who thinks that? Isn't that why I'm here? Maybe I've got it round the wrong way and they're the ones who know the score: work is just work. I'm the one torturing myself with the search for meaning.

No-one wants to spend eight hours plus a day engaged in inconsequential activity, the purposefulness of work is its saving grace. But corporate employees are often so distanced from the end product (of customer service perhaps or a sale) that making that connection may be one of the greatest challenges companies face. Staff who understand how their task relates to the endgame perform markedly better than those who have no idea. And I for one am happier.

The meaningfulness of work can also be found in the personal learning curve offered by a particular role, or the cold hard cash accumulating. Money, however, is less often cited as a reason for working than I would've expected. I'm pretty sure I'd be on my own if I said the salary was the sole reason I was here—and I'm not even sure I'd be telling the truth. Somewhere between me and those who are, in their own words, 'here to make a difference', are those who run with the rats to further their careers, or for the company of their colleagues—which is not to say they'd be happy with less money. In the corporate world money equals respect, recognition and, most obviously, reward. It's the precise measure via which we plot our trajectory. The money is not why we're here, but it is the mark of how well we've spent our time.

No doubt it's easier to appreciate the significance of your own job—and grasp its essential outcomes—if you understand others'. Welcome to the value chain. One of the first things I noticed when I started at the biggest company I've ever worked for and one of the largest in Australia was the extent to which no-one knows what anyone else does, only whether they arrive early or leave late, which is why most people make sure they do, even if they then spend hours on the phone or at the gym.

I, for example, have no idea what my boss does ... although I'm the first to admit I'm probably not the best judge: I'm not even sure I know what I do; job titles change as quickly as the latest fashions, job descriptions are as impracticable as the same. Friends who've spent their whole working life here—whether six or ten or fifteen years—give that diversity as their defence. All I know is that they, along with many others, spend most of

every day in meetings. 'Feeling bored? Lonely? Call a meeting!' So reads a sign that a friend of mine keeps with a pile of others in a Manila folder; too true to pin up. Meetings are essential regardless of whether you're being punctilious, keeping key stakeholders informed, or just working out what the hell you're supposed to be doing. (Although not, as I've made enemies by pointing out, where you actually do it.) We spend most of our time recovering from the latest restructure, identifying gaps and overlaps between roles, making sure the next person is doing their job—and trying to find out if they're doing ours as well. Picking up projects that were abandoned when we last tightened our belts. Rediscovering why they fell by the wayside the first time round. It's all pre-work and rework. The only way to stay sane is to focus on the present moment and lose yourself in the detail.

But meetings are also a way of avoiding work. We cluster around trays of gourmet sandwiches as we prevaricate and pussyfoot around the topic. Desperate for consensus we're afraid to take responsibility. Incapable of making decisions, fearful of consequences, we long for leadership. 'Analysis paralysis,' we whisper behind our hands, but identifying the demon isn't enough to exorcise it.

Obviously this torpor fuels our love affair with the vigorous, engaged language of sport, sex and military campaigns. And it goes some way to explain our susceptibility to Americanisms. We steal the phrases they've coined hoping they'll bring with them something more. 'Get it across the line,' we yell, longing for team spirit, clear rules and black and white results; 'focus on the main game'. 'Get in bed with ...', we cajole, craving virility and intimate knowledge; 'bed it down'. And the kinship we claim with the military goes beyond references to 'plans of attack', or things being 'on our radar', to the command and control structure that's traditionally been, and generally still is, the corporate model.

But there's another linguistic fetish that stands out even more: the obsession with esoteric, specialist words like 'fungible' and 'swingeing'. A friend has told me how he once queried whether swingeing was a real word—to the speaker's great delight. I'm surprised anyone uses such incomprehensible words but, as he pointed out, they're co-opted to shut down the conversation and silence opposition.

Thinking about those two words—borrowed from law and economics respectively—I realise that nothing I've seen, and nothing I've said here, can form the basis for a general overview of corporate culture. My experiences are so specific, so limited, so localised that it could be just me, just my company, my industry. Maybe I should've said up-front that I work for a bank; the financial services sector is particularly prey to the trends and practices I've identified so far. Indeed, you could almost make the case that corporations like mine don't really need employees, just self-servicing customers and electronic solutions. Maybe staff are some kind of energy source—not unlike the human batteries in

The Matrix. Some kind of tax-deductible social responsibility or underground marketing campaign.

Or are employees sentient programmers, roaming freely inside the mainframe? And those like me, who choose to enter the construct even though we can see it for what it is, do so because we think we're the ones to bend the code?

— EQ: A CULTURAL REVOLUTION?

And if the industry I work in colours all my observations so far, then it's probably even more relevant when I move on to what corporate life is like for women, and the sexism I encounter daily—whether disguised as door-opening chivalry or exposed as a good old-fashioned pinch on the arse. Because money, and numbers, are traditionally masculine domains. Traditionally? While there's much evidence of efforts to make it otherwise these attempts only reinforce the fact that, at present, banking is still a man's world.

That's not a popular observation here, among either sex, and I suppressed it for a long time. (Proof, perhaps, of how the environment was already changing me.) The latest buzzword, people remind me when I ask them what they think, is emotional intelligence: 'EQ'. 'There's a move away from the old models,' they say; 'We're realising and recognising the role of emotions.' I'm highly suspect of the speed and ease with which that leap is made: from women to emotions. Sure, there's obviously a place in the corporate world for qualities that have traditionally been perceived as feminine—such as empathy and persuasion—but haven't we made any progress in recognising they're not solely the prerogative of the female sex? My discomfort increases as I realise my colleagues have no idea why I feel discomforted.

I'm absolutely fascinated by this latest trend and simply cannot decide whether it negatively emphasises the differences women may bring to the corporate world or positively introduces and reaffirms ethics and humanity. Of course it's both. To say more I'll first have to see the practical consequences of what is, at this stage, still a topic for a speech rather than an enforced performance review criteria.

I don't want to make out that the corporate world is worse for women or, God forbid, not suited to us. There are many many women here, particularly in HR and marketing and communication and customer service roles; it's just that, as with so many other industries, there are far fewer female senior managers, executives and board members. Of course, we're trying very hard—and very publicly—to change that. One manager told me he had it in his objectives that at least 33 per cent of his employees were female. Laudable? Perhaps. Obviously the idea is that if a man and woman are equally qualified for the job the woman will be chosen. But bonuses are decided on the basis of objectives met, so a

less qualified woman might end up in the role. The numbers suggest that's hardly the case but it is the risk, at least according to the men I discussed it with.

I have heard stories of women in senior roles who, when they handed in their resignations, were asked to take leave without pay so they'd stay on the books, maintaining the company's female contingent. If such anecdotes aren't true the very fact that they circulate proves the rife sexism that's called such policies into being. Regardless of the consequences, such rules clearly show the business is still a male-dominated environment. Women, like an endangered species, must be protected. Women, like a precious commodity, must be guarded. And as with any boys' club there are some who don't really want us there. Or want us there for all the wrong reasons.

I've had a friend tell me, while waiting for the lifts, that he's trying to take advantage of our height difference but my arms are crossed. I've had a manager tell me that my suit pants fit me like a glove. I've had my arse pinched on the escalators barely two metres from the office doors. I have no expectation—or desire—to work in some rarefied, politically correct environment, but my experience is very far from that. And I find it hard to believe my casual attitude invites exception; my friends would never treat me so. The only conclusion I can draw is that this is how the corporate male flirts. They probably think I'm flattered.

There are other, less obvious ways in which I'm discomforted. Men whom I admire, when ranting about a hated woman high up the management chain, invariably call her 'an ugly bitch' or 'dog-ugly'. They can't understand why my sympathy evaporates. 'But she is,' they say, seeing something in my face. They don't even recognise the arguments I try and marshal. I've only tried once, because he was such a close friend: 'it's only a joke, Rose,' he said.

And it's not just the guys. A senior female manager once told me over coffee how important make-up is, that it shows you're making an effort. That statistics prove women who wear make-up are paid more. It wasn't until I was back at my desk that it occurred to me that since I never wear make-up to work and we were discussing a role on her team maybe she was hinting at something. I told the story to three other women to see what they thought and all but one said, 'but you don't have to wear make-up because your skin's so good.'

Sometimes I feel like everyone else is speaking a foreign language, then I realise I'm probably the one speaking in tongues. The Matrix, the illusory world, is the one I've come from. It's been a rude shock to discover that I've spent so long among people who share my views that I'm comparatively inexperienced at communicating them to outsiders. Whenever I try I'm reminded, in various degrees of affection, that I'm in the minority.

Am I? I oscillate between thinking corporations are microcosm of society and hoping they're extremely distorted examples, dominated by a tiny demographic. Time among people with whom I have fundamentally different political views has made me question things I once took for granted. But I'm afraid it's also undermined my ability to drill down into the detail of an argument because I can never get such discussions off the ground. I've become the new mistress of subterfuge: lining up examples and qualifying every point with 'perhaps' and 'seems'. I have no confidence that things are as clear as they once seemed to me.

Once upon a time I used to like what I did. I used to think I added value. That may have been because it was a different job, a different boss, a different structure, or it may have been because I never saw through what was said to what was done. I remember sitting dumbfounded in meetings listening to people who sounded more intelligent, more analytical, more logical, more articulate than I'd ever experienced outside academia. I worked for leaders with charisma and vision, and the arrogance and ego to forge ahead. I was part of something bigger than myself. I was part of something big. When work was really good (and I hope it will be again) it was like this article: a disciplined effort to find out how things work and why and—even better than this, even more than writing can ever be—to change that.

Maybe it's just time to move on, that's what people say when I share my take on corporate life. 'It's time to move on,' they say, shaking their heads. So I start looking for another company. A better job. A bigger pay packet. And I'm amused to find I still believe the hype: teamwork essential, performance rewarded, career pathing, challenging environment, lateral thinking required. I still get excited, even though I know it's written by someone just like me.

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