
One Last Compile...

I love my company, and my company loves me

Last month we were taken off for our annual 'Talk to the Troops' meeting. This is when senior management take us off to a posh hotel somewhere and show us lots of slides about how well we're doing. It's also a good opportunity to explain the new mission statement, show us the new logo, and tell us that despite the fact the company's doing well, there's sadly no money for a pay rise this year. But, in case we feel bad about this, they remind us that we are the company's most important asset. To prove this they give us each a free hat and a badge. Afterwards they put out some sausage rolls and some paper plates and while we eat, they scuffle around the periphery, occasionally trying to mingle with us.

It's deeply embarrassing for everybody concerned, and most people go straight home afterwards and work on their CV. The programmers all wander around looking mortified and trying to avoid eye contact with anybody who's wearing a short skirt (probably in marketing) or anybody who seems to be permanently smiling (definitely in sales). Occasionally programmers will recognise colleagues from former projects and they will head joyfully for each other, happy in the knowledge that they can spend the next hour discussing Great Bugs That Nearly Sank The Project or That Hilarious Time We Put Tea In The Coffee Machine.

This year I found myself clutching a glass of warm lager in the middle of a group of Delphi people. We stood there mournfully, like a group of despondent sheep on a snowy hillside. We didn't have anything to say to each other, so we talked about whether Quick-Report was better than Piparti (this lasted about three minutes). Then we talked about what features we'd like to see in Delphi 4 (four minutes). We talked about the new mission statement (eighteen seconds). Then we talked about which of the girls in *Friends* we'd most like to go out with (twenty minutes). This last conversation got a bit heated, so we agreed to talk about something else. We spotted a group of Cobol programmers over to our left.

"Imagine!" said Quentin, a spotty graduate recruit who had argued strongly for Monica. "They still have to design their input screens using graph paper!"

We chortled to ourselves. We may be a pathetic group of individuals with the combined social skills of a dead llama, but at least we didn't have graph paper on our desks.

"I feel sorry for them," said Bert, who was a sensitive soul, and who had voted for Phoebe. "They still have to use dumb terminals hooked up to a mainframe."

We paused. Bert was right. A life without your own PC on your desk: that was hard to imagine. No Internet connection. No Jennifer Anniston wallpaper. No Minesweeper. Worst of all, no Duke Nukem. We looked at the Cobol people with new eyes. They looked rather sad and lost. Not like us, cool cyber-surfers on the on the cutting edge of technology.

Quentin snorted. "Have you seen the contractor rates for Cobol people at the moment? These Year 2000 problems are pushing prices through the roof. See that guy over there, the one in the really horrible sweater?"

I looked. They were all wearing horrible sweaters. So were we.

"Well, he doesn't even work for us. He's a contractor. Somebody told me he earns two thousand pounds a week! Maybe three thousand!"

We looked at the Cobol people again. They looked rather smug now. Maybe life on the cutting edge wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

"I hear," said Bert, "That all our work's going to be outsourced to India. They work for less than a dollar an hour. And they write better code."

"Hi guys!" said an oily management type who suddenly appeared, "how are you all doing?"

"We're fine thanks," we all chorused. "Great presentation. Thanks for the hats. Nice sausage rolls."

"That's good," he said. "It's important to have happy staff. See you next year."