DINIS SANTOS

WORK WON'T KILL YOU, BUT IT'S TRYING!



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A Humorous Chronicle-Style Workplace Guide

From the Author:

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Author: Dinis Santos
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Coordination: Tatiana Leote and Dinis Santos
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Dedicated to Everyone Who Works

To those who give their very best, even when the best they get in return is more work.

Thank you for continuing to give it your all. After all, it's thanks to every one of you that this whole thing somehow manages to keep ticking along.

Dinis Santos

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Preface

There comes an age when you realise that you spend far too much time working and far too little time actually living. It's hardly an original revelation, but it does have the advantage of coming round every Monday morning.

Work takes up a considerable chunk of our lives. It provides us with a salary, a routine, a little self-esteem and, in some cases, a rather compelling reason to need a holiday. It also brings us inspirational bosses, unforgettable colleagues, endless meetings and a surprising number of English expressions designed to explain things that would be considerably easier to sort out in plain English.

This book is born out of observing that wonderful world of work. Within these pages, you'll encounter managers who mistake leadership for the ability to talk for forty minutes without actually saying anything, companies looking for dynamic individuals for jobs that require little more than patience, and employees who develop extraordinary skills simply to survive working environments that should never have required quite so much survival in the first place.

Humour is a useful tool for looking at these contradictions. It doesn't solve the problems, but it allows us to see them without the solemnity with which they are so often presented. And, when used properly, it has one advantage over many a training session: it can explain an uncomfortable truth without the need for a fifty-slide presentation.

These chronicles are not intended to teach you how to become a better employee, a more effective leader or a more competitive professional. For that, we already have consultants, management manuals and LinkedIn posts written by people who get up at five in the morning to explain that the secret to success is getting up at five in the morning.

What they are intended to do, however, is invite you to look at work from a little distance, with a critical eye and a sense of

humour. Because some things deserve to be taken seriously, such as dignity, competence, fairness and respect for those who work. Others deserve to be taken considerably less seriously, such as the idea that a team becomes more productive simply by changing the name of a meeting, or that professional happiness depends on squeezing the word resilience into your CV.

You may find yourself laughing at other people. Ideally, you'll also laugh at yourself. Humour loses some of its intelligence when it serves only to confirm that everyone else is an idiot.

Don't worry. This book doesn't conduct performance reviews. You can read it outside working hours. You can stop halfway through a chronicle. You can even learn absolutely nothing from it, provided you get some enjoyment out of the experience.

So, come on in. Read. Have a laugh.

And if you're reading this at the office, check that your boss isn't standing behind you first.

Welcome to this humorous journey.

Dinis Santos

Part 1

Welcome to the Wonderful World of Work



But Who Invented Work?

Why?

It's a question I find myself asking quite often, particularly on Monday mornings, when the alarm goes off and I realise that life, as it turns out, isn't quite what I was promised.

I was told that life is short, that we should make the most of every moment, that time waits for no one. They simply forgot to mention that, for a considerable proportion of that time, we have to do things in order to afford the rest of it. Oh, and somewhere along the way, there's a mortgage to pay every month, naturally.

Life is an extraordinary con, if you ask me. A brilliant one, too. The victim actually finances the crime.

Work is a curious activity. It's the only thing we need a holiday from in order to recover. Nobody spends a fortnight by the seaside and comes home needing a few days to recover from the experience. Nobody returns from a weekend away eating roast pork with the feeling that they need several days to get over all that happiness.

But try working for eleven months and then asking for a few days off in the twelfth to recover the will to carry on. They call it annual leave. How generous!

The most extraordinary thing, however, is that nobody knows who invented work.

History records kings, wars, empires and the discovery of penicillin. It remembers men who crossed oceans, conquered territories and decided the fate of millions. But nobody knows who the first person was to look at someone else and say:

— Right. From tomorrow, I expect you here at nine.

It's a staggering gap in the historical record. Some civilisations built pyramids to bury their dead, yet we don't even know who first buried the living in a spreadsheet.

I imagine it all started with something quite simple. One man had a goat. Another wanted the goat. The first suggested a swap. So far, so good. Economics is essentially an elaborate way of stopping people from hitting each other over goats.

The trouble started when someone asked the goat owner what he did all day.

— Nothing. I have a goat.

— Nothing? And what would you say your professional objective is?

— Keeping the goat alive.

— I see. And where do you see yourself in five years' time?

— With two goats and fewer questions.

By that precise moment, it was already too late. The conversation had entered the realm of management.

The goat was no longer a goat. It had become an asset. The man was no longer a shepherd. He was an agricultural entrepreneur. And somewhere, someone had started preparing a feasibility study to establish whether the goat had growth potential.

That's how civilisation works: we identify a need, invent a solution and, shortly afterwards, create three new professions to manage the complexity of that solution. Finally, we hire someone to assess whether those professions are delivering satisfactory results.

Work has become so important that simply doing it is no longer enough. You have to love it.

In the old days, people worked because they needed the money. It was an honest arrangement. I give you my time, you give me money. Neither of us pretends this is a love story.

These days, work has to be a passion.

The company doesn't just want your time, your skills and your availability. It wants your heart.

Professional passion is a brilliant idea, particularly for those who pay the salaries. Convince someone that their job is their calling and, suddenly, they start giving away their time for free, answering messages in the evening and thanking the company for the opportunities for personal growth that are stealing the time they could be spending watching their own children grow up.

We call it commitment. In practice, it's an emotional dependency with a meal allowance.

And there's an entire industry devoted to improving this relationship. Workplace happiness specialists teach us to cultivate gratitude. Wellbeing consultants recommend breathing exercises to help us survive working conditions that perhaps ought to be addressed before anyone has to start breathing into a paper bag.

—Take a deep breath. Focus on the present. Think of three things you're grateful for.

It's easy to take a deep breath when other people's problems are your business model.

Meanwhile, nobody seems to find it strange that we spend forty years doing something so that, one day, we can finally stop doing it.

That's what retirement is for: a promise of future freedom, carefully scheduled for an age when your knees have stopped cooperating, your back has developed political opinions of its own and getting up from the sofa requires a preliminary meeting with your spine.

For decades, we save money in order to buy time. Then, when we finally have time, we're too exhausted to spend it. It's

like spending your entire life saving for a holiday, only to discover, when departure day finally arrives, that your destination is the waiting room of an orthopaedic clinic.

Retirement is the loyalty card of existence. After forty years of shopping, you finally get a life. Subject to availability, of course.

And yet, in the meantime, we've invented machines to do the work for us. Washing machines, computers, robots, apps for absolutely everything. Every invention promised to free us from repetitive tasks. The future was going to be wonderful: less effort, more time, and humanity finally free to think, stroll, read, love and discover the true meaning of existence.

Humanity looked at this opportunity and decided to increase the workload.

You have to admire the species. We give a man a hammer so he no longer has to break stones with his bare hands. Then, when he learns to break ten times as many stones, we hire someone to assess his productivity and demand that he breaks eleven.

Next, we invented artificial intelligence, and the first question we asked was: "How can we produce more?".

More reports. More presentations. More messages. More content. More meetings about the content. More reports evaluating the presentations that came out of the meetings.

The possibility of reducing the amount of work was immediately interpreted as an opportunity to squeeze more work into the same working day.

We're no longer trying to save ourselves work. We're trying to eliminate every spare moment in which a person might notice they're actually alive.

Technology didn't come along to replace work. It came along to replace the excuses we used to have for not doing more of it.

And so we've reached the point where even our free time has to be productive. We go to the gym to optimise our bodies.

We read to develop our skills. We travel to collect experiences. We cook healthy meals to maximise our energy. We sleep for eight hours because an expert has explained that getting less sleep affects our performance.

We no longer sleep. We carry out maintenance.

Human beings have turned themselves into businesses, complete with high operating costs, disappointing quarterly results and a board of directors that never takes a holiday.

Sometimes, on a Sunday evening, I find myself thinking that I really ought to make better use of the weekend. I could read, go for a walk, see friends, do something I enjoy. Instead, I spend Sunday worrying about Monday and Monday worrying about all the time I failed to enjoy on Sunday.

It's a perfect system. We don't even have to be working for work to ruin our rest. All we need to know is that it's coming.

Let me make one thing clear: I'm not advocating a civilisation in which nobody works. Society would struggle to function if nobody produced food, treated the sick, collected the rubbish or fixed the plumbing. It would be an interesting experiment, but a short-lived one.

Some jobs are necessary. Some people enjoy what they do. Some professions give life meaning, and some tasks make us feel useful. There's nothing wrong with that.

What puzzles me is how we've managed to turn the need to work into an obligation to enjoy working, and then into a measure of human worth.

We need to do things. We don't need to pretend that our jobs are the meaning of life.

As for the inventor of work, I'm still waiting for him to show up. I'd like to ask whether he ever imagined that one day people would be answering work emails on holiday, justifying their need for a rest and feeling obliged to apologise for not being permanently available.

If it was an accident, perhaps we can forgive him. If it was deliberate, I hope he spent the last few years of his life filling

in forms to request permission to change careers. It would only be fair.

But there's one final possibility, and it's considerably more unsettling: perhaps nobody invented work at all.

Perhaps we collectively built a system so absurd that we can no longer imagine an alternative. We inherited the rules, repeated the rituals and taught our children to do the same. We tell them they must study to get a good job, get a good job to earn money, earn money to have a good life, and have a good life so that one day, when they're too tired to do much else, they can finally enjoy it.

And we call this preparing someone for the future.

Perhaps the real problem isn't work itself. Perhaps it's our inability to imagine a life in which work doesn't have to occupy every available inch of it. A life in which we can do what needs doing without turning every minute into an opportunity to produce, every break into a failure and every person into an investment with legs.

In that case, the inventor has no name. We're all partly to blame. Which is unfortunate, because it means we have to get up and go to work tomorrow, then find time after work to sort out the problem we created ourselves.

At least we can call it personal development.



Dynamic Individuals Wanted

Some job adverts aren't looking for an employee. They're looking for a solution to the inconvenience of having hired human beings.

"Dynamic individuals wanted…".

Sounds good. Almost like an advert for dancers. In reality, though, it applies just as readily to an accounts department.

What the company really means is that you need to get yesterday's work done, adapt to tomorrow's changes and be grateful for the opportunity not to know what you'll be doing the day after.

The job market has stopped hiring people and started hiring possibilities. It's no longer enough to know how to do something. You have to demonstrate the potential to do other things that don't yet exist, using tools that haven't been invented, under the supervision of someone who hasn't quite worked out what's going on either.

That's modern employability: they expect you to have experience of the future.

In the old days, companies looked for an accountant. These days, they're after a dynamic, resilient, proactive professional with critical thinking skills, emotional intelligence,