

A meaningful paycheck?

S.P.A.M. OFFICE covers a total of six workstations. The first workstation is the 'front office.' Here, a first S.P.A.M. OFFICER prints out the incoming spam e-mails. When workload is low, this officer also undertakes activities that result in more incoming spam. The printed e-mails go to the 'back office' where the pages are perforated and carefully bound with plastic rings. A third officer investigates the document and highlights the name of the sender with a fluorescent marker. Next, the paper is read in the 'spam lounge.' Here it is decided whether or not the e-mail was handled properly. The e-mail is then ready to be archived. Archiving is the final act in the production chain that the spam runs through during the performance. A sixth officer is responsible for the 'facility management.' His workstation is located at the office canteen, where coffee breaks, lunches, and work meetings take place.

It is not that the S.P.A.M. OFFICERS are pretending. At no time are volunteers asked to act. Participants are invited by the artist to participate in the work process in an authentic way. The artist himself plays the role of boss. He explains which jobs should be done at each workstation and shows the resources. Like the other officers, he wears the uniform with the logo of the company. His shirt, however, is white, unlike the cream of the performers. The artist controls the actions of the S.P.A.M. OFFICERS and is available for them to ask whether one is 'doing a good job.'

It is amazing to see how fast all participants feel comfortable with their roles as officers and get into the job. The different officers start to interact with each other, after the artist and 'manager' instructed them that they can go back if they think that a mistake or inaccuracy has occurred. Automatically the officers use this interaction not only to rectify a single error, but also to improve the work process. This creates a system with unique feedback interaction, which resembles 'Total Quality Management' (TQM). Following the TQM principles, people who work within systems look for ways to continuously improve the system, and improve quality not only by detection, but by being preventative.

The interactions between the S.P.A.M. OFFICERS are interesting because they show that the S.P.A.M. OFFICERS are not simply acting but genuinely want to do their job well. The participants discuss different interpretations on whether the tasks were well performed. What at first seems a simple task, e.g. the identification of the sender, becomes a complex issue: is it the last-mentioned sender or rather the original sender of the e-mail? What do you do when there is only an e-mail address, or names begin with a digit? During the performance, the officers really make an effort to deepen their tasks and in doing so, keep their work interesting. While the tasks at first glance seem banal for the participant as a spectator, it becomes very serious for the participant as a performer.

S.P.A.M. OFFICE is an obvious reference to 'scientific management', that considers a company as a closed system. In contrast, contemporary organizational theory assumes an organization as an open system in which social, economic and cultural factors play. In this sense, S.P.A.M. OFFICE is an anachronism. S.P.A.M. OFFICE also confronts us with some position-practices. The ease with which the participants play their role can only be explained by a widespread familiarity – from their own experiences or through popular media – with this kind of mind-numbing office work. The talks between the participants, unknown to each other in advance, quickly center around clichés associated with familiar roles. This is particularly notable in their conversations about 'the boss,' who rapidly is being called 'big chief.' Also, an officer who puts on a show for the boss becomes an object of ridicule and is called a 'boss pet.' Because of their joint position (subordinate of the boss) a certain 'esprit de corps' arises among the participants. The uniform also creates certain identification with the S.P.A.M. OFFICE.

It is interesting to see how the structure of the office evolves through the different performances. At the start of the exhibition period, the e-mails were being classified based on the name of the sender. During the second performance day, the S.P.A.M. OFFICERS decided to use an additional thematic classification for the incoming e-mails. S.P.A.M. OFFICE is thus a dynamic exhibition. This is also apparent in the fact that 2D works of the artist ('S.P.A.M. dialogues') were added in the second retake

of the exhibition. Combined with the office setting, they become an integral part of the performance and even affect it. These graphical 'spam-dialogues' based on textual elements in the archived spam e-mails inspire the officers as they show the ultimate goal of their labor. The 2D panels can indeed be considered as the 'end product' of the work. Like most companies, employees can be motivated by the displays of its final product. Work that is meaningless in itself – for example piercing holes in paper and putting plastic rings on the holes – becomes in that way meaningful. The need of modern (wo)man to do meaningful work is confirmed.

As labor became increasingly divided into subtasks (scientific management), and powerful administrations surrounding the production of goods and services emerged (bureaucratic way of working) the relationship between labor and objective became compromised. The meaning of work is no longer manifest and the need for meaningful work often remains unfulfilled. Therefore, in today society meaning is being more and more achieved by limiting the 'horizon of meaning'. In other words, we prefer to be ignorant to the final consequences of our work. The meaning of work has shifted from the work itself (the product or service produced) to other aspects of employment such as wage (the paycheck at the end of the month), social contacts and social roles. We are not interested in what we do, but in how we work with each other, in the social identities that are constructed, and the relationships we maintain with each other. These aspects of work are important and meaningful. For those who are socially adapted to be part of labor organizations, a large part of their remuneration in the workplace is about having 'fun' with colleagues. These individuals develop activities and rituals that aim to ensure that even outsiders will consider their work important.

S.P.A.M. OFFICERS are in a similar position and lay bare these mechanisms. We do what we are supposed to do and feel good to be part of an organization. We get respect from our colleagues. We have fun. This in itself makes the work meaningful. We are part of it. Because we do not want to lose this privilege, we do our job properly. We develop a certain work ethic and quality norm so that we do not lose our position. Others are thus excluded. In this fact, however, we are confronted with a permanent feeling of guilt.

The artist plays with this 'horizon of meaning'. First, he presents the 2D work as an end product of the S.P.A.M. OFFICE. Second, the ultimate significance or meaning of his art is very fragile. Here too the aspect of fun is involved. It is not the social critique that drives the artist. S.P.A.M. OFFICERS are thus committed to the manager / artist without questioning his final product. They choose to limit their responsibility at this point and are waiting for the next paycheck.

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