

VIEW FROM THE CUBE | EILEEN MCAVOY BOYLEN

Perks of the job often hassles in waiting

It was one of the biggest disappointments of my then two year-old career. Flush with the success of my first promotion, I was invited to a "management" training seminar in New York City.

I couldn't wait to book my seat on the Trump Shuttle and shop for a suitable travel ensemble. I had already shared this exciting development with anyone who would listen when my boss told me the budget was cut and my trip was cancelled. I was crushed.

Five years later, snowbound at JFK beside a planeload of refugees from a Puerto Rican rum tasting tour, I wished I'd never heard the words "business trip." I remembered Dramamine-fueled flights on 10-seater props, scary motels that made The Bates seem like The Helmsley, e-coli burgers, lost luggage, and more lost weekends. And, to think I once envied co-workers dashing to the airport.

It's human nature to want what we can't have, and to see other people's jobs as more desirable than our own. When I worked in a cubicle, I longed for the day I would have a "real" office with windows and a door.

I didn't realize that when I did I'd be too busy to ever look out.

I didn't anticipate that there would be an endless line of people with problems standing outside my door, or, that the only time I'd close it was to fire someone.

When I was in marketing, a co-worker, Helen, actually cried because her job didn't rate a free subscription to People magazine. When I ran into Helen in the mailroom a few years later, she was swearing because she couldn't get her hand in her mailbox because of all the "stupid magazines."

My friend, Janet, always wanted a job with an expense account. She imagined lavish champagne-drenched lunches at the Four Seasons bought with a flourish of her corporate gold card.

She didn't realize that "account" was the operative word in the expression and that she'd spend the rest of her career accounting for her spending. Trying to make a pile of wadded-up cab receipts, register tapes, and vague recollections of tips add to the amount on her expense report was like a traffic accident reconstruction. And at the end, there was some dullard in corporate finance scrutinizing everything from Sambuca shots to laxative purchases.

Many of us envied those important enough to attend meetings in the conference room. We wondered what went on at the long teak table behind those frosted, curtained windows. We imagined serious intellectual debates about marketing strategies, the exchange rate in Europe, and instability in the Pacific Rim.

Too soon we got our seat at the table and were forced to listen to tedious people drone on about their inflated accomplishments, and about projects that affected us as much as Britney Spears's custody battle.

A co-worker and I used to count the endless sports analogies used in meetings. As in, "It was year-end, we were in the bottom of the ninth, and we went the whole nine yards with the pitch, and when we realized we'd struck out with the buyer, we went back to the locker room, took a Mulligan, stole a page from their playbook and placed the ball securely back in their court, threw a Hail Mary, and somehow managed to hit a home run and come out a winner. Advantage: us! SCORE!" Maintaining one's "game face" while sweating missed deadlines and irate clients required an iron constitution and regular Botox injections. For most managers, "work" is something accomplished at the end of the day when meetings are over and everyone else has gone home.

Everyone always envies the company's meeting planner. All those free trips to lush tropical resorts, exclusive country clubs, and five-star restaurants. Working with celebrities and senior executives sounds so exciting! Until you're the one with a staple gun to your head because the meeting materials are missing in action, your celebrity "diva" is stiletto-kicking an empty vending machine for Snickers bars, and some idiot has booked your chief executive to Dayton, Ohio, instead of the Daytona 500. And guess what? The marquee events don't often happen on weekdays. They happen on weekends during your kid brother's graduation or your regular golf foursome.

And who hasn't thought sales might be fun? Out on the road by yourself with no one (except your pager, GPS, cellphone, and Blackberry) looking over your shoulder? And then there's the free company car. Company cars really *are* great. Unless you get one like mine. My sporty sputum-green Buick was the size of the infield at Fenway, handled like the Space Shuttle, and had the lingering smell of Jovan Musk from some previous occupant. Nuns in Corollas whizzed by me on the turnpike, veils flapping, and I swore they were laughing as they passed.

Sales can be fun, I learned, except at the end of the year, the end of the half, the end of the quarter, and sometimes the end of the month when you need to reach your quota. This is when your destiny is controlled by strange little men in seedy warehouses who may or may not opt to buy your excess inventory at fire sale prices, and resell it later at lower prices than yours. Or, when management makes decisions that take success out of your hands, but places the blame securely in your lap.

I finally did get to attend that "management" seminar in New York. As I looked around at all the other well-dressed executive assistants filling in for their bosses, I realized that things are seldom as exciting as they seem.