

Would You Sell Your Soul?

(and How NOT to Make a Workplace Faustian Bargain)

by Sidney K. Moormeister, Ph.D.

*The wages of work is cash.
The wages of cash is want more cash.
The wages of want more cash is vicious competition.
The wages of vicious competition is—
The world we live in.*

—D. H. Lawrence

The plight of the aged Dr. Faust touches opera goers with each performance. The story's power to enchant does not diminish as ages pass; indeed, the story of a man who sold his soul to the Devil rings truer now than ever before in the corporate arena in which we work for our living. Dr. Faust sought the solution to the riddle of life in vain, ultimately bartering his very soul in exchange for the pleasures of youth and vanity. Dr. Faust strikes a bargain with Mephistopheles that he will enjoy all of his desires for a time on earth in exchange for the forfeiture of his soul. So desperate is Dr. Faust that he quite literally makes what has become the proverbial "Faustian bargain"—a deal with the devil.

Our current economy and transcription climate frequently lead people to make what they feel are "Faustian bargains." Countless transcriptionists tell me that they fear for their very souls in the transcription workplace.

Long gone are the days of the hospital transcription department where, it seems, problems with dictators could be more easily resolved because of personal access to the physicians; gone, too, is the camaraderie that existed between fellow-workers. The home-based transcriptionist who is new to the profession has missed a whole block of our professional culture.

As the population of transcriptionists grows older, there are fewer and fewer "die-hards," as they have been called, who can mentor and pass on their wisdom to others. Some of the die-hards have literally done that—they have died. Others, having become disheartened with the impersonal atmosphere of today's milieu, have retired or gone on to second careers. Some, concerned by issues of outsourcing, have thrown up their hands in disgust and walked away.

Perhaps there are other ways to view and approach today's transcription workplace. I am not convinced that kindness, compassion, and the other "virtues" that are undefinable but very real need be abandoned. They certainly should not be. We must fight with every fiber of our collective soul to retain our humanity. But how do we do so?

Society as we have come to know it moves at warp-speed. "The bottom line" is pursued as if it were the Holy Grail. Multitasking has taken its place right up there next to kindness, compassion, and honesty as a bona fide virtue. What are our virtues, and how do we define them? What effect does the current marketplace have on our sense of ethics? How are our business ethics developed and will they survive the daily onslaught of production quotas and pressure-cooker urgencies?

Is it truly possible to remain centered in a work arena in which ever-increasing demands (with fewer and fewer rewards) are the norm? Will we attempt to do so? Should we do so? Yes! Resoundingly, yes! Not to do so is to sell our souls to an unseen devil which, while less dramatic than the Mephistopheles that beguiled Faust, is nonetheless real in its effects upon our collective psyches and well being. Not to retain our humanity is to allow ourselves to slip into a state of being in which we are robbed of our personhood and left achingly fatigued. Let us work seriously, calmly, and in an orderly manner to preserve our humanity in the rough and tumble world that is production transcription today. We must first define the challenge and then develop strategies to successfully meet the challenge—we must gird ourselves to overcome Mephistopheles, as it were.

The challenge is simply this: How do we remain human while working constantly with machines? How do we, in a high-tech world which prizes technical wizardry, speed, and gross output, manage to keep intact those qualities that make us so uniquely us? (After all, one machine looks and performs like another, and another, and another.) There is no insurance policy on earth that can indemnify us against loss of our true selves. The maintenance of one's humanity is strictly a do-it-yourself proposition, and thankfully so; uniqueness is a large part of what we are seeking to preserve.

There are plenty of technical articles out there that deal with everything from developing techie prowess to increasing transcription speed; there are few articles about preserving one's soul or inner-being. Let us focus on the issue of maintaining our humanity while working ethically and—dare I say it?—with pride and enjoyment in our work.

Virtue. It is a word that gets tossed around everywhere from Sunday school to the parking lot. What does it mean? It comes from the Latin *virtus*, which means "worth." Virtue, according to Webster, is general moral excel-

lence; a specific moral quality regarded as good. For the sake of this article, I would like to focus on kindness, compassion, honesty, and integrity as the virtues we should cultivate in our marketplace. These virtues will be coupled with ethics, which is merely the study or application of standards of conduct of moral judgment.

Let us consider four workplace “myths” in which we can apply the virtues of kindness, compassion, honesty, and integrity, and work through some strategies of application.

Myth 1: All that counts is the bottom line.

What are the characteristics of your corporate culture? Whether you work for a megaservice or one of the rapidly dwindling “Mom and Pops,” your company bears characteristics that are unique to it. Regardless of size, all companies are focused on the bottom line. This is not wrong per se; indeed, the company’s reason for existing is to make a profit. Capitalism requires and supports a production-driven workplace.

Far too many workers, be they MTs, clerks, proofers, or others on the transcription team, think and speak scornfully of “the bottom line,” as if it were something intrinsically evil. Perhaps we need to reframe our view of the need to make and show a profit. When I hear MTs speak in condescending tones about a megaservice’s concern with “the bottom line,” I remember sadly many wonderful people who were small service owners. I use the past tense because these folks are now working for university hospitals, physicians, or the megaservices because they as small-business people could not or would not acknowledge and embrace the need to keep their small companies solidly in the black. Some of them lacked people-management skills; others lacked the foresight to solicit new clients and obtain new contracts before the old ones ended. There is nothing virtuous or noble about running a business into the red! As these small businesses crumbled, people were left jobless.

We must examine the characteristics of our corporate culture as well as the role our attitudes play in it. What sort of a dynamic are we creating? How do you feel about going to work on Monday morning? One of the saddest expressions in popular culture is TGIF—“Thank God it’s Friday.” (Interestingly, this phrase expresses an international emotion. The French say, “Dieu merci, c’est vendredi,” no doubt with the same world-weary inflection as their American counterparts.)

To determine the corporate culture, it is necessary to ask a few key questions:

- Do all employees treat each other with dignity and respect in all situations?
- Do supervisors temper necessary directness with kindness and compassion?
- Are employees (or independent contractors) encouraged to give feedback, and are they taken seriously when they do so?

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Sufi tradition demands that three criteria be met before words are uttered:

Are they true? Are they necessary? Are they kind?

Embracing such criteria as our own might create a kinder, less stress-filled workplace while at the same time enhancing productivity.

The ideal workplace brings out the best in all individuals. The way we speak is an indicator of our willingness to embrace dignity and respect.

As a practical example, when I have occasion to call the corporate office of the team for which I work (which is many hundreds of miles away), I always take the time to ask the clerk, “How are you?” and to say “thank you” for any service the clerk performs. This takes but a nanosecond, yet it acknowledges that we are human beings, not modems, communicating with each other.

Myth 2: It’s “us” versus “them” in a workplace tug-of-war.

The failure to work collaboratively occurs on both sides of the table; management and MTs themselves often mentally position themselves as if they are standing on opposite sides of a chasm. What creates such a chasm? How can it be bridged?

Many MTs tell me that they are fearful of speaking honestly to management for two reasons: (1) Management will not take the time to listen, or (2) in the alternative, management will listen but will do so only superficially, not giving serious consideration or validation to what the MT has to offer. (As one seasoned MT told me recently, “It is as if they are thinking, ‘Shut up and type’.”)

As we move into the global economy and our world becomes smaller, it will pay rich dividends to treat each individual in the workplace with dignity and respect. We need to learn from cultural differences. What is acceptable and permissible in one culture may not be so in another. Even in our own culture, there are differences and boundaries that must be respected. Everyone has something valuable to add. When I became an associate dean of a major forensic sciences program during the eighties, I once asked my secretary for her opinion on something. Amazed, she replied, “But I am only a secretary! Why do you care what I think?” I told her that I never again wanted to hear her refer to herself as “just” a secretary and that I honestly felt that if all of the secretaries went on strike, the university would quickly close. She got the point.

Employees stand on one side of the economic chasm while management maintains its guard at its own border. Differences,

however small, are magnified when there is no communication. An MT friend of mine who works for a megaservice relates that their CEO last year was awarded a \$4 million bonus. While this is not a particularly outstanding bonus when compared to what other CEOs earn, it offended my friend mightily. Bitterly she asked one of her fellow MTs how much her bonus had been. Neither MT had received a bonus at all, nor had there been any acknowledgment during the holiday season. While I realize that we live in perilously politically correct times and that Christmas cards are not appropriate in the workplace, could not the company have sent out a generic end-of-year card thanking the employees and contractors for a job well done and wishing them well in the coming year? I know of no one who would have been offended by that. It would have been a wonderful opportunity to build a sense of team and cooperation; it could have even been a chance to bridge the chasm; yet it was not done. The employees noticed, and many made cynical comments to the effect that machines do not need to be sent holiday greetings. The chasm was not bridged, but reinforced. Perhaps something can be learned from this story.

Myth 3: It's personal.

One of the most pervasive yet most dangerous workplace myths is that any issue is personal. Feelings are hurt and the embers of temper are fanned by our all-too-human tendency to personalize workplace conflicts. Many times we use the phrase, "Oh, it's just a personality clash" to excuse ourselves from resolving interpersonal problems.

The most helpful thing I learned while in academia is that we all see issues from our own unique perspective. We all have developed an idea of what is "right." Because we are human, we sometimes have firmly entrenched beliefs that something is right even when logic and reason tell us it is not so. (Witness my persistent love of drinking Coca-Cola with breakfast, years of dental bills notwithstanding.)

It has been helpful to me to realize that even though I may be dismayed by a viewpoint or approach taken by another, that person feels and acts the way she does because it is right from her point of view. (In the immortal words of Bob Dylan, "You're right from your side and I'm right from mine.") The other person's viewpoint and behavior have nothing to do with me personally but rather are the result of the sum total of that person's experience, ethics, values, and beliefs. When I let go of my own desire to be "right," I can more objectively analyze the issues at hand. In any conflict, three questions are helpful:

1. What is the single issue that leads to disagreement?
2. How does this conflict affect my individual behavior and productivity?
3. What part of the conflict can I take responsibility for transforming?

Perhaps the only thing that can be transformed is your attitude toward the problem. Perhaps you need to speak up (politely) for yourself and others. Communicating honestly and clearly

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signals to the other party that you respect them and that you expect them to respect you.

Myth 4: The Golden Rule has been rewritten.

"Do unto others before they do unto you" seems to be the transmogrification of the classic Golden Rule of doing to others as you would have them do unto you. This change to Holy Writ is unofficial but it appears to be very real in some quarters, and it is part of the sad legacy of the Yuppie movement of the 1980s. Over the past three decades, there has been the evolution of what I will call the "Me First Generation." Membership in this group has nothing to do with age and everything to do with attitude. I know very altruistic 20-somethings and greedy 60-year olds—and vice-versa.

"Me-Firstism" is a fear-based behavior that occurs because people believe that there is not enough—not enough work, not enough money, not enough time. A belief in scarcity drives this behavior. Many MTs working for large services feel that the human part of them has been lost. They do not see themselves as members of the team. Some of this has to do with being home-based; more of it has to do with the exclusive focus on technical skills with little interpersonal interaction or acknowledgement. There is a perception, even among the nontranscriptionists in the transcription industry, that anyone who can type can do this job. The late, wonderful Vera Pyle contended that transcriptionists would never have professional respect because their tool is a keyboard. How sad.

There is also the constant quest for increased production. Some—mostly inexperienced—managers push production-based workers to and beyond the breaking point. This is not a new problem. I well remember an incident that occurred in the 1970s in a well-known hospital where I worked. A transcriptionist, tired of the constant struggle for more lines, picked up and single-handedly threw her brand-new self-correcting IBM Selectric against the wall of our transcription department. (For this she won herself a trip to the psychiatric ward.) Under such pressures, it is little wonder that the Golden Rule and other forms of civility lie broken and bloodied on the battlefield of production.

What is the solution? The Moody Blues sum it up neatly in one phrase: It's a *question of balance*.

To keep production finely tuned is a challenging proposition. MTs frequently tell me that they are afraid of being turned into machines, and rightly so. On management's side is the complaint that MTs (especially those who are classified as statutory employees) have become so individualistic and so con-

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cerned with their own convenience that their attitudes toward work are downright cavalier. Production agreements are not kept, schedules are disregarded, and accounts are ultimately endangered. Management and MTs stand at an impasse.

I have personally witnessed situations in which a transcription company had to offer its employees bonuses to work on the weekend. I have a real problem with this. While I like a good bonus as much as the next person, I find it unfortunate and improper that workers need to be bribed into doing the work that they have already contracted to do.

This brings me to the number one problem in today's transcription workplace—a simple lack of integrity. My definition of integrity is simple: Integrity means doing what you say you will do. That transcriptionists must be "invited" to do their work makes me sad. What has happened to professionalism? What has happened to keeping one's word?

Transcriptionists who fail to "deliver the goods" hurt not only themselves but also put their fellow MTs at risk. Accounts are jeopardized because MTs do not produce what they have agreed to produce. One of the reasons for acting without integrity is that MTs feel that the company's immediate and ongoing needs for production supersede the MT's needs—needs for time off, time for a personal life, time to be human. I often wonder if the reason some MTs do not keep their word is sort of a passive-aggressive approach to their own dissatisfaction. Such an approach does not work. Just as MTs need feedback, so do supervisors. If there is one weakness in the megaservice model, it is that feedback is always one-way. Almost never is there provided a pathway through which the MT may communicate with management on key issues. This is demoralizing. It also robs the company of valuable information from seasoned "in the trenches" workers.

What if? Ask yourself "What if?" What if you embraced the company's goals as your own? If you view your job as only a means of obtaining a paycheck, try visualizing yourself as part of a team. This may be especially difficult for people who work from home; paradoxically, people who work from remote sites may be those most in need of this exercise. What can you do to serve the client and ultimately the patient? Frequently the patient gets lost in our need to master technical skills and in the remoteness of our workplace. But never should we forget that

we are part of a team whose opportunity is service and that the patient is our main concern. We provide unseen but invaluable service.

Margaret Mead said, "The best possible work has not yet been done." The transcription world of this new century is an exciting one. We face more challenges and more opportunities than ever before. Let us redefine our workplace as a place in which we will get and give support; let us remind ourselves that transcription is a service business, and that the person we serve is the patient. Let us approach our colleagues with a sense of collaboration rather than of competition. Let us reframe our attitudes and re-embrace integrity. Let us develop virtues and exercise ethics. Let us create a new workplace in the new century. In so doing, we will defeat Mephistopheles.

I would be interested in exploring questions of ethics, virtue, and the preservation of humanity in the transcription workplace. Please let me know your thoughts at: slcwarthog@earthlink.net.

Resources for Further Reading

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