

## The Queuing Man

by SCC Overton

Gregory M. Burg had been waiting in a queue for well over forty-five minutes when a very uncomfortable realisation came upon him.

He had been lucky in terms of queues and waiting for almost a month. This was a perk of the new job, of course. Still, the difference – the lack of waiting around in queues, for example – was refreshing and it felt a lot like luck; good honest luck.

About four weeks previously he had joined Modern Generics as an AP and acquired, as part of his employment, a proximity alarm. Its purpose was to prevent any noticeable convergences of APs while they were on-duty. The job of an AP was simple and he had only to work for eight hours a day. He had to, for example, stop suddenly in busy streets. He had to spend ages in the cubicles of public toilets. He had to take two or more bank cards to ATMs and switch between them in long, complicated transactions. He had to have loud, inane mobile phone conversations on public buses. He had to stop at the top of escalators and look around, and block the sensors of lift doors with his rucksack so that they wouldn't close. He had to listen to club music. He had to walk diagonally along corridors. He had to stand too close to and too much to the side of people waiting for supermarket check-outs as if he were going to push in. He had to gently but persistently nudge the backs of cinema seats (something for which he'd taken an hour-long in-service training session). He had to lightly sprinkle his urine on toilet seats. He had to slightly damage rental videos. He had to stand in shops reading entire magazines whilst blocking the rest of the aisle. He had to drive badly.

He had also received in-service training for some basic customer service positions: how to turn lines of enquiry into paradoxical loops, how to patronise effectively, how to frustrate people until they give cause for their own removal from premises, and, most interestingly, how to lose records, files, documents, evidence, transactions and other electronic data.

And so on it went. Gregory M. Burg had been pleased to discover that no

people in the world were genuinely annoying; but in fact such people were employed by a small number of contractors who were themselves partially funded by persons or institutions unknown. There was comfort in the fact that the little irritations in life were being regulated and evenly distributed among the populace, and were also being properly funded. It gave him a strange feeling of satisfaction and hope for mankind. And yet, there was that uncomfortable feeling again. Had he really become so unused to queueing after just a month? He tended to leave his proximity alarm switched on all the time, even when he was not actually 'on the clock', because it kept him free of these petty annoyances that were his bread and butter. He would feel the alarm registering another AP – a street fundraiser, or a hard-braking bus driver – and would sometimes share a sly nod with his colleague, like they were members of some secretive, paranoid members club. Perhaps he had spoiled himself; gotten himself used to an artificially trouble-free existence. It seemed a little absurd, and yet there he was, still two places away from the front of the queue where the clerk just had to sign off his hours so he could get paid the following week. Forty-five minutes; actually fifty now. Had the queue moved at all? He was beginning to feel rather... His thoughts were interrupted by the intercourse between his colleague and the clerk.

'Do you have your contract with you?'

'No, of course I don't. You must have a copy here. You're the HR department!'

'Ah yes, but the form clearly states that all salary claims must be appropriately supported *by the applicant*. Without your contract I can't calculate your entitlements.'

'But the form was given to me by your department! My hours are printed on there!'

'I'm afraid I don't have your hours logged on the system. Without a system log, this is just a piece of paper, isn't it Mr... Mr Bruch. Let me check with my supervisor, he should be coming out of a meeting in a minute or two.'

Gregory M. Burg fingered the proximity alarm in his pocket. It was prohibited to have it switched on within the head office or any regional

branches, and he began to wonder why. Could it be that the clerks, supervisors, team leaders, line managers, department heads, directors and regional heads were also APs? What on Earth would be the point of that? He looked at the booth adjacent to the one for which he was queuing. Behind the thick, sound-proof glass, the 'Counter Closed' sign, and the tiny, ineffective speakerphone, sat another clerk, calmly and benignly working with some papers, oblivious to the queue next door as if a closed counter were the best and most comfortable place for a clerk to work. Gregory M. Burg rose up on tiptoe to get a better view, making the man in front shift nervously to guard his place in the queue. The clerk looked up and shuffled his papers officiously and then, with the briefest eye contact and the smallest inclination of his head, and with such ambiguity that ninety-nine similar gestures against this one would suggest nothing whatsoever, seemed to give Gregory M. Burg a sly nod.

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