

Viral video should provoke thought

Oct 6 , 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

I make an effort to stay in touch with a number of my students after they graduate and enter the job market. The world of work out there is a tough world. All too often, simply to survive and earn a living is a true accomplishment. Keeping ties fresh with recent graduates particularly, I say to myself, is a way to be there, if necessary, to offer a word of encouragement in times of need.

The China Post briefly mentioned this week at the end of an article dealing with a disgruntled worker that, according to a recent survey, up to 93 percent of local office workers would like to land a second job to supplement their income (CP 10-2-13 p. 15). Over half in the study said they already work more than 10 hours a day. They put in those extra hours gratis seemingly because they want to. In fact, these workers feel it necessary to curry favor with their bosses. They must make points and solidify their positions. In a spirit of self-defense, they must appear as industrious, responsible, and dedicated as they can. Call it expected Taiwan "office culture," or something like that.

Anyone in regular contact with former students has a mountain of anecdotal evidence to support office workers' claims that their bosses routinely take them for granted, if not actually abuse them.

Treatment of low or middle level white-collar employees is of course a sensitive topic. In addition, taking advantage of workers' desires to hold their jobs and advance their positions hits close to home. Certainly we who work for private universities are well aware of the numerous often nearly invisible hours our secretaries, sometimes termed assistants, pour into special services in their respective departments and work units. Lights burning into the night in offices that in theory should be shut down around the strike of the bell at 4:30 are steady reminders of workers pouring added sweat and care into their chores. What are the chances these good people will be paid their rightful overtime for their efforts? We all know the answer to that question.

Having worked, she says, for nearly two years for what The China Post calls "one of the largest 3 D computer animation studios in Asia" (10-2-13 p. 15) an unhappy young woman by the name of Marina

Shifrin recently created a lively video and posted it on Youtube. This little gem, entitled "An interpretive dance for my boss, set to Kanye West's Gone," attracted over 10 million hits in less than a week. Let me tell you, in near Jerry Lee Lewis ("Great Balls of Fire!") style, Ms. Shifrin puts on quite a show as she quits her job in grand and public fashion.

"For almost two years I've sacrificed my relationships, time and energy for this job. And my boss only cares about quantity and how many views each video gets," she says.

Media everywhere quickly circulated and commented on the video. One pundit called it "the coolest way to quit a job." I have my doubts about that. I do believe, however, the mix of anger, sarcasm and humor, as well as the self-satirical spirit of the message deserves reflection.

Next Media Animation offered a response to the Shifrin video as I finished drafting this column. A 94 second parody it posted shows workers for the company doing a dance in the middle of the day and commenting on why its employees eat lunch at their desks. "We want to wish Marina well and let everyone know . . . we're HIRING" (TT 10 - 3 - 13 p. 2), it said.

Well, OK. But let's not let this lament, for that is what the Shifrin statement is, sail away in the air like a puff of cigar smoke.

In a handful of days, over 10 million viewings of a video about an dissatisfied, nondescript office worker says something. What do bosses demand of their workers? Is quantity the be all and end all of everything? What roles do the feelings, family lives, and personal sacrifices of our workers play in our companies and our industries?

And what are university presidents and deans in Taiwan doing to prevent bosses on their campus from squeezing extra "free service hours" from staff members who feel trampled upon and unable to complain? (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. Are you familiar with complaints by office workers in Taiwan similar to the woman's feelings in the Youtube video this column talks of? She is more or less saying her boss (and company) are taking her for granted.
2. There is a way to quit a job that is unhappy for us, and a way not to quit. How do you feel about the way this young woman quit her job?
3. Could a video on Youtube such as this ever happen at Fu da?
4. If you did see the video, what feelings did it stir in you?

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