
Corporate Animals

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The notion of a 'corporate animal' reminds me of Yann Martel's idea in *Life of Pi* that wild animals enjoy the physical safety and food security of living in a zoo rather than having to fend for themselves in the wild. This is a neat analogy for different attitudes to life and work that is also frequently rolled out by sometimes self-congratulatory entrepreneurs.

As a 37-year-old corporate animal, my social circles are littered with people rethinking the way they have been living, and making their living, for the last 15 years or so since they grew up and their lives got real. Some are entrepreneurs having a crack at building the next big thing, while others want to leave a corporate job to freelance back to their former employers in a bid for more independence, tax efficiency and lifestyle flexibility.

There are mainly two types of entrepreneurs: those who want to build something great and, usually, want to become really, really rich; and those driven by mostly hypothetical notions of having three-month holidays and being at their kids' school plays and sporting events while building a successful business. However, the corporate animal lives for the simultaneous benefits of a monthly pay cheque combined with the intoxicating thrill of being in charge of stuff bigger than they could independently afford or manage.

Growing up, I was fortunate to be one of those people who believed they could make a difference in the world and 'do anything' one day. I gave a lot financially, emotionally and even physically – to complete my studies (for one thing, I got really overweight from eating cheap food at varsity) and after completing my studies, joined the working world in a steady corporate job with high aspirations of helping improve the state of the world through my day-to-day endeavours. What could be better than plugging into a big chunk of the economy and influencing it incrementally in a direction that helps to make society function better?

At university, I became accustomed to, and even bought into, the intellectual snobbery of academics who say people in corporates are dumb and lack innovation and creativity. But once I got going in my first corporate job, these myths were quickly dispelled. Even from my first real job interview, it was impossible to believe corporate animals were all stupid. The ones I met were clever; sometimes lazy, like all people, but not at all stupid. They had the luxury of time, and they took it to think about things, they observed people closely and picked their battles carefully. They loved an honest and well thought-through challenge, hated poorly conceived ideas and had a deep understanding of the incredible power of multi-year teamwork. At 20-something I quickly realised that the things that kept my 'big bosses' awake at night were things that affected the lives of entire populations. It was clear that one really could influence the world from inside a corporate.

Today, more than half of the world's 100 biggest economies are multinational companies. 'Belonging' to one of these juggernauts brings with it a sense of relevance, and their omnipotence has become a fact of life for all of us. Yet at some point, the heady glow from being part of one does wear off, the routines set in and the internal corporate politics begin to smoulder. Competitiveness and a lack of perspective from being so focussed on your small piece of the world can and do wear you down. Things that used to change the world become everyday facts of life, and obstacles to home-time or the extra glass of wine on a Friday night. You realise that being an astronaut or a fireman are no longer options for you – let alone being a sun-kissed professional surfer or dolphin expert with sand between your toes. And to top it all off you aren't making, and saving, enough money to retire at 40 and write that book or start that business you think about in traffic on the way to work.

It also becomes clear that people can be loyal, but effective organisations cannot. Corporates are like machines set up to move and replace their parts at any time. They can be incredibly tolerant of incompetence but can also rid themselves of whole departments and still keep running smoothly, sometimes better than before. They prefer the path of least resistance and the most efficient way from point A to point B. They say they like innovation but also decide things by consensus,

and they don't really like change. A corporate will accept all the time and energy you can give, but there isn't always a direct correlation between your level of effort and level of reward. They can make heroes out of the free and highly relevant entrepreneurs driving society forward at the coalface of the economy and encourage you to be just that – as long as you observe the sometimes stifling institutional processes, policies and procedures.

All at the same time the people inside of corporates – the corporate animals – can be remarkable combinations of everything from disengaged to incredibly talented, kind, insightful and loyal. Corporates can bring together a diverse set of intoxicating ideas along with the resources, institutional gravitas and long-termism needed to bring them to life. They can have mysteries and unintended internal intricacies complex enough to be the subjects of hundreds of PhD theses in just about any discipline. And if you are so inclined, all of this can make a corporate organisation something that you can fall in love with while knowing that it will never love you back.

In their final analysis, many corporate animals become acutely aware that one day they'll leave and it will all be over; not the corporate, but their relevance inside and outside of it. Their contribution to that part of the world will be woven, neatly or haphazardly, into the fabric of the processes, procedures and, if they're important enough, the 'corporate memory' of the organisation. To some this matters greatly, and many never readjust after wielding power in a large organisation. In my social circles, we regularly discuss anecdotes of people who run huge organisations for years and years and then die of old age within a few months of retirement.

For the corporate animal this is a tragedy, because other corporate animals should enjoy a long and healthy retirement after being put out to pasture from life in the main exhibits. For the entrepreneur, the important part of the story is the individual's commercial contribution to the business and longevity of the organisation. Yet somehow, despite these differences in attitudes to life and work, there is a common thread. For corporate animals, the joy can be in knowing the corporate machine will live long beyond your years, evolving and adapting to thrive in a new and changing environment. While for the entrepreneur, the pleasure often lies in creating something that hopefully, someday, can also become a corporate.