

He and I

My filing system changed drastically with his arrival but eventually I made it clear that I was the boss and the files would be named as I liked! ■ by Annam Suresh

I first met him, when he came to my office, some 13 years ago. He was smartly turned out in the latest fashion, from head to toe; squeaky clean and irresistibly seductive. I fell in love instantly. He came in as my office administrator-cum-secretary-cum-knowledge manager all rolled into one — and then some. It did seem like a lot of responsibility for one person, but he assured me that he could do that and more almost effortlessly.

Moreover, he was going to live in the office premises with no fixed hours, close to where I stayed. As we chatted, I learnt that he could play a few games and had virtually no social life. That suited me fine — not only could I enjoy a round of cards, when I needed a diversion from my work, I could use my office any time — a 24 x 7 arrangement! Seemed like a dream come true.

I dreamt of efficient filing minus staff problems — an environment that would help me write in peace. I presumed that, with such a well-qualified, highly recommended and experienced assistant, anything that could possibly go wrong would be of my doing.

The next morning, I walked into the office, expecting to see him already at work. Instead, he was sitting in the corner almost exactly as I had left him the previous evening — as neatly dressed as last night. I was impressed — till I noticed he had done nothing to ruffle his clothes.

So why had Mr Super Efficient Secretary not got down to some real work?

He offered no apology. He demanded a well-laid-out work-station, comfortable lighting, and a silent air-conditioner. These were absolute essentials — he could not even begin before he had these. He could not stand dust and heat — so, even if I had to sit with the Class IV staff on the rickety stool outside, he had to have a temperature/humidity-controlled, dust-free cabin.

The table I had hastily vacated for him (used to be Mr Mallik's till I sacked him, last week, for incompetence) did not measure up to his standards — seemed a bit too rickety for Mr Efficient. He needed one with a smooth, non-electromagnetic,

non-ionising surface.

I meekly provided everything, hoping for better times. I switched on the smart, overhead office lights and the sleek, newly-installed, whisper-soft air-conditioner, while he sat there silently (warming up, he said). Once the room was suitably cool, I politely asked him to work.

I had just sacked Mr Mallik and planned to shed some more deadwood, once this assistant got into his groove. I did not want to antagonise him. Besides, his smart appearance and technical superiority intimidated me.

He looked busy and cheerful as he worked. I could hear him hum. However, every now and then, he would sit frozen-still and I worried that he had succumbed to a massive cardiac arrest.

"Don't disturb, when I'm halfway through thinking things out. Now, I'll have to start all over again," he warned.

I moved away — maybe, the methods of the technically-superior are different, I told myself.

He said he would have to organise my office in such a way that there was a proper place for everything in an easily-retrievable manner. I was impressed. This was something I knew had to be done — I had known it for years; just did not know how to do it.

He began to go through all my folders, one by one, every file, every page, painstakingly checking their names and whether they belonged where they were supposed to. Often, he came across files (he seemed to find fault with almost all my files) that were in the wrong place, or with the wrong names or with other mistakes.

Every time he spotted one of these, he would tut-tut rather loudly, stop work, and glare at me malevolently. He would wave the offending bit of work in my face and refuse to proceed until I had acknowledged his superior intelligence in spotting my blunder. Then I had to pick one of the options he gave me: a) rectify my gargantuan misdemeanor and refile it properly, b) ignore (this stupidity), or c) consign this ignominious piece of work to the incinerator.

I was so much in awe of his much-talked-about superior brains and incredible

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efficiency that I let him right the mammoth blunders he waved at me every few minutes. In fact, it seemed wiser to say 'OK' since, every time he came across one of these, he stopped work till I declared my option.

Two hours later, there was a power breakdown and our man instantly stopped work. "Mr Mallik used to move to the table by the window and continue working," I hinted pointedly.

No reply. He had gone back to his strong, silent slumber. An hour later, the power returned and he went through the whole process of warming up and starting up.

"Electricity is rather uncertain in these parts. Mr Mallik used to move to the table by the window and continue working," I repeated.

"I can't work in this heat. No power, no work. Why don't you get some kind of a sturdy back-up, like a heavy-duty inverter or generator?" he asked haughtily. "It is impossible to work in this primitive environment."

I seethed quietly. I had invested a lot in doing up my office — it was considered rather modern. I had never felt so insulted.

By evening, he had gone through only one-third of my desk — not surprising, since he had started only after all his creature comforts had been ensured and then had an hour-long power-failure break.

I was tired with the day-long intimidation and decided to go home. "What about you?" I asked nervously.

Well, I live here, anyway. If you want to shut office, you can switch off all the lights. However, if you leave everything on, I will continue working," he said.

"Oh, good, he's not so bad after all," I thought. Just then, he held up another example of my 'bad filing' and waited for an answer.

"Oh, don't bother to ask each time — just set them all right, every time," I said as I went out.

Three hours later, after I had freshened up and had dinner, I went back to my office. I found him still working. Heavy with guilt and remorse, (my staff called me a slave-driver and I didn't want him to think the same and quit) I asked him to call it a day. I switched off the office mains and went home.

I sauntered in late, the next day. The 'good mornings' were rather lacklustre. The rest of my employees (there were 4 left, now that Mallik was sacked) were already insecure and grouchy. No one else had been able to convince me to install an air-conditioner or inverter or effect a decent increment.

However, my new, upstart assistant had the most enviable cabin in the entire office and had already instigated me into giving marching orders to 2 more filing assistants. Only the cameraman and the errand boy would continue after the weekend.

As I proceeded to his cabin, I was already

congratulating my foresight — I was saving the salaries and sitting space of 3 employees. Maybe, I could eventually get rid of the errand boy too...

I was behind with a few deadlines and was sure the new, efficient filing would help me meet these in no time. True, he cost me a tidy sum, plus the new office set-up, the air-conditioner, the huge inverter I had ordered as soon as I left office the day before, and the custom-made stationery he demanded.

"But," I comforted myself, "if he is as efficient as I was assured, I would earn his keep in no time." I could now trim my staff strength and work more productively with my papers more readily retrievable.

I saw him at work and left. I had a flight to catch and would be back only after 3 days. Hopefully by then, he would have done with my files.

I returned on Monday, at noon. As I walk into the office, he is at work and does not stand up to greet me. "No subordination here," I observe and let it pass. I have already sacked the others and no use rubbing him the wrong way, when I have deadlines to meet.

I reach for my papers in their familiar folders — they are not there. "Don't you remember — I have been reorganising your files efficiently?" he asks.

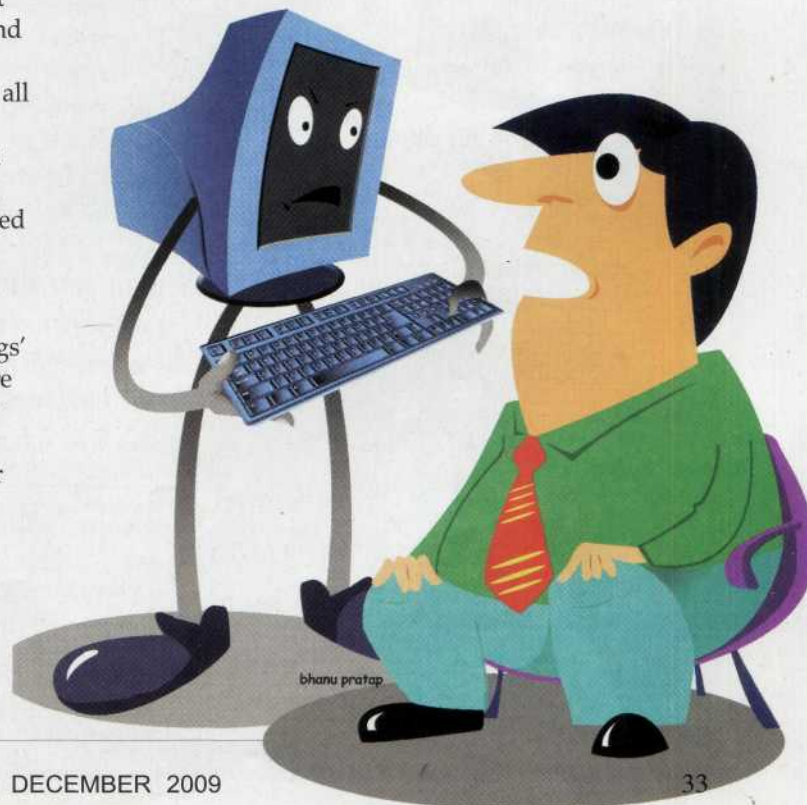
I write out a list of half-a-dozen files I need immediately. "Can't find them," he says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, you told me to reset your filing system," he reminds me.

"So where are they?" I demand impatiently.

"All in here — very neatly kept — not cluttered and





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