



A *M* B I E N T M

E N T M U S I C

He tried to press his words neutral or pleasant or what at the very least might register as agreeable though it was difficult to tell how a voice carried through to the other end of the spider-like Ego Conference Speakerphone—a low-profile, blob-shaped, and eight-legged object of grey and black perforated plastic—his posture bent toward it to suggest attentiveness or maybe even servitude, coming in this morning without having had breakfast, famished, feeling a feeling he once in therapy described as Feeling like infinite pale blue. The speaker unit, as part of a marathon performance review, had been brought down from one of the Lab's seventh-floor conference rooms and placed in the center of the grey-blue support cubicle's desk replacing the everyday headset, so a small assembly of three coaches, and possibly depending on various factors someone from HR or others, could listen in. The median wait time during which the caller was played Muzak per customer was seven minutes, and the median time for direct communication excluding wait time was half a minute per customer, with hopes to cut this by half and even further with newer systems and ideally The customer hangs up first, meaning never under any circumstances to hang up on the customer. Dave Kmit could see the current time five different ways from where he sat: on his wrist-watch, on the wall clock on the far end of the fluorescent cubicle sprawl, on the speaker's LED display which was off by several hours, on a small digital desk clock along-

side some Peanut M&Ms he'd brought to stabilize himself, and again right next to it in the lower right corner of the 17-inch Dell monitor, the desktop background set to a close-up photo of a child presenting a missing front tooth. There was a vague chemical smell that was new and maybe possibly coming from the speaker.

The Basic Call Management System (BCMS) in use at the Lab was developed by AT&T as part of its call center management tools in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and when AT&T's enterprise equipment division became Lucent Technologies BCMS continued to be supported and enhanced under Lucent, and after Avaya spun off from Lucent in 2000 it inherited and continued the development of BCMS, integrating it with its newer systems and other platforms. The decision to switch from a perpetual licensing model to a subscription model for the Lab's software offering had added roughly two-thirds to gross annual revenue on top of what had already been a particularly profitable fiscal year due to continued and new government and private contracts. The Lab's support division on the third floor of the [information withheld] building consisted of four rows of cubicles, each row two by six units with entries at opposing ends, three pathways running between the rows and one along each wall. This morning the north wall of one cubicle—the wall behind the desk opposite where Kmit currently sat—had been dismantled, thereby merging it with the adjacent cubicle into one large cubicle (i.e. recticle) which was cleared out and fitted with a desk with coach (1) Teddy Kaufelt (Branding & Customer Sociology) on the left (Dave Kmit's left), coach (2) Charlotte Sztern (Infrastructure & Integration) directly opposite Dave, and coach (3) Michel (The Unconscious), originally from Quebec (Mee-shel, like Foucault), whose stool on the right (Dave Kmit's right) sat currently empty, rendering the arrangement imbalanced for the time being.

When a customer calls the Lab's support division, they are automatically routed to an Interactive Response Tree (IRT), a large schema of questions to determine which agent to connect to which customer via an Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) operating under the aegis of a team of Workforce Analysts and Managers. Metrics are sampled daily. Yesterday, 87.7 percent of calls were from whites. Of those, 82.7 percent were male. 56.1 percent were aged 36 to 45. 32.6 percent were aged 26 to 35. The most cited service level objective for calls handled by live agents was 80 percent answered within 20 seconds, though other targets—such as 80 or 90 percent within 30 seconds, 90 percent within 20, or 85 percent within either 20 or 30 seconds—were also frequently reported. First Call Resolution (FCR) is considered by many specialists to be one of the most critical performance metrics in the modern call center, with numerous studies linking high FCR to high customer satisfaction, agent satisfaction, lower operating costs and increased revenue generation. Most agents at the Lab don't measure FCR, but those agents that do measure FCR achieve impressive rates: 25.2 percent reported an FCR of 85 to 89 percent; 21.2 percent reported 90 to 94; and 12.6 percent reported a very impressive 95 to 100. Such favorable results might be misleading given that there is currently no real standard method for measuring FCR—agents may not be doing so accurately. Experts say the best way to measure FCR is from the customer's perspective, yet the most common method cited by respondents was "agent input on CRM (customer relationship management) call tracking software," where agents—not callers—are asked to determine whether the call was fully resolved. Dave Kmit was 43; Teddy Kaufelt and Charlotte Sztern were 42 and 39. Michel was [information withheld].

A small orange LED on the speaker started to flash

and coach Teddy Kaufelt motioned go with both index fingers drumming on the edge of the table looking at Kmit, who swallowed the three (one blue, two brown) Peanut M&Ms he had been sucking on before reaching for the plastic button at the speaker's top center and depressing it until it clicked and the line opened. Charlotte Sztern, who might've been listening or might've been somewhere else entirely, her crossed leg's foot bopping along to a rhythm Dave was not privy to and possibly not invited to, looked pale under the Lab's Daylight lights (a bulk purchase of fluorescent tubes specifically engineered for office use and advertised by the Japanese manufacturing company to prevent fatigue and/or boredom)—but a pale that rendered her skin a patchwork of red—and wore the same red and white coach tracksuit and white Reeboks as Kaufelt. Sztern's background was understood to consist mainly of guiding multiple major first-wave internet and communications holding companies through the dot-com boom and bust while also simultaneously working the Y2K problem known as the Millennium Bug, a computing flaw related to how dates were represented in computer systems being that many systems stored years using only two digits (e.g., '99' instead of '1999'), which led to concerns that when the year rolled over to 2000 ('00'), they would be misinterpreted as 1900, causing potential malfunctions and leading to digital collapse and cessation of western hegemony; she'd come to the Lab because she said she'd discovered in her late thirties a real hatred for Illinois where she was born to poultry farming parents and grew up around mostly whoopings and yeehawings and black jeans and all-kinds-of-colored checkered shirts and felt hats, where everyone got up before four and had to shower three times a day for olfactory reasons of working with livestock. Just before working in data-systems for the Lab Sztern had been managing large-scale agri-

culture projects across the Upper Midwest but kept it off the record, and neither Teddy Kaufelt, who was closest to her, nor anybody else at the Lab knew what she was up to between 2002 and 2007, but holistically Sztern was irrepressibly from Illinois, despite the honed East Coast mannerisms, which were a kind of behavioral fixation, specifically a mechanism of control or a workable substitute for other less containable desires which began in adolescence, when Charlotte had to come to terms with herself in a particularly rural, quiet corner of Illinois with nothing to do but watching what any reasonable observer would have to call a staggering, stupendous amount of television while eating green apples her mother Lisa Sztern (often called Mona Lisa for her back then unwavering beauty) would bring, her teen-sense of the world in this time being exclusively televisual, filtered through the 50-inch screen the Szterns kept in their post-and-beam farmhouse outside Galesburg. Coming home after school Charlotte would turn on the TV before dropping her bag, the set's audio running in the background while she moved through various domestic preliminaries until without her registering the transition she would be found stationary, staring from the kitchen threshold or mid-hallway, minutes gone. Lisa and Emmet (Charlotte's father) referred to her stare as predatory. Six to eight hours of TV-time a day was the estimate of her parents for their daughter, which was close enough to the national mean to feel statistically unremarkable, give or take two hours. Emmet Sztern liked to imagine his daughter as a constant in the network's ratings, a unit in a Nielsen table whose reliability reassured producers that their programming strategies were doing something right. She belonged to the daily prime-time pleasure audience, for whom "production" in the narrow industry sense remained genuinely captivating. Both Lisa and Emmet Sztern, having grown up without television

and postponing its purchase until she was eight, continued to prefer being out meeting friends face-to-face at home or in public venues. Her seven brothers, in keeping with their parents, spent most of their non-school hours in outdoor or otherwise non-domestic settings. Charlotte, by contrast, kept to the living room. She herself said it was hard to explain. The majority of what she had seen in her life up to that point had come via broadcast. Her first love and sexual experience had come televised too, accompanied by green apples. Later, if asked whether she liked watching television, she would answer no, and if pressed, would cite the persistent sense of disconnection from the external world. Most days and nights what she took from TV was the impression that everyone else was somehow less alone.

In the first hour of the marathon performance review, Kmit opened forty-seven lines routed to him through the ACD, of which eight were phantom lines, the internal designation agents used for lines (i.e. calls) where, after connection, there was nothing audible on the other end, not a single sound, a problem generally chalked up to the management software itself and neither considered by the Lab an issue with the agent nor the customer, though it remained unclear whether phantom lines meant customers had their calls dropped as well, or if they simply had to wait longer in queue because of these lines which manifested themselves and began circulating within the system without any exterior input ever since the opening of the new Support division. Of the remaining thirty-nine lines, nine were abandoned lines, like phantom lines with no communication between agent and customer and ultimately unresolvable, but which did feature sound on the line and were required to be held open for exactly thirty seconds before closure, being the grace period agents were instructed to give for a customer to answer once the sys-

tem had connected them to an agent. These cases were most often the result of people setting the phone aside once they had finished with the IRT and connected via the ACD and were placed into a queue with Muzak playing, at which point customers tended to chores, spoke to relatives, or dealt with whatever else came up while they waited (a time of usually less than a minute, as the Operations Analysis Group emphasized repeatedly in laborious board meetings about the new and costly Support operation—costly not by the standards of the Lab’s multi-year, multi-million projects, but compared to the earlier outsourced Support, which represented only a dwindling fraction of the present human-staffed expense). Downstairs in the Lab’s marble-floored lobby, Michel, who has a master’s degree in clinical psychology and a documented family history of ischemic pathology on both maternal and paternal sides, and at this moment being overdue for Dave’s marathon performance review, was attempting without success to interface his fob with the elevator’s fob reader, dressed in the same red and white coach tracksuit and white Reeboks combination as Charlotte Sztern and Teddy Kaufelt, and has, during his inbound commute in the champagne-colored 2001 Hyundai Elantra, sustained a series of nine consecutive cerebrovascular events, each a clinically small nonfatal stroke or mini-stroke but cumulatively leaving him moderately polyimpaired in face and upper extremities.

Support was a recent addition and an upgrade from the old version of Support, which had been outsourced for over 20 years and had come to be seen, especially considering recent involvements, as insubstantial, causing the Lab to designate half of floor three of the [name withheld] building for the investment, replacing a legacy media research department which had been deemed redundant and merged with external communications in the

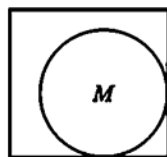
upper floors with a complex of cubicles which, when established, was assigned a two-part alphanumeric designation, with rows numbered 1 through 4 and units lettered A through L from left to right, so that each workstation was known by its grid label (e.g. 2F, 3B) (a system borrowed from the Lab's general use shelving nomenclature). Each cubicle was an assembly of four walls made from a flame-retardant blueish textile, with one wall featuring an entrance (meaning cutout) and two to three walls being shared with other cubicles depending on the unit's placement within the grid. Each workspace was fitted with a desk made from plastic laminate the same color as the walls (but a couple of shades lighter) on one wall and shelves made from the same material as the table on the opposing wall (neither of these walls were the wall with the cutout or its opposing wall). Each cubicle featured a computer (under the desk) and monitor and little structures for files and documents, and was tethered to the Lab's network through CAT5 Ethernet cables, and to the PBX phone system via RJ11 phone lines, which had already been installed when the Lab first moved into the third floor in 1997, then a major US computer software company best known for developing image editing toolsets (founded in 1982, originally focused on desktop publishing, but gradually becoming central to the creative industries and in the recent decade investing heavily in research, developing new tools and technologies focused on building software that empowers organizations and governments to effectively integrate their data, decisions, and operations). Most stations also had shared printer/copier access over LAN and, depending on the role, a headset jack connected to a switchboard or softphone interface. Dave Kmit did track FCR throughout the initial period of his employment at the lab but dropped it after three months (55 workdays to be exact) for feeling it was some-

what phony or deceptive, and also a waste of his and thus the Lab's time navigating through the menus (four clicks in total from the BCMS "End Call" button to the agent's Call History, where the most recent call could be selected and then rated with an optional field for comments and notes on the call, which could then be accessed by other agents working the same customers or issues). The CRM was a custom layer on top of Avaya's BCMS iteration, developed in-house at the Lab with heaps of other additions to the package, which, like the rest of the Lab's software and SaaS, Software as a Service, Infrastructure as a Service (IaaS), Platform as a Service (PaaS), and Data as a Service (DaaS) offerings, were, as everyone agreed, really really good and pleasant to work with. To give himself a score usually meant landing, in the given system of one to ten blue stars (zero not being an option and registered in the system as not rated, i.e., canceled), on a seven and, depending on how he was feeling that day, most likely bumping himself up to an eight, which he thought would present him in a better light than if he was too self-critical, and because he did do a good job and the call was resolved, and aside from the irresolvable calls his record would consist almost entirely of eights, with the occasional nine or ten, these tens reserved for those instances where a call was resolved in under thirty seconds, the issues in such cases being generally of a minor nature and the solutions simple, often not even technical in nature. The [information withheld] building, where the Lab had been the anchor tenant for close to a decade, was 41 stories tall, and all floors up to the 18th occupied by the Lab, with floor one being Access Services and Badging, floor two Security and Visitation, three Support, floors four and five IT Operations, six to nine Legal, Finance, HR, Communication, and the cafeteria with adjacent deck, ten to fourteen Engineering and Development with R&D,

DevOps, Data Science, and Product Management, fifteen and sixteen [information withheld], and everything above C-suite offices and boardrooms. The rest of the building was empty. There was a gym somewhere, and a limited number of employees had identified a means of accessing the rooftop, which was barren and without parapet or guardrails and had in recent months been observed in occasional use for informal beer consumption or cannabis smoking, activities noted in two separate workplace-conduct reminders issued by the Lab's HR department. There were also persistent, detail-light rumors regarding an anarchist group presence squatting somewhere in the unleased floors, along with a black market consisting of three purple-tarped tents that kept changing position.

Both of Michel's parents had experienced cerebrovascular events in middle age, his father at 43 while harvesting marjoram and cilantro from the raised-bed herb garden behind their house in the suburbs of Quebec, and his mother on her 44th birthday during family dinner, becoming cognizant that something was horrifically wrong only when the hamburger steak and gravy both began registering as chocolate milk, the stroke leaving her gustatory mapping permanently crosswired so that most ingested solids thereafter resolved as some variant of dessert. Michel's right upper limb was for the most part flaccid and tremorous, and although digital flexion was intact enough to maintain a grip on the fob, he could neither elevate the limb to the necessary height nor sustain the elevation for the elevator's panel-mounted proximity reader to register, resorting instead to a compensatory maneuver in which he propped his elbow against his hip and levered the arm upward with torso pressure while bending one leg and lifting the other to get the fob in range of the panel's reader. Because of his mother's post-stroke proclivity for desserts, Michel and his father and

mother had since Michel's adolescence (his mother's 44th birthday) become what their Canadian friends described as severely American-obese, and Michel was now filling nearly the entire Lab's elevator 4 chamber with his circumference:



resembling the static bulk of a hotel ice machine in transport, his arms inert at his sides and his face showing no trace of expression but a slight hang to the right, a line of drool darkening the polyester of his coach suit as he shifted his hips back and forth in small oscillations until the reader finally registered and admitted him with a brief chirp and a digital chime announced the closing of the sliding elevator doors, while Michel used his outstretched abdomen to actuate the small convex plastic button labeled 3, in the process also depressing 1 2 4 6 and 8 and illuminating them simultaneously as the elevator began its ascent. Michel, unable to close his eyes, registered just above the illumined 1 2 3 4 6 and 8 a perforated grid, in the shape of a hexagon made up of 224 holes with a diameter of 1/16 in. each, covering a speaker which was playing Brian Eno's *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1979), "1/1", which Michel knew about from a second-year elective in human behavioral studies he had taken during the spring semester of his junior year, listed as PSYCH 342: Applied Anxiety Research, a course that dealt with nervousness, agoraphobia, and generalized anxiety in public spaces and/or situations in which subjects were required to entrust their lives to professionals such as pilots or sur-

geons (a list that in fact extended to many more professions normal people never thought about but that only the pathologically anxious remained aware of, including anesthesiologists, structural engineers [bridge or high-rise], nuclear power plant operators, subway or train conductors, bus and cab drivers, electrical line technicians, pharmacologists [drug dosing, chemotherapy regimens], and bakers and generally anyone working with food, to name a few). *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* was the first of four albums in Eno's Ambient series, the series generally credited with spawning what critics later termed the entirely new genre of ambient music, conceived in deliberate opposition to the already existing Muzak genre (and assorted categories of so-called easy listening; produced in an effort to strip away all sense, i.e., experience of doubt and/or uncertainty), an idea Eno began to articulate while confined to a bed in the trauma ward of Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital after an accident in late November 1976 in which a semi-tractor hauling a cylindrical tank trailer rated at 30,000 liters of industrial xylene for automotive paint application collided with David Bowie's tour coach on Interstate 94 outside Detroit, on which Eno had been traveling as part of Bowie's entourage while assisting Bowie and Tony Visconti with the final stages of the album *Low*, at that stage requiring only minor synthesizer touch-ups before submission to RCA and eventual release to divided critical reception. The accident—Bowie and Visconti escaping unscathed due to their location in the forward third of the coach, Eno in the rear section where the lateral force of the collision was concentrated—left him with multiple compound fractures, internal hemorrhaging, and cerebral concussions that precipitated a comatose state of 11.7 months' duration at Henry Ford (costing close to \$250,000 in 1977 dollars, a sum disputed and reduced through aggressive negotiation by

RCA's management before ultimately being settled by the touring company's shifty third-party travel insurer), during which interval he was visited on a weekly basis by his American acquaintance Judy Nylon (of the punk rock duo Snatch), who made a practice of leaving phonograph records playing at low volume on a portable turntable beside his bed after each visit, recordings that Eno later claimed to have perceived in some attenuated form while unconscious, their faint signal mixing with the rainfall on the hospital windows and the diffuse ward noises of oxygen hisses, plastic curtain rings, visitors' remarks, and nurses' conversations, all of which he had no option but to register and to which, as he later described it, he ultimately yielded, producing an ambience in tune with his drifting and involuntary attention. Upon eventual discharge in December of the following year he returned to his childhood home in Suffolk, where over the course of three months he employed a domestic reel-to-reel tape recorder to splice together loops of various lengths and sources into a continuous aural fabric designed to replicate the same state of enforced drift and acceptance he had inhabited in the Detroit hospital bed.

Of the nine abandoned lines that Dave encountered during the first hour of his marathon performance review, two were not wholly silent but produced instead a brief intermittent hum, one featured the persistent background sound of a vacuum cleaner in operation, three contained barking that could be located at differing distances from the receiver (one quite close, two apparently further back, though distance was difficult to judge with certainty, given the distortion of telephone microphones and the variability of domestic acoustics), one contained the noise of rain or some other continuous impact that could not be conclusively identified as meteorological, and two contained human voices, one of them not in En-

glish. In handling such abandoned lines agents were permitted—indeed instructed—to repeat their introductory script verbatim in hopes of eliciting a response, but were not permitted to raise their voice or deviate in any way from the approved script, partly in order to maintain the appearance of well-mannered conversation and partly to avoid distracting neighboring agents, or worse, to prevent a live customer from overhearing in the background of their own call another agent shouting God please stop fucking vacuuming for just one second or to Answer the fucking phone oh my fucking God I want to kill myself please pick up the goddam phone. Thirty of the forty-seven lines that Dave accepted were recorded as “Successful,” a designation that did not signify resolution of the problem or request in any sense, but simply that bilateral communication had been established between a customer and the agent the system had determined to be best suited to handle their case, through whatever criteria of routing or load-balancing the system was applying, which was unclear, and which Dave hoped, for better or for worse, did not involve special treatment or decisions due to him being under review.

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