

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RB-13 Starting Work

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

No job is so important
and no service is so urgent
That we cannot take time
to perform our work safely
Bell system

Thursday afternoon, May 28, John Connors hustled me over to Western Electric's employment office in an attempt to avoid the customary week-to-ten days waiting period between the filling out of papers and the beginning of work.

There had been some discussion of my beginning either as a materials handler or bench press operator. The woman at the employment desk was a bit surprised when John couldn't tell her what job I was interested in. Nevertheless she gave me a form and told John that unless he had a job description down by the end of the day it would be impossible to have me begin work the following week.

John said he would do his best and left. I had no trouble with the first three lines of the application, which asked for name, address, and person to notify in case of accident. However, the next line asked for the following information, none of which I was able to supply: kind of work desired, what other work can you do, and salary or wages expected.

The rest of the application was fairly simple. First you were asked to list your educational background; this was followed by a page requesting information on former employment (dates, salaries, and reason for departure). The third page dealt with military service, and the fourth page was reserved for those who would review the application. Before returning the application I noticed, just under the Western Electric log, the words: it is understood that if employed, false statements on this application shall be considered sufficient cause for dismissal.

The woman at the desk told me to report next Tuesday at 8:00 AM for orientation. "Please bring your birth certificate and positive proof of your social security number" she said. "Right now, please take your application to the medical office."

I thanked her and made my way to the medical examination office. There was a uniformed, gray-haired woman sitting at a desk with one of those little white nurse's hats which always look as if they are about to fall off. The nurse asked me the usual series of questions about past medical problems, before checking my hearing, height and weight. Neither of us could believe my weight.

The physical took about twenty minutes. The doctor said, "Except for being

overweight you seem to be in good shape." I didn't think that compliment required any reply so I put my clothes back on and left for home.

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When I returned to the employment office at 7:40 Tuesday morning there were about a dozen people scattered in the lobby and outside on the steps smoking. When eight o'clock rolled around and the doors to the employment office were unlocked there were nearly thirty of us. We all fell in line to pick up our employment packets.

A young woman and I were called out of line. "I'm sorry Mr. Balzer," the woman said, "your packet isn't ready. I told you last Thursday we needed the information about your job on that day, but it didn't come down until late Friday afternoon. I'm afraid you'll be delayed a little bit. Don't worry, though, as soon as the rest of the people go off to orientation we will type up your forms. It won't," she smilingly said, "take more than a few minutes."

So I sat down to wait. Soon everyone else was gone. The woman at the desk shot a smile at me and so I sat patiently waiting for my papers. When they didn't appear in ten minutes I walked over to the desk and asked if I couldn't go to the orientation and come back to pick up my papers later in the day.

"I'm sorry," she said, "you'll have to wait. But I'm sure it will be just a few minutes more. Really, Mr. Balzer, you haven't missed very much of the orientation, just some introductory remarks."

I sat down again and when another fifteen minutes had passed I thought of calling John Connors, but I didn't. Twenty minutes later my papers arrived.

The woman at the desk called me over. "We have an agency shop at Western Electric. If you choose to join the union your dues can be used as the union sees fit; if you don't, \$1.50 will be deducted each week and will go for negotiations. Now as soon as you have a picture taken for your pass we will take you and the young lady to the auditorium."

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The man at the front of the auditorium looked up as the two of us walked in and said, "What's the matter, miss the bus?" This got him a quick laugh.

Two weeks later I joined another orientation group in order to learn about the part of orientation which I had missed. Frank O'Donnell was in the front of the room. He said, "On behalf of all the people at the Merrimack Valley works I would like to welcome you. To start, I would like to say good morning."

The group weakly responded, "Good morning."

"Come on now," he said, "I know you can do better than that."

The group responded with another "Good morning."

"That's better," Frank said, "I know it's Monday morning, and we're going to

try to make it a good Monday for you. Just to show you how much we like you we're going to treat you to doughnuts and coffee at 10:00. You can thank Ed Ford back there, he said he was going to pay for it all.

"And just to show you where our hearts are, we're going to treat you to lunch at 12:00, and the gentleman back there named Bill Banton is going to pick up that tab."

A few scattered laughs.

"Now I want you all to make yourselves comfortable. Of course, not as comfortable as this man down here in the front row, he looks like he took me seriously and is about to go to sleep. Don't do it, I have a little buzzer on the seats, and if any of you falls asleep during the movie or filmstrip I'll wake you up.

"Now seriously, I'd like to introduce you to our boss, Bill Banton."

A well-dressed man took a few short strides to the front of the room and said, "I'm glad to meet all of you. I'd like to tell you a little about the Merrimack Valley Works. We produce more than \$1 million worth of parts a day. At this time we have more than eight million dollars on back order and by the end of the year we will be producing at the rate of \$1.5 million worth of material a day. We do no military work at the Merrimack Works.

"With such a big production schedule and the backlog of work we have, attendance is very important. Each and every one of you is important to keep this company functioning well, and we depend on you helping us do our job."

This was the day's first mention of attendance. The theme of regular attendance would be repeated. Only slightly later Frank O'Donell would be telling us that although there are nearly 10,000 workers at the plant each worker is vitally important to the functioning of the company. He told us how we would be expected to work each and every day, and that those who couldn't keep good attendance would, unfortunately, have to be let go. In our packet there also was a card which was to be filled out in case an employee had an unexcused absence. Later in the day my supervisor was also to give us a little speech on the importance of attendance.

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After finishing his brief remarks Bill Banton proceeded to pull a typed piece of paper from his inside coat pocket and began reading in Spanish. When he finished, to the applause of several people, he said, "You'll have to forgive my Spanish; I didn't get further than three years in high school."

Bill Banton left and Frank O'Donell took over again.

"We have a couple of films we'd like you to see this morning that may help explain what it is you are going to be doing. The first one, we hope, will explain what Western Electric does for the Bell System, what you can do for Western Electric, and what it can do for you. After that we'll take a look at a filmstrip about the Merrimack Works."

The lights went out and the film began with the words, "The telephone is a magical device which enables a mind here to touch a mind there."

The film and filmstrip took about thirty minutes, and they tried to convey a feeling that the new employee was joining a huge and complex network which enables society to function better. The viewer was given a sense of the progress the phone had made possible, as well as a sense of how the worker could contribute to this process.

At the conclusion of the filmstrip Frank said, "I'd like to introduce you to a few people on the staff, and then we'll take the morning break I promised you."

"I'd like to introduce to you a very special person, who's meant a lot to all of us. I'd like to introduce to you Mr. Dan Denney. Uncle Dan heads the counseling program around here, and he has helped Ed Ford on more than a couple of occasions."

Dan Denney, a square-shouldered, white-haired man in slacks and open-collared shirt walked up to the front of the room. He put out his cigarette and said, "Hi, my name is Dan Denney. Western Electric is concerned that you have a place to feel free to talk about things that bug or hassle you. They've been kind enough to give me an office. I'm not a psychiatrist or psychologist, I'm a street person. I've been around, and let me tell you there isn't anything that you could tell me that I haven't been through myself."

"I've seen or done it all. I know about drinking and drugs first hand. I want all of you to feel free to come by any time and talk about anything that's bothering you. I'm not going to come out and chase any of you. If you want to talk just come and see me. I'm there to help you help yourself."

"Feel free to come and see me. I hope all of you enjoy working here. The company has been good to me and if you give it a chance it will be good to you."

Uncle Dan strode out, and in a moment of seriousness Frank said, "That is one heck of a guy. Seriously, he's helped a lot of people around here, and he means it when he tells you if there's something eating at you, talk to him."

With that, Frank said, "Let's take that break. Just leave your things down here and we'll go upstairs for a while."

Before I realized what I was doing, I sat down at a table with six other men. A quick look around the room and I realized that at only one of the six tables were men and women sitting together. This division by sex tended to occur during every break, and, I soon discovered, carried over into the work break periods as well.

During the break I took the opportunity to look around at the other people. I suppose I had been a bit too nervous earlier in the morning to notice what people were wearing. I was surprised to see that several of the women were quite well-dressed, in pants suits and dresses which didn't fit my stereotype of factory clothing. One woman was decked out in an all blue outfit: blue

shoes, blue skirt, blue shirt, blue nail polish, but, thank God, no blue lipstick. The men on the whole were less well dressed. One wore a jacket, but all others were casually dressed, some like myself in jeans and a short-sleeved shirt.

When we returned to the auditorium two women began explaining the various benefit programs Western Electric offers its employees. The benefits included not only holidays and a pension program, but Blue Cross, Blue Shield, major medical, and life insurance. While we filled out computerized cards the girl next to me said that the company had improved its Blue Cross, Blue Shield coverage, especially in regard to maternity benefits. The fellow on my other side said he was just about to get married and couldn't afford not to come to work at Western Electric and take the coverage.

We took a break for lunch and then reassembled in an upstairs conference room where each of our new supervisors came to pick us up. It was my first introduction to supervisory personnel, their ties a badge of their position.

While I waited for my supervisor I looked at my envelope and discovered that I would be a 32 grade bench press operator making \$2.76 an hour. Maybe two-thirds of the people in the room had left when Al Langlais came in and Frank called off my name and that of Mike Beal. We both got up, glanced over at each other, and then went to greet Al in what always reminds me of the pre-football game midfield handshaking ceremony.

Looking at me Al said, "You're Mike," and to Mike, "and you're Dick, right?" We looked at each other, smiled and Mike said, "No, I'm Mike."

"OK", said Al, "I'll get it down."

"You'll be working in an area called T2-M12. That's the code name for what you do. Remember that name. You may get lost during the first few days, but as long as you remember what area you work in someone can help you find us. Also remember the telephone extension and then you can pick up a phone in any part of the plant and get back here."

"Now you're both probably wondering what you'll be doing. Well, this department is a little different than a lot of the others. We are what you call a miscellaneous group. That means that we do several different jobs. So in a given day you may be called upon to do a variety of jobs. Now", he continued, "I do have some people who prefer doing one job, and I try to accommodate them whenever it's possible. I think you'll both like this group. I think you'll find the work easy and you'll get the hang of it."

Mike said, "I hope so, the only job I know is army work. I've never done this kind of work before."

"Neither have I," I quickly added.

"Don't worry," Al said, "you'll get the hang of it, I'm sure. Tomorrow you'll both be spending the day in training, learning how we organize things around here."

"Well, fellas, that's about all, but I should tell you that attendance is very important. We have work to turn out here and the only way we can do it is if you're here all the time. If your attendance is poor I'm afraid we will have to let you go.

"I'd suggest that you try to get here a little early. I expect you to be in your seats ready to work at 6:30. You can't get here in the last five minutes and expect to be ready. Anyway you'll find the parking lots get very crowded in the last ten or fifteen minutes, so if I were you I'd give myself plenty of time. Get in the habit of getting here early. I'm sure we won't have any problem."

Mike said, "I'm planning to come in with my father, so I don't think I'll have any trouble."

"Good, I'll take you back upstairs now." When he took us back he shook my hand and said, "I'll see you soon, Mike." I told him I was Dick and we all laughed.

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It was 6:15 AM when I reached the already-jammed parking lot entrance. I parked in the back and followed several hundred people into the plant, flashing my new identification card to the guard as I passed by. I was pleased with myself, having arrived early, and then I saw that Mike Beal was already enjoying an early morning smoke with a couple of the other men. We all talked for a few minutes, and then a bell rang at 6:30 and everyone tossed their cigarettes into the little receptacles that line the wall.

Al took us down to the training center where we joined six people from the previous day's orientation class. The morning began with a filmstrip which took the group through the assembling of a printed circuit board. Step by step we viewed the insertion of parts, the clipping of leads, and the soldering of the leads. The lights went on and Ed Ford rewound the filmstrip and showed it to us again, taking time to carefully explain each step in the process.

After seeing the movie for a second time we were each given some discarded boards and parts to practice with while Ed circulated around the room making spot checks.

As the morning wore on people began to relax and talk to each other. A variety of work styles began to emerge. For example, Mike seemed intent on putting the most number of resistors in his boards at the quickest pace. On the other hand, the man who was sitting in front of me seemed content to put a few resistors in his board while spending as much time as possible gabbing with anyone who would listen.

By late morning the pace of the whole group had slowed down. Mike went off to join his father for lunch, and I went upstairs with three other men, one of whom stopped at a table to say hello to an uncle. During the afternoon various people stopped by the training area. First it was someone's sister, and later it was another person's cousin.

During an early afternoon break Al Langlais stopped me in the hall, and told

me that he had just come from a meeting with John Connors, and that he now knew about my project. "I want you to know," he said, "I plan to treat you like any other worker."

"Look, Al," I said, "that's all I want. I don't expect any special treatment."

"Well," he said, "I was a little concerned at first because there are some menial tasks that go along with the job, like sweeping the floors. John assured me that whatever I would assign anyone to you'll do too."

"That's how I want it," I said, "I'll try to do whatever anyone else does. If I goof off it won't be because I'm expecting special treatment, it will just be because I'm a goof off."

Al concluded the conversation by saying that sometime early the following week he would assemble the group and explain my project to them.

He went back to work and I returned to the training center, where everyone was working on boards. The slow pace gave me some time to think about what was happening. The job we were being shown wasn't that complicated. I wondered why a day, and in Mike's and my case, two days, was going to be devoted to training. The only conclusion I could come up with was that the training was primarily a smoke screen to allow the new worker the luxury of easing into the work group. I imagine most people must have felt some anxiety about making silly mistakes in their first few days - I know I did. By having a training period, people were able to gain a knowledge of the tools they would be using in a fairly informal, non-pressurized setting.

By 2:30 PM we were doing practically nothing. Ed told us that even though he wanted to let us leave he couldn't let us go before 3:00, because a guard would probably stop us, take our E# and detain us until he found out why we had left early. To avoid that we sat in the room until 3:00.

At 3:00 a buzzer rang and I went outside to my car, opened the door, let the heat escape, turned on the engine and pulled out into the lemming-like line that reached from the back of the lot to the gate. It took me more than ten minutes to get out of the parking lot, and an additional ten minutes to get free of slow-moving traffic and onto Route 114. I promised myself from then on that I would leave the plant later and avoid the traffic and the headache I had developed.

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I got to the plant at 6:15 AM again the following morning. Since Mike and I didn't have to be at training till 8:00 Al got us started on some work in the area. Al sat down next to me at one of the bench presses and said, "This is a simple job really, all I want you to do is put these terminals in this board. There are seventeen terminals that go in the board, six go in one way and eleven the other."

Al proceeded to take a board and insert the seventeen terminals. When he had finished, he asked me if I thought I could do it.

"Sure," I said, "I think I can do it. Maybe not so quickly, but still I think I can do it."

"Don't worry about speed for now," he said, "all I want you to do is to do it correctly."

Al left and I got started. The terminals which had fit so comfortably into the boards when Al held them were reluctant to go in when I held them. The holes in the board seemed too small to accept the terminals. Besides, I had constantly to refer to the sample board so as not to forget which terminals went which way. However, by the time we left for training I had at least memorized the pattern of vertical and horizontal insertions.

Ed Ford began training by giving us a twenty-page, complicated booklet about color coding. He told us to memorize it. I looked through it once, but I couldn't see much sense in memorizing it since I had no idea what it was used for.

After a while we quizzed each other on the color value system. Ed told us that there was an easy way to remember the color codes. "You can remember the color value system, which is black, brown, red, orange, yellow, green, blue violet, gold and white," he said, "by remembering the following sentence - Bad boys rape our young girls, but violet goes willingly."

When we finished with color coding, we moved on to gun and hand wrapping. Both procedures were interesting and new and didn't take long to learn, but each would, I guessed, take a long time to be able to do well. Since Mike and I had earlier agreed that training was a waste of time we decided to ask Ed if we could go back to our group after lunch and not spend the entire day in training. Much to our surprise he said, "Sure."

Almost as soon as we arrived back at T2-M12 Al began calling the other workers over to an open area. Pointing to Mike he said, "This is Mike Beal," and then pointing to me he said, "and this is Dick Balzer. Dick," he said, "is going to be working here, but at the same time I want you to know that he is a writer and photographer, and he may do some writing about his experiences here. I've talked with the people in the front office, and I've talked to Dick about his project. Dick is primarily interested in writing about people, and not about Western Electric. I've told him he is to be treated like everyone else. I've also told him that if any of you don't want to participate in his project he should respect your wishes."

Al asked me if I wanted to say anything. I listed some of my previous experiences, explained a little bit about how I chose to come to work in a factory, and told them I hoped to get to know them a little better in the next several months.

Al called the meeting to a conclusion, but during the afternoon several people stopped by my work bench. One said, "If you write about this place mention that there aren't wide enough corridors." Another commented, "Say that I'm a cog in a capitalist system."

