

Capitalism and Morality

OFFICE SPACE: LIVING IN A CUBICLE

Catherine Gallagher

Catherine is a student in Wheeling Jesuit University's MBA program.

Office Space is a satirical film mocking the everyday life of an average white-collar worker. The film makes light of issues such as corporate downsizing, the outsourcing of employees, employee theft, and violence in the workplace. The main character, Peter, is a dissatisfied employee for the computer company *Initech*.

The film takes place in the late nineties when companies were awaiting the 2000 switch, and Peter has the mindless job of preparing the data for this. He works six, sometimes seven days a week entering the number 19 in front of lists and lists of banking data.

Every day Peter wakes up is the worst day of his life, because each day gets just a little harder to bear. He is extremely burnt out and has no motivation to work for *Initech*. The company does not have a functional rewards system, and Peter feels he does not get credit for his work so why even try.

Peter works with his two friends Michael Bolton and Samir Nagheenanajar who both work in the IT department of *Initech*. They are two of the few employees who actually contribute a good deal of work. They, like Peter, feel no commitment towards the company and are dissatisfied with their jobs. Every aspect of *Initech* is dull and mundane, making the small office talk almost unbearable.

Bill Lumbergh is a stereotypical middle manager at *Initech*. He wears suspenders as well as a belt and is constantly seen with a cup of coffee in his hand. He speaks in a completely monotone voice as he walks around the office pretending to be important to the corporation. Lumbergh has no regards for the employees working under him, which is exemplified when he makes Milton move his office down to the basement, and corners Peter into working every weekend. And Lumbergh is just one of Peter's many managers, so every time Peter makes a mistake he has to hear about it multiple times. A work environment such as this could drive anyone over the edge, and the film mocks the way corporate management ignores such issues.

Milton Waddams takes on the role of the quite disgruntled employee, who always gets pushed around. He mumbles at a tone that is easy to ignore, but when actually listening one finds that Milton has been threatening to burn *Initech* to the ground. The corporate middle managers at *Initech* ignore Milton, as they do with all the employee complaints.

This is the daily routine for Peter and the other *Initech* employees. That is until one day when everything changes. Peter goes to visit an occupational hypnotherapist, who just so happens to suffer from a stroke in the middle of the session. This leaves Peter in a state of complete relaxation. He no longer has

any worries and decides he wants to pursue his life long dream of doing nothing. Being completely unproductive and enjoying life.

In a capitalistic society individuals are taught to work their hardest, and that we can derive value from our work. But this is not the case at *Initech*. Peter, like many other *Initech* employees, suffers from a complete lack of motivation. Every day he wakes up dreading work. And as Peter said, each day is worse than the previous day, making every day the worst day of his life. This has in effect led Peter to dream of doing nothing. *Initech* has destroyed his view of the working world, by making him feel as if he was merely a disposable asset to the company.

The next morning Peter, still in this state of complete relaxation, decided he was not going to go to work. He let all the calls go to his answering machine, which were mostly from Lumbergh asking Peter why he had not shown up for work. This was simply because Peter had decided he would rather spend his time doing things like fishing and going out on dates with a waitress named Joanna.

Peter did decide to stop in the office at one point in order to pick up his address book. It just so happened that when he came in 'The Bobs' were conducting individual one on one interviews with all the employees. Only these were no ordinary meetings, the Bob's were conducting these interviews in order to decide who was disposable at *Initech*. They were downsizing and outsourcing jobs where they could, in order to pull *Initech* stock up a mere fraction of a point. *Initech* was so concerned with profit they disregarded any concern for their employees.

Outsourcing and downsizing occurs in many companies throughout the world, and sometimes the very livelihood of an organization depends on using such cost cutting methods. But these were not the reasons *Initech* was downsizing and outsourcing. They wanted to raise their stock that mere fraction of a point, regardless of the outcome. They did not care that they were discouraging any commitment the employees might have had in *Initech*. Instead they actually made the employees interview to keep their jobs.

It was in this interview that Peter decided to do the unthinkable. He told the complete and utter truth. Peter told the Bobs' that every morning when he came into work he would space out for about an hour and stare at his desk. Then he would do this again after lunch. Next Peter proceeded to tell the Bobs' that he only did about 15 minutes of actual work in a day. But, instead of being shocked and appalled but such complete disregard the Bob's were impressed. They told Peter that he was in no fear of loosing his job. In all actuality they thought Peter would be perfect for a position in upper management.

That was the last response anyone, including Peter, would have expected from the Bobs. They were willing to give a promotion to one of the laziest people at *Initech*, and then fire two of the best IT specialists the company had. The Bobs informed Peter they where going to fire both Samir and Michael.

The Bob's downsizing destroyed any commitment Peter, Samir, and Michael had to *Initech*, and in effect led them to thievery. They developed a plan to plant a virus in the accounting program at work. This virus would round each fraction of a cent down, and then take the accumulation of these fractions and place them in a separate account. Since they were taking only a fraction of a penny at a time the money taken would be unnoticed. That is until the plan backfired.

Michael put a decimal point in the wrong place when installing the virus and the system stole over three hundred thousand dollars from *Initech* overnight. Peter new that their was no possible way *Initech* would not notice that much money missing and decided to do what he thought was right. Peter was willing to take the fall for their actions and later that night he wrote a letter of confession to Lumbergh. In with the letter Peter left unsigned travelers checks for the complete amount missing from *Initech*.

Peter thought his life as a free man was over. That is until he tried to go into work the next morning. Upon arriving at work Peter came to find that *Initech* had been burnt to the ground. The virus they had installed and all proof of the theft had been destroyed. This was fortunate for Peter, Michael, and Samir, but devastating to *Initech*.

Milton was seen leaving the seen holding the very envelope Peter had placed under Lumbergh's door the previous night. Proving that Milton had in fact started the fire he had been threatening to the entire movie. Management and other employees at *Initech* had become so accustomed to ignoring Milton, that even with his threats they never saw this coming. The movie ended with Milton lying on a beach enjoying his newfound fortune, and Peter working a construction job that he derived much pleasure from. Peter was so disgusted with the way he had been treated at *Initech* he no longer wanted to be a white collar worker.

The film *Office Space* depicted working in corporate America as mundane and unfulfilling. It exaggerated and touched on some very serious and real topics. Management cannot ignore disgruntled employees, because that would only lead to disaster. Quite Milton, who nobody thought would hurt a fly, felt so at a loss at work that he finally exploded. *Initech* was burnt to the ground because management wanted to avoid all confrontation. They did not bother to inform Milton he had been fired, but instead removed his name from the payroll.

Another problem with the management at *Initech* was that there were too many middle managers. Whenever an employee made a mistake they had to hear about it from four or five different people. This would not only be annoying, but also keep employees from being able to establish a healthy working relationship with their managers.

Next their came the issue of the Bobs. Each employee at *Initech* new that they where interviewing to keep their jobs, even though it was not openly broadcasted. This is because *Initech* did not bother to try and hide what the Bobs were actually hired to do. Employees working for companies such as *Initech* want to know they have job security. And, after years of employment with the same company, telling someone they have to interview to keep their job would destroy any workers moral. It is one thing to downsize and remove positions when needed, but *Initech* downsized for a mere fraction of a percent in profit gains.

Lastly was the issue of theft. Having no loyalty left in the company Peter, Michael, and Samir who could have been useful and productive employees, instead spent their time figuring out a way to scam *Initech*. *Initech* had successfully pushed its employees over the edge. Employee theft is a common problem in many corporations, which is why it is important to make employees feel they are a part of the organization. This can be done by: offering stock options and job security, ensuring that employees are challenged to think, and their ideas are respected within the organization.

Office Space offered an exaggerated view of the white collar-working world. Through the use of satire the film made light of many serious issues, while stressing the importance of good management. Peter spent his entire life, day in and day out, dreading going into work and sitting in his cramped cubicle. Work should not be something one dreads, but instead something one derives value from and is challenged in. *Initech* could have solved this problem with better management. *Office Space* is the perfect film for one to learn what not to do as a manager.