



# Life in the “modern” office

**Early May 1996:** Began working for Emap, the large multi-media company. It derecognised the National Union of Journalists [NUJ] in 1991, and since then has established a system of individual contracts. I'm working in the consumer magazines division. Within a few days, I realise that most people I'm working with are proud of the magazine, and very loyal to it — at the expense of other titles, even if they are Emap stablemates. There isn't much sense of unity as fellow-employees of a big company.

**Mid-May 1996:** Everyone who works in the consumer division — several hundred of us — are taken to the Criterion Theatre, at Piccadilly, to be told Emap's results for the previous financial year. They've hired the whole place, and there's a free bar and buffet. Amid the gilt and velvet splendour of the theatre, the company's chief executive tells us that record profits have been made the previous year — the consumer division alone is £80 million in the black. After a gung-ho, onwards-and-upwards speech, he takes questions from the floor. On my row, we all surreptitiously discuss asking a question on why our wages are lower than all the other publishing companies. Our harassed-looking deputy editor says it would be professional suicide, and that those of us still in our probationary period wouldn't be kept on. So no-one asks.

**October 1996:** Another flashy corporate do. This time we're taken to a hotel in Mayfair to hear the results of an employees' opinion survey. A random selection of people were sent questionnaires on various aspects of working for Emap, which were to be answered anonymously. A personnel consultant has been hired to present the results. The resulting graphs and Venn diagrams agree that discontent over pay is the main issue at stake.

Our managing director then takes great pains, using a further blizzard of charts and figures, to explain that, in fact, we're not badly paid at all. The atmosphere in the room is derisive. What was the point of commissioning this survey if they don't want to take on board what people have to say?

**November 1996:** The NUJ, which has chosen to target recruitment at Emap this year, leaflets my building. The leaflets, given out in the morning as everyone goes in to work, are short and to the point, asking us if we are aware how much pay has decreased since Emap derecognised the union.

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In my office, we discuss the leaflet. Some of the people who've worked for Emap for a while reminisce about how, two years ago, they were paid for overtime done during the week. Nowadays we have to work longer days — often until ten at night — but don't get paid for doing so. We all hate having to do this, but don't have much alternative. If we left on time each day, the magazine wouldn't get printed each week and we'd lose our jobs.

**Two days later:** Another morning of leafletting. There's only one entrance,

so it's very unlikely anyone in the building has not seen at least one leaflet. This time, we're invited to an informal meeting in a week's time to meet NUJ representatives to discuss what the union can offer and how contracts of employment have changed since derecognition. In my office, people discuss whether they will go to the meeting, but several people advise against it, saying that senior management will probably note who goes in.

**A week later:** From about 150 people, there are only three of us at the meeting, which is after work and in a pub not far from the office building. The two NUJ reps have done similar recruitment drives at various other Emap buildings this year, and they tell us that they have had a similarly disappointing result at each one.

**December 1996:** Emap regularly sends all full-time employees letters urging them to buy shares in the company — after a certain period of service you can get shares at a discounted price. Several people in my office are shareholders. This week, all the shareholders receive a letter asking them to vote on an issue which is dividing the board of directors. Two non-executive directors are opposing a proposal to change the way non-executive directors are selected which would place more power in the hands of the existing board.

The company's chief executive encloses a letter urging all shareholders to support his line. Various people in the office are heard to say: “Oh, I'd better vote the way they want. I have to put my name on the form, so they'll know who I am”. Nobody in my office is over thirty, and everyone is well aware that employment is a precarious thing these days.

*Rebecca Webster*