

Prelude to an Adventure in Silicon Valley

by Steven Wells

This began as a short contract job at Cisco Systems, Building 14, 1st Floor as part of their *Mobile Worker Initiative*. At first glance, it might seem to have been a good idea—set up everyone to be able to work anywhere within an organization without the limits of traditional office paraphernalia. All you need is a computer connection, through Cisco equipment of course, and you have computation, email, text messaging, an IP phone, and the World Wide Web. What more do you need? In its haste to perform an experiment to prove the concept, *notably on unwilling subjects*, Cisco ignored the most crucial element that is needed—a human being using the Cisco connection. And human beings don't all look, work, act, or thrive alike. Each one is an individual, and the environment at the end of the Cisco connection is an essential element. That which excites one person is toxic to another. By ignoring individuality, Cisco's great experiment ended in failure after a short time. Things returned to more traditional office environments, where each person has a designated workspace, desk, chair, and screen. Not just a huge barren room with large unassigned tables and chairs all around for the mass of wandering tech-nomads.

After experiencing the mobile worker environment, I wrote the following fanciful quasi-fiction. While the perspectives and motivations are clearly unhinged, all the physical details and descriptions of activities reflect the reality of the environment. Somehow, from the *mouth of madness*, the details are all precisely real, down to the Nurse Ratchet lookalike in the white coat.

A short stay in the mental ward at a homeless shelter

I just spent a few days in a very strange place. It was clean and bright, so at first glance, it looked okay, but it was really a secret laboratory where they experiment on people. It's all a diabolical plot to turn human beings into mindless robots connected throughout the world by internet wires. They say it's their model for the future—a special corporate initiative in their plan for global domination. Turn everybody into human pieces of packet data they can control with something that sounded like HOIP. I think it stands for *Humanity's Our Internet Packets*.

The test subjects are people, but only some of them are volunteers. The rest are unwilling human guinea pigs. To make it easier to prove that the dehumanizing techniques work, the minions of the mysterious H.R. who masterminded this horror, use homeless, mildly-deranged technical workers because those are the easiest to manipulate. They tried to dehumanize me, but when I resisted, they knew I had figured out their plan, and sent me away. Rather than allowing any negative data to show up in their experiment, they risked letting me out, thinking that everybody would think I'm just a paranoid loony. They thought it was safe because they think I'm just an engineer, and engineers can't write worth a damn. But they forgot that I'm rare and special—an engineer who knows how to write. I'm really, really good at it. **I'll show them!**

So, how do their sicko systems work? They send you to the special facility where a door guard calls for a trustee to take you in. It's a secure place, so they don't want you to come and go on your own. They put special electronic locks on the door, and because you have no identity inside, you're stuck. The 1st floor

warden came for me. She was Nurse Ratchet from the Cuckoo's Nest. She went by another name, but she looked just like Nurse Ratchet, and her white coat was a giveaway. Like I said, at first glance it looks like a nice clean mental ward, with the walls painted in an institutional off-white and a few large, formless, ugly modern-art pieces stuck on the walls. The furniture looks like it should be comfortable, but they only had two kinds of chairs, and both of them hurt my back, so I had to sneak up in the elevator to the next floor and steal a comfortable adjustable purple chair from an empty cubicle. I did this on two days, and I think that got the wardens mad. Maybe it's because I discovered the empty cubicles, and they want everyone to think that there aren't any cubicles, and that's why they've got everybody down in the first-floor ward.

I watched the wardens and the inmates carefully. They must have made the first group of inmates into wardens once they had been dehumanized into robots. Both the wardens and the inmates are nuts. They spend all their time staring into little screens that are only three-quarters of a square foot, and thrashing at undersized keyboards. Or clicking mice. Typety-typey-type and clickety-clickey-click. Once they give you a screen, you have to stare at it all the time, or carry it around with you when you're not staring into it. They get mad if you aren't constantly staring or carrying it or dragging it around with you. The Romans had a big funny word for that. It's "vademecum," which is Latin for carrying a stupid notebook around with you all the time, and that sounds pretty crazy to me. But then again, the Romans tried to rule the world, too. **Now, I see through their plans!**

Everybody rushes around aimlessly, all in a big hurry, but without getting much of anything done. There are systems that are supposed to be working but I heard that one of the big systems was down again. Programs and plans don't go the way they should, and everyone is in a constant state of turmoil. Everybody constantly interrupts everybody else with little messages on the screens so that nobody has time to form a complete thought in his or her mind. Yes, they experiment on both men and women, oops—ladies first—shopping-bag ladies and guys who live out of shopping carts. You see, this is a dehumanization experiment, so nobody is allowed to have anything of their own. You don't have your own place to sit, so you have to find a spot that other squatters haven't taken yet.

But really, you're just out there in this big room. In the mental ward, you have no privacy. Everybody else can watch you all the time, whenever they stop staring into the little screens. And you watch everybody else, when you're not staring into your own screen. Because the place is chaotic, they didn't have a screen for me, so I got to see what was going on. I also got to hear what was going on. Or really, I had to hear what was going on. There are no sound deadening partitions like you'd find in an office with cubicles—just lots of short, hard, white-boards to reflect all the noise all around the ward. You hear everything every other

inmate says, and the babble is so loud that it's hard to think. I used some ear plugs to cut down on the noise I had to endure, and I think the wardens didn't like that I did that, either. It's not just all the babbling. There are machines making noises, too. Beep-beep and buzz-buzz and goofy singy-song sounds coming out of tiny pocket-size devices. One of them went deedle-dee-do-dee-deedle-dee-dee a few times.

Like the other homeless wanderers who are still outside the ward, some of the inmates have a few personal do-hickeys, and they hide them in special little lockers when they can. But mostly they are seen dragging their junk around on improvised carts, or toting jetsam around in bags. I asked about getting a place to store a few of things like my super keyboard and a box of magic buttons, but that was ignored. Twice I got told to go buy a cart, but I can't afford to do that, and Safeway would get really mad at me if I stole one, so I carry around my stuff in an old cardboard box. I had put my box down on a table when one of the wardens called me over, and when I got back, I found that another inmate had moved my box to another table. So you've got to watch what little stuff you have or someone will take it away or lose it on you.

I thought about putting up a nice picture or a cheery calendar so the place might look better, but one of the wardens looked at my box of stuff like it had a bad case of cooties, so I didn't do it. Nobody else has anything cheery up, so I guess they want it all to look like a sterile robot ward.

There are a few bigger screens to look at instead of the tiny ones, but there is a lot of contention over sitting at the bigger screens. Even for the squatters who sit at them first, the wardens tell you off if they catch you with your stuff at a bigger screen but you aren't staring at it. Nurse Ratchet told me this. She's my warden, and she stares at one of the bigger screens a lot.

There are some tiny rooms around the ward, and sometimes inmates and wardens go in there to torment each other. They complain to each other about how things aren't working the way they should. They do this a lot, but all the things they talk about are a disorganized mess, so you don't see anything come of it. I got told about some database that says where stuff is, but there are way too many ways to mess with the database, and none of the ways does all the stuff that needs to be done. And when they try to do stuff at night to fix it, the machines don't always do what the machines are supposed to. Maybe that's what they want some of the dehumanized people as robots for.

So the wardens talk and talk and talk. And the inmates stare and stare. Babblety-beep-beep. Typety-dickety-buzz-buzz. Deedle-dee-dee. I know that if you start making these noises all by yourself

without the screen, then you've been turned into a robot, and you are doomed. HR wants all the inmates to be robots.

I had to blow my nose a few times, and I had some tissues in my cardboard box and used them. But you don't get to have a trash can nearby where you sit. So you've either got to get up and find a special trash slot to dump them, or you keep snotty trash with you. Or you carry it around with you. If the babble voices told me that snot was valuable, then I'd save it in a handkerchief in my pocket. But this mess was from allergies and blown into tissues, so it was cruddy to have around, and when I had a bunch of used tissues, I wandered to a disposal pod and threw them away in the trash slot. *Not the mixed paper slot, and certainly not the beverage container recycle slot. Yechh!*

But having to hang onto used gooey tissues is better than the way it is in the bathrooms. When you've got to take a piss, they have these special urinals. They splash back a lot so you end up getting pissed on. Normally, when the design is bad and you get a lot of splash, you can flush it when you go so you don't get piss on yourself. But these are special urinals that don't have any water connected to them, so there's no flush handle to pull. That's part of the dehumanization plan. For some reason, there's a toll-free phone number embossed in the sealing disc in the bottom of the urinal. But I've got no phone. And maybe it's good that I've got no phone. When you're in a mental ward, and they make you so crazy that you try to phone and converse with what you see in the bottom of a toilet, *you're in really bad trouble.*

Maybe this will help some of the poor lost souls getting turned into robots. I hope they get out before they're destroyed. It's a good thing I got out of that nuthouse before my head imploded. *I was lucky!*