

Chapter 36. Mike

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This story comes from my experience as a writing tutor at the Sam M. Walton College of Business's Business Communication Lab (BCL) at the University of Arkansas. As a "business communication" lab, we tutored both writing and oral communication, and we explicitly served business majors. The Walton College attracted many international students, and these students constituted a good number of our tutoring sessions at the BCL. One of my most common repeat students was a senior I'll call Mike, a man from China majoring in business management.

At the start of one of our sessions, Mike sat down with even more enthusiasm than usual—he seemed to be in a particularly good mood that day. He excitedly told me that he had secured a job interview. "That's great!" I said, giving him a high five. "What's the company?" But when I heard the name, my heart sank. As it happens, I'd interviewed with that same company not too long ago and discovered in the course of the interview that this company was, in fact, a multi-level marketing scheme—an MLM, or a pyramid scheme. Sure, the job description had been attractive enough: set your own hours, be your own boss, grow your portfolio. And their website looked pretty legit, too, with photos of people happily working together on computers, shaking hands, and exchanging files. To any outsider, especially one looking to gain a foothold in the business world, it was the perfect intro-level job. But a more skeptical applicant might have noticed that the company seemed very keen on not telling you what it was, exactly, that they did. What product or service did they provide? Amid all the vague language of *we provide quality services* and *we serve a variety of stakeholders*, there was no indication of what one would be doing on a day-to-day basis—after all, if applicants knew that they'd be spending hours on their feet, outside in the Arkansas summer, pressuring people to buy subpar products for a pittance of a commission, they'd probably look elsewhere. But my interview with the manager had told me everything: the vagueness was the point. This company preyed on young, doe-eyed job seekers—preferably straight out of college—who didn't know any better and could be taken advantage of.

As my excited smile sank into an expression of dismay, I told Mike the truth about the company. I told him that I, too, had gotten a call for an interview mere hours after sending them my résumé (which should have been the first red flag), that I had gone to the isolated, run-down building in my finest slacks and blazer, that after winding through a labyrinth of unadorned hallways, I eventually found the hiring manager, a "Mr. Little," sitting alone in an oddly empty office with only a *Game of Thrones* poster on the wall. He grew increasingly defensive as I pressed

him on what exactly I would be doing if hired for this job, and it was only my wife's sage advice to *never burn bridges* that kept me from getting up from the interview and thanking "Mr. Little" for wasting my time.

I answered Mike's many questions as best I could. I explained how these "jobs" worked—how they typically required the new recruits to employ high-pressure sales tactics on their friends and families or even resort to the door-to-door approach just to make a barebones commission. And if one was devoted enough to put up with the exhausting hours and pitiful pay, one might—emphasis on *might*—make it to the next tier on the pyramid. But there would always be someone higher, someone whose earnings depended on the lower tiers, and so the very concept was predatory by design. Mike was disappointed, but he understood. I showed him some resources for finding *real* jobs, jobs that wouldn't take advantage of him, and he thanked me for the explanation. I continued to work with Mike until he graduated from the business college later that semester.

On the one hand, Mike's story offers a refreshing happy ending: in a hopeful moment of solidarity, I was able to draw on my own experience and steer Mike away from a potentially disastrous outcome. But on the other hand, it raises some important questions for us in writing center work: what drives people—including tutors and even the students we work with—to pursue exploitive jobs like this in the first place? How do these illegitimate companies manage to trick otherwise savvy individuals into applying? And what can we do as tutors to prevent them from falling into the trap?

I would argue that the first two questions go hand-in-hand. Thinking back on my own experience with the company, I had been lured by the job posting's claims that I would be able to use my communication and leadership skills, network with like-minded people, and solve challenging problems. This all sounds familiar: these same opportunities had led me to writing center work in the first place. MLM schemes prey on the same types of people who seek out and excel in writing centers: the desire to use one's communication skills, the desire to continue to develop those skills through challenging and rewarding practice, and the desire to collaborate with others and work together to solve problems. It's no surprise that someone interested in writing centers, whether as a tutor or a student, would also be interested in a job that offered these opportunities. Even worse, these companies prey on those who tend to give people the benefit of the doubt, which I think we in writing centers often do. One thing that got me into writing center work was knowing that my skills and efforts would be appreciated; that my sessions would end with a reciprocal sense of genuine gratitude. MLM schemes capitalize on optimists who can be duped into thinking that if they just push through the long hours and work hard, they, too, can reach the top of the pyramid.

As for what we as tutors can do to help, maybe the most important thing we can do is teach them how to identify these toxic jobs in the first place. After all, to read an MLM's job posting and website is to engage with a piece of rhetoric—one

that is often meticulously crafted and downright nefarious in its design. Even I, a Ph.D. student in rhetoric and composition, had been hoodwinked by the slick language of the posting and the strategic visual rhetoric of the website. What chance did Mike have? We need to treat these as opportunities for serious rhetorical analysis. Rhetorical analysis is a matter of reading between the lines, and that's what we have to do with these devious texts. After all, they aren't *lying*, *per se*—the company does indeed “provide services,” “serve stakeholders,” and offer “challenging opportunities for advancement.” But they certainly are leaving a lot out. We can read job materials alongside students, asking key questions such as, “What exactly would we be *doing* at this job?” “What *specific* product or service is this company known for?” “Is there any information about this company somewhere besides their website?” In my case, it wasn't until I asked the manager these questions point-blank that I realized what I was in for. We'd prefer that the students we work with—our fellow laborers—not have to get to that point, of course, and that is a matter of successfully analyzing what the company is telling them versus what they're *not* telling them. This takes practice.

But aside from this opportunity for fostering some rhetorical awareness in students, I share Mike's story because I think it represents an important component of writing center work that often goes overlooked: the work that we do with students extends beyond just dispensing writing advice. Here was a moment where I was able to advise a student on a different front than the typical assistance with definite versus indefinite articles, thesis statements, and citation guidelines. Those things are important, of course, but they weren't *as* important in this instance as being Mike's cultural informant about this unsavory part of the United States job market. As we know, tutoring sessions can be unpredictable, which is part of what makes the work so challenging yet also so exciting. We need to be in tune to what sort of feedback would be most useful to the student in front of us here and now—and that feedback might not always be directly related to writing. It might come in the form of simply warning students about the dangerous reality of United States work culture. And on that note, we need to continue to think of ways we can use our positions to foster solidarity with our fellow laborers, ways that we can advocate for them as they, too, navigate the hazardous waters of the job market.