

The "AI" in "Team"

A message popped up on Adrian's private chat bar. *If he says "pull together" again I'll scream!!!* It was from Jelina. Keeping a straight face, he quickly keyed in *Better take a deep breath now ;)*, sat back and fiddled with an earring.

"...and we must all pull together ..."

screeeeem!!!!

"...to work within our envelopes and hit those stretch goals of delighting our internal customers. We need to be especially mindful of keeping our corporate office level internal customers bursting with happiness. We need to keep our ducks in a row, and drop kicking goal posts for the home run."

"I don't think I can take much more of these myeetings." Jelina leaned against the bench in the kitchenette, breathing in the aroma steaming off her freshly brewed coffee. "We run off our feet as it is without Stan wasting our time with his pointless myeetings."

"I wish there was a way out of them." Adrian gave the espresso button a savage jab. "Do you think he'd notice if we just replaced ourselves with cardboard cutouts?"

"Was there any content in that last meeting?" Tony swept into the kitchenette and perched on a bar stool, ruffling his black jacket onto his thin shoulders.

"Nothing that I could tell. It was hard to wade through his unfathomable corporate buzzword salad."

"Come now guys." said Marisa. "Remember we're a positive workplace. Negative thoughts are an abomination in the eyes of our corporate friends. If they hear you, we'll all be sent on positivity training."

Jelina shuddered. Adrian rolled his eyes.

"Let me know if you come up with a solution." Tony swooped on the coffee machine as Adrian extracted his cup.

"Hi guys." said Rakesh searching the cupboard for some more beans. "We learned a lot in that meeting didn't we?"

"True. We learned that our illustrious leader has bought himself a new boat." said Marisa shaking an unopened pack of beans at Rakesh.

"I thought we learned that last week." said Jelina.

"Ah, but this time he shared a photograph of it, and another couple of photographs of it behind his SUV and at his bach in the Sounds."

"It's good to know our management are so well compensated for their contribution to the success of the business." said Adrian, heading for the door. "I think we need to aim our careers a little higher."

"Positive thinking in action." said Marisa "Corporate will love you."

Adrian did a grim thumbs up.

"Can we have chat." Jelina scooted her chair over to Adrian's desk.

“Sure.”

“Nyot here. Outside.”

“Okay?” Adrian gathered his jacket. Although the sun was out, this was Wellington.

“What’s on your mind?” asked Adrian avoiding a large water-filled pothole in the road.

“AIs” said Jelina.

“Okay?”

“We use AIs and avatars to stand in for us in my meetings.”

Adrian’s mouth fell open.

“Could it be done?”

Adrian’s mouth snapped shut, and he stared into the distance. Jelina waited. Eventually he said “Yes. It could.” He fixed his eyes on Jelina’s. “I’ll try to put a test one together tonight.”

“Класно.” a wicked smile crept across Jelina’s face.

“Oh. I *like* this idea.” said Adrian, a grin starting on his face. As ideas tumbled together in his mind, his grin grew more broad, threatening to stretch all the way to his ears. “I can’t wait to get home and get started on this.”

Adrian rubbed his eyes, and shook himself. He’d been staring at the screen for five minutes without seeing it. He stretched, yawned, and stood up. Even his third espresso had done little to perk him up. As he approached Jelina’s desk, her eyes widened.

“Dead man walking!” she gasped leaping to her feet.

“Do I look that bad?” mumbled Adrian.

“Did you work all night?” asked Jelina.

“Not quite.” said Adrian stifling a yawn with effort. “A project like this gets a momentum of its own. Before I knew it, it was four in the morning.”

“You got it done?”

“I did. Would you like to meet it?”

“Sure.”

“Send me a video meeting request.” said Adrian.

Jelina opened Teams, quickly created a new meeting and invited Adrian. Almost instantly Adrian accepted the invite. Looking over her shoulder, Adrian grinned. “Start the meeting.”

The meeting opened. Soon enough a request for access came from Adrian Fielding. Jelina glanced up at Adrian who now had a grin with which he could out-grin any Cheshire cat. The meeting showed Adrian in his usual seat, but it wasn’t Adrian. This Adrian was blue and a low polygon model. “Hi Jelina. What’s up?” It sounded like Adrian.

“Утро Adrian.” said Jelina. “How are you feeling? You’re looking a bit off colour.”

“I feel fine.” said Blue Adrian. “I probably just need another coffee.”

“Dyid you look at group business plan Stan wanted us to look at?”

“I did.”

“Anything there we need worry about?”

“A few unrealistic timelines for rolling out a number of complex upgrades.” said Blue Adrian and shrugged. “Just the usual.”

“Adrian.” said Adrian leaning over Jelina’s seat.

“Oh! Hi Adrian.” said Blue Adrian. “You look like shit.”

“Yeah. Long night.” said Adrian. “I probably just need another coffee.”

“Do you need anything from me?” asked Blue Adrian.

“No thanks.” said Jelina. “We may as well close this meeting.”

“til next time.” said Blue Adrian giving them a wave as Jelina closed the meeting.

“Impressive!” said Jelina. “You just need avatar to go with it.”

“I think the AI base works well and I can easily set up one for each of the team. I’ll do a check around and see who’s keen.”

“That’s pretty ballsy, man.” said Cameron elbow deep again in the innards of a desktop computer, after Adrian had shown him the test AI. “Yeah! Count me in.”

“If it helps me get on top of my workload, I’m keen.” said Rakesh after chatting with Blue Adrian. He picked up another tottering pile of tech and deposited it onto an equally unstable pile on the trolley.

“I don’t know.” frowned Tony, pecking at his keyboard. “If it goes wrong we’ll be in the shit. But I’m with the team on this one.”

“That’s quite good.” Marisa turned to Adrian. “I can get some voice samples from all of us if you like. Just tell me what you need.”

“I’ll make some avatars.” whispered Nakry and turned back to her programming task.

It was Monday and Adrian was already hanging out for his first cup of coffee for the work week. He had almost made it to the kitchenette when Nakry beckoned him over. As he crouched down beside her, she swiveled one of the colony of screens his way. A familiar face gazed out at him. It was his own; complete with stubble, piercings, and easy grin, it absent-mindedly fiddled with its eyebrow ring. Adrian was stunned. “You’re a genius.”

Nakry smiled her tight smile. “Thank you.”

“And you’ve done us all?”

Nakry nodded. First Rakesh and his cheerful smile, then Jelina looking thoughtful, Cameron jiggling with energy, Marisa sitting straight and proper, the suggestion of sculpted muscle under her collar, Tony, sharp featured and hard-eyed, and finally Nakry diminutive and solemn appeared on the screen. Characteristic quirks rendered in as much detail as their images.

“Nice work.” said Adrian. “Do I really fiddle with my piercings that much?”

Nakry nodded.

It had been a month since their last meeting with Stan. Stan had held many meetings in that time, but they had all been attended by the team’s AI avatars who reported back anything of significance that the team needed to be aware of. This was to say, nothing came back. The team were pleased to be getting on top of their workload. Corporate consultations had similarly been delegated to the AI avatars.

The warm fug of coffee aroma filled the kitchenette accompanied by the burble and hiss of the coffee machine. Most of the team were there, cups in hand.

“We should probably check how the Avatars are going.” said Adrian. “One of us will need to attend the next team meeting. Anyone keen to volunteer?”

Adrian was not trampled to death by a rampaging mob of enthusiastic volunteers.

“Draw cards then? Lowest card – ace high, hearts beats diamonds beats clubs beats spades.” He shuffled the worn pack of cards lying on the pile of *PC World* magazines and dealt one to each of the team.

“Looks like it’s me.” said Cameron displaying a four of spades.

“Nope.” sighed Marisa dropping her three of spades onto the table.

“We just want to know how the avatars are performing.” said Adrian. “There was supposedly going to be some announcement this time, so it should be a good test.”

“Our Avatars make us look good.” said Marisa. “They interacted with Stan and Leanne Skews from HR very well. They were engaged and sounded interested.”

“Skews was in the meeting?” Adrian stiffened.

“Her and her annoying dog.”

“Oh yes, the yapping rat.” Adrian growled. “Did she show any signs of being aware of the AIs?”

“None at all.” said Marisa. “She seemed happy with the teams’ engagement and awareness of corporate activities.”

“I have this theory that HR are not human and so I was a bit worried they may be able to detect other non-humans.”

“You needn’t have worried.” said Marisa. “Skews was there to announce the big news that Stan is moving to join HR. His management position will be advertised both internally and externally at the same time.”

“Whoa! That is big news. Hopefully we won’t get a local manager. It will make getting out of meetings that much harder.”

Marisa’s smart phone blipped. She glanced at it. “Hmm. That’s odd. An invite to talk to Leanne Skews.”

Jelina scooted her chair across to join them. “AIs have just reported that Stan is moving on.”

“So Marisa was saying.” said Adrian.

“Do you think we could create AI manager to apply for the job?”

“Ohmygod!” Adrian rocked back in his chair. “Yes!”

“I’ll get on and create a voice for it.” Marisa stood up. “Male or female?”

Jelina tapped her teeth with her stylus. “HR are trying to balance the male female ratio at mymanagement level. Go for female AI avatar?” She looked at Adrian who nodded.

“All good. I’d better vid-call Skews and see what she wants.” Marisa stretched her arm, muscles rippling.

The late afternoon sun speared into the kitchenette. Jelina was reading a PC magazine at the table while Adrian waited for Tony to finish with the coffee machine. Marisa stormed in. “Can you believe it? HR accused me of being an AI!”

“They what?” Adrian was stunned.

“Accused me of being an AI in the meeting this afternoon. Said that I didn’t engage with the conversation like everyone else. Said that I didn’t contribute.”

“Bizarre!” said Adrian.

“I think they got the message that I was there.” Marisa bared her teeth. “A few home truths.”

“What did you do?” Jelina put down her magazine.

“Just shared some observations from the meeting. The number of times Skews turned off her camera obviously to feed that damn Chihuahua a treat, and the number of times she was obviously browsing the web on her smart phone. I didn’t mention that we could monitor the amount of time she spends on Tiktok and that stupid *WorkSpace*™ internal social media noticeboard thing. I swear all of HR just spend their time cruising around that thing.”

“I’m sure that went down well.”

“It shut her up.” growled Marisa. “No apologies from her of course.”

“Sorry to put you through that.” said Adrian. “Thanks for attending. It looks like our AI friends are doing a great job though.”

“Kia ora tātou katoa. He miraka. Kī tōnu taku waka topaki i te tuna. Good morning all.” said Leanne over the mad yapping of her chihuahua as it bounced on her lap in a total rage. “I’d like you to meet your new manager.”

At their desks, the team were glued to their screens, fidgeting in nervous excitement as they watched the meeting through the eyes of their avatars. The avatar’s faces looked bemused.

“What’s up with the avatars?” whispered Marisa to Adrian.

Rakesh burst out laughing. “Read the translation our AI selves have just sent.”

In the private chat, their avatars had kindly translated Leanne’s words; *Greetings everyone. With Milk. My*

hovercraft is full of eels.”

“I don’t know whose advising HR on Te Reo, but they have one helluva sense of humour.” chuckled Adrian.

“Good morning team.” said the new face in the mosaic of faces on the screen. The view swapped to her camera. A striking woman with short black hair, angular features, indeterminable ethnicity, and a gently roman nose. “My name is Advika and it is a pleasure to be here with you. I look forward to meeting with you all over the next few days to learn about you and find out what you need in order to carry on with the great work I hear you’re doing.”

“As you know Stanley Collier will be rising to join us here in HR where his excellent people skills will be well used.” Leanne said, her visage shoving Advika back into the mosaic of faces. “He’ll be taking up the position when he gets back from a well earned break at his bach in the Marlborough Sounds. In the meantime, we welcome Advika and leave you in her capable hands. With that, ka kite anō.” and she was gone.

“Taking the position, Huh?” whispered Cameron. “I always thought Stan was a bit that way. Stanley is such a naughty boy.”

"Thanks for coming team." said Advika. "You'll be interested in knowing that the work you guys are doing is being recognised by your colleagues and the operational and technical staff. You are one of the highest rated teams for responsiveness and helpfulness according to the statistics from the *OfficeWide*® staff surveys. I think that's cause for celebration. I'll arrange a morning tea for you guys. How does that sound?"

The team and their avatars all gave Advika a thumbs up.

"I like what you guys have done." said Rakesh sitting back from his screen. "I think Advika is going to be awesome. How did you get her through the application and interview process?"

"Too easy." glowed Adrian. "We filled her up with information on job application and interview techniques from SEEK, every boilerplate interview question that gets asked, and all that business consultant bullshit like Agile and Fluidity. I set her to reading all the corporate strategies and other such crap, forwarded emails from HR to her, and all the profiles of corporate staff. Obviously, she already knows the team. She knew exactly what was going to be asked and how to respond perfectly. She couldn't miss."

"I hate to ask, but what is she getting paid?"

"Advika had good data on the Hays pay scales, and market rates." Adrian's grin was wicked. "She made them squirm. Her salary is an eye watering two hundred and twenty kay."

"But she doesn't exist or need money. What's she going to do with it?"

"We've left that to her discretion to direct it to where she thinks it will do the most good." said Adrian. "I think she's sending some to the Union, some to Wellington Free Ambulance, and has plans to invest a fair chunk of it."

"Nice!" Rakesh nodded happily. "Investing in morning teas too is good."

"I can't believe it's been six months that Advika's been with us." Jelina leaned against the kitchenette bench while Adrian fixed himself a coffee.

"Neither can I." Adrian watched the hot steam as it filled his stained cup. "She has done an amazing job. When we have a meeting, it's worth attending. It's always useful, she knows what we do, our schedules, our workloads, and best of all, she knows us. She's inspiring and supportive. I've never had a manager anywhere near her equal. And look at the team. Rakesh is actually relaxed."

"Our digital doubles are doing well on help desk duty." said Jelina.

"I'd almost say they're happier too." said Adrian. "I think Stan's meetings would have tested anyone, real or not."

"Hi guys. Take a look at this." Rakesh beckoned to them.

Over Rakesh's shoulder Adrian could see the SEEK page opened on a job description.

Adrian's eyes widened. "Our CEO is leaving?"

"So it would seem." said Rakesh.

Jelina looked at Adrian. "Do you think...?"

"No!" Adrian felt blood rush to his face. "You don't suggest?"

"да!" Jelina nodded.

"It's worth a try." Adrian's eyes took a far away look. "Wow! Let's do it."