

McJob: *n., slang*, C20, a fulfilling role with great prospects

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A letter has fallen into my hands. (I've always wanted to write that.) It was sent by David Fairhurst, senior vice-president and chief people officer in northern Europe for McDonald's, the global fast-food chain, and it invites its recipients to sign a petition as part of a new campaign to get publishers to change the current dictionary definition of the word "McJob". Really.

Open your dictionary today and you will find a McJob defined as "an unstimulating, low-wage job with few benefits, esp. in a service industry". A McJob "requires little skill", is "often temporary", and "offers minimal or no benefits or opportunity for promotion". Flipping hell.

You can understand Mr Fairhurst's objections. In the UK at least, McDonald's has established a pretty solid reputation as a decent employer. It has featured regularly in most of the main "good employer" league tables, and recently won Caterer and Hotelkeeper magazine's "Best place to work in hospitality" award.

Let's go large. Eighty per cent of McDonald's UK branch managers joined the company as hourly paid "crew members", as did half the company's executive team. Compared with some other companies in the service sector, McDonald's is serious about training and development. It is also more "female-friendly" than most: 40 per cent of managers and 25 per cent of the company's executives are women.

So here's the paradox: you can get a hamburger and milkshake at your local McDonald's, but you will look in vain for a McJob. Readers based in the US may think that this curious semantic battle, about to be joined in Europe, sounds a bit familiar. And you would be right. In 2003 Jim Cantalupo, McDonald's then-chief executive, lambasted the 11th edition of America's distinguished Merriam-Webster's Collegiate dictionary for publishing another of those oh-so-downbeat definitions of the McJob.

There were threats of legal action, which came to nothing. (Given the company's record in litigation, symbolised by the long-running McLibel case in London, that could not have been taken for granted.) One aspect of McDonald's complaint was that they did already have a scheme called "McJobs" - a training programme for disabled people. But the word and its popular definition remain in English-language dictionaries to this day.

Attempting to turn back a linguistic tide is futile. This struggle casts Ronald McDonald in the role of King Canute. Dictionaries reflect contemporary usage - they describe rather than prescribe. And as Dennis Baron, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said back in 2003: "If lexicographers allowed individuals or pressure groups to dictate definitions, then our language would be reduced to mere McWords."

The American psychologist Frederick Herzberg said: "If you want someone to do a good job, give them a good job to do." That is not always so easy in an era of automation and efficiency, when employers deliberately seek - often unwisely - to simplify and de-skill certain jobs.

But what should managers do about their "customer-facing" staff if they want to avoid the disgruntlement and disillusion of those condemned to carry out repetitive tasks? Lyn Etherington, a director of Cape Consulting, which advises businesses on their customer service, says that some companies go wrong at the recruitment stage.

"You should 'recruit for attitude, train for skills', as Archie Norman [former chairman of the supermarket group Asda] put it," she says. "There are some people who will never be suited to that customer-facing role."

But if you want to beat the competition by offering superior customer service, Ms Etherington adds, it is no use management over-designing people's jobs, minimising the opportunity for staff to respond to the individual customer's needs.

To achieve good customer service there are five key conditions to fulfil, Ms Etherington says.

First, there has to be clarity within the business as to what the "customer experience" is supposed to be. Do senior managers, middle-managers and front-line staff all share the same clarity of purpose?

Second, is that purpose regularly reinforced by managers, at daily briefings and team meetings? Third, is good customer service measured and rewarded? "People notice who gets promoted and 'who gets on around here'," Ms Etherington says.

Fourth, does the idea of customer service fit in with other organisational priorities? If all the talk is of cutting costs, don't expect "customer delight". And fifth, does your business present itself to your customers in a seamless way - hard to achieve when technological advances (and cost savings) tend to fragment the organisation.

McDonald's must be getting something right. In January it reported its best results in 30 years, with its fourth quarter net profits more than double what it had achieved 12 months earlier. The company has managed 44 consecutive months of sales growth, and is pulling in 4m more customers a day than it was four years ago.

But McDonald's is doomed to be controversial. And questions will always be asked about its management style and working conditions. Jerry Newman, a professor at the University of Buffalo, has just published *My Secret Life on the McJob*, his account of 14 months spent undercover as a fast-food industry employee. His conclusion? "The McJob isn't McEasy," he says. There are good managers in this sector, but also a lot of toxic and destructive ones.

We knowledge workers cannot afford to be superior or complacent. Who hasn't succumbed to the lure of the late-night cheeseburger, a welcome friend in need? And these days, job security is not what it was. Have you heard that new joke yet?

Q: What do you say to a recently fired management columnist?

A: Big Mac and fries, please.

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