

The Wrong Question

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I once had a second interview for a job at a small software engineering company. Instead of the common programming questions I was expecting, the person who interviewed me asked the following: “how much do you think a developer costs me?”

I was quite surprised by the question, and for a few seconds I simply didn’t know what to answer. I replied that I had run my own business for a while, so I knew a bit about all the ancillary costs of having an employee in Switzerland: insurances, pension funds, etc., on top of a regular salary. But I was still frowning, trying to gauge the actual intention behind the question.

I guess my answer pleased this person; in retrospect I should have left the room right there and then. I took the job because I needed it, and I only lasted there a few months.

As expected, after a few weeks in the job this manager became convinced that I was working less than the 42 hours and 30 minutes of legal work per week.

Because, you see, in Switzerland the law states eight hours and a half per day of working time, or 42.5 hours per week; most companies just specify eight per day (40 per week) in their standard contracts, though.

Actually this was the first time in my life in Switzerland where I had to work 42.5 hours per week. And it was also the first time I had only 20 days of legal leave per year, which again, is the minimum length specified in said Swiss law. Most companies give you 25 days, and some even more, because, you know, markets, competition, and such.

Here was a business who liked to squeeze as much work as possible out of its workforce, by offering the strict minimum in exchange.

(The longer I keep writing this article, the more I ask myself how on Earth I thought it was a good idea to sign that contract, or to stay in that job for that long. Anyway.)

So as I was saying, they thought that I was “stealing” hours from them. Now, the thing is that I *did* work those hours. I did not work less time, and I’d say that I actually worked more than that: usually I would start on the morning

train, and finish on the train back home. Since I had 40 minutes of train in each direction, I used the time there to start or finish some tasks. Add 4 hours in the morning and 4 in the afternoon, that makes for 8 hours and 40 minutes of net working time. Heck, sometimes I'd even work on evenings. I'm such an idiot.

But no, their idea of work was for me to be physically present in the office all those eight and a half hours a day. (Kids, this was before the pandemic, when working from home was unheard of, unless you worked at Basecamp, that is.)

And boy did they get angry. I actually got yelled at several occasions, and even got threatened of legal action. I replied to such courtesy by asking what proof they had that I was not completing my hours. I even had the *toupet* of suggesting them to install one of those time tracking machines with badges, so that they could still accuse people of misconduct and felony if they wanted, but, you know, with actual proofs.

And they re-yelled at me, that they did not have the obligation of installing such machines (indeed Swiss law does not say anything about that, point taken), but that I had the obligation of working the legal amount of hours (again, *touché*).

Clearly it didn't matter to them that all of my projects were on time, or that the customers I was dealing with were very pleased with my output, or that I had contributed substantially in quantity and quality, in every project I touched. Or, you know, that it was their word against mine: I did work the required 42.5 hours a week, and more.

The only concern of this business was for me to work the maximum number of hours allowed by law *in situ*, and having the least possible amount of holidays allowed by said law, and to pay the least possible salary that would pass the market test. That was it.

All of this while, at the same time, they were telling everyone that this company was "a family" (more on that in another article) and that if we did not attend some of the various company BBQs they set up arbitrarily following their whims and desires, we would have one of those 20 days of legal leave discounted, because retaliation and punishment are great ways to nurture that *family* feeling.

One day I resigned, and in retrospect, it was one of the best decisions I took.

A few months later I received an invitation from them to one of those BBQs, because they like to keep this "family" thing going on with their alumni. And it's a large alumni family all right, particularly judging by the length of the output of the `git shortlog -s -n -e` command in each repository. Spoiler: that list was longer than the list of current employees. If that isn't a red flag, I don't know what is.

Said invitation ended up in the recycling bin, of course, but fate wanted me to meet one of those managers in a train station a few weeks later. He rushed to me like a kid, asking if I had received the invitation, and became furious when I

told him that yes, I had gotten it, and that no, thanks but no thanks. His face actually turned red. I guess he wanted to sue me or something right there and then.

I turned around, wide eyed and chuckling, and walked away.

So, long story short: if you ever get asked about how much you will cost a company where you would like to work, instead of being asked how much value you can bring thanks to your knowledge, just walk away. The *only* thing some businesses care about is the P&L sheet, where salaries (and for extension, employees) are just liabilities, and you don't want to work for such "families".