

Back to School

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Uncle Arthur’s invaluable tips on how to get back to the grind.



It’s hard for me to believe that the August holidays are over. Kids are not the best people to have around when stress in the office keeps mounting and there are a thousand-and-one incomplete ideas floating around in your head even when you get back home in the evenings. And they have this nasty habit of creeping into your dreams at night.

But August is also holiday season and kids have been the alibi for us to have outings down south or to buffet lunches at the Pegasus Reef off Wattala.

Now all that’s going to be over. No more quiet times under coconut trees with a mug of chilled beer in-between dips in the pool. Yes, it’s time to go back to school. Sure, it feels terrible but why torment yourself? That’s the job for Chaminda up on the 14th floor, where they’re looking at unbudgeted 1996 expenditure. So let’s shelve the self-pity and go out and get the things we need to start the school year, right?

The Right Pens and Pencils: Let’s face it: One bit of equipment isn’t enough now that we are in the big money bracket. At this moment I am working on an old Compaq-Contura AERO 4/33 C with a poky old 486 DX processor and 750 megs of hard-drive. It’s great with text, weighs less than four pounds, and has good battery power, too. At home I often drive an old Apple Macintosh with the most beautiful interface around. A little ancient compared to what’s coming into the market in Sri Lanka these days? True, but good enough for me as long as it does the work I want. it to. It tends to be a little erratic starting up like my Mazda Familia DX, but we forgive that.

For the big budget jobs which are sure to come along as soon Devendra begins giving out assignments, I like to go with the IBM Thinkpad they have over in marketing. It is so effortless and slick and delivers better than anything in the range I can think of.

On the low-tech front, I recommend my current brand new briefcase, I picked it up after spotting it in a show window at Martin’s. It has a compartment for your travel computing axe, all kinds of cool zippered compartments and a side trough where you can store random paper, so you don’t have to open the entire case or poke around looking for something. It’s great! Several other executives have commented PAGER on it, so I figure it’s already paying off what it cost me to get.

The Right Desk: Your desk is a reflection of you. Or is it? Take a look around. Tell me

what you see. Is it you? Is it really you? Why is it so clean? If you are, fine, but if you're not and you're turning your most important surface into a reflection of that sleek Maheswaran, the senior officer who seems to be setting the cultural tone for the whole business school right now – forget it!

It's a new school year and time to let your mates know how freakish, or eccentric you can be! Or maybe you don't want to. You can still stay on that borderline where your personal expression doesn't show you've gone round the bend and mental vibes are anchored to where they should be!

This weekend go around the shops in town that sell objects for children or grownups who have no sense of humor and have to acquire one. I've had success before on one of my business trips to Singapore, where I walked into Change Alley and picked up one of those little electronic gizmos that record about three seconds of your speech and play it back. This proved to be as big an item as the little hand- held box I got a few Septembers ago that laughed hilariously and unstoppably or told people to shut up when you pressed a button. Man, was that hilarious at big meetings.

The Right Attire: The impulse to acquire new clothes at this turn of the season reminds me of those days when as school kids we were trundled off to Brothers or Kundanmals on Main Street to get new sets of white shorts or longs and shirts, as we had outgrown the previous year's ones fast. Since many of us still do, grow in or out, this effort is not misplaced. But remember, the goal now is not to shop for a new look. No, you're merely accomplishing what any self-respecting war effort must do shoring up the infrastructure. This means getting things like socks only cottons for me, no silks that match all your shoes, respectable underwear (not those garishly colored ones sold on city pavements), a new belt, some hankies and a few new, white shirts. Sure, get a new suit too, if you need one. But this is mainly about being prepared where it counts-underneath or up there around the cranium. It's about walking confidently into business school in the new season, clear as crystal in your head and above all knowing that deep down, right next to your skin, you are cool.

The Right Head: Not only a clear, luminous head inside, but the look on top too can say a lot. My preference is for the shaggy, deliberately studied careless head of hair but that doesn't go along with what most manager's think as being in good boardroom taste. Women, of course, generally boast more hair than the average male executive and thus have a plethora of restyling options. But how many guys

do you know could maintain a beautiful lustrous ponytail down the middle of their backs at this point in their lives even if corporate culture permitted it? No, for men over 27 the world is pretty much circumscribed into three options: short, neat hair that displays whatever tragic events are actually going on without artifice; a pathetic, sad comb-over; and power balding with perhaps a few streaks of gray to denote honesty, and experience if not expertise. Really, long hair is out for all but those who wish to look unalterably junior.

The Right Methods: Now, school means learning all that stuff about management philosophy and cross marketing. Cross-marketing flourishes most in a company that is market-driven, one that bases its products and services on the needs of the customer, rather than trying to force-feed products it has on hand. Agreed. But we have to learn not to be like that salesman-manager at a Colombo store who tried to sell me an overpriced battery charger. When I told him it was available for less at another store nearby, he simply shrugged and said, ‘I’m here to do the selling, someone else does the pricing.” And then he went back to sleep.

Clients value integrity in business relationships, but not that kind. No force-feeding, take it or leave it. Customers appreciate a salesperson who admits that a product might not change the course of man- kind and one who is not afraid to say ‘I don’t know, but I’ll find out’ and does. My battery-charger sales- man could have done just that and won a customer for life. He didn’t and so I don’t give a damn! Well so much for the right methods.

The Right Books Ahead of the Course: For those executives who wish to revise on management techniques we recommend a read of ‘Managing the Unmanageable Middle Managers’ written by a lady who did research on human resources and focuses on handling people who have been on the fast track but now have come to the end of the corporate growth curve and still want more money.

Also, ‘Big Egos: How to survive ’em’ can be a useful read for those who want to do things the right way this year at school. In depth attention will have to be devoted to tactful and efficacious sucking up, producing false jollity upon demand and coping with anger and self-loathing. Extra credit of course goes to those who will imbibe the lessons provided and apply them correctly in practice.

The Right Attitude: You could be tough and a no- nonsense person. You could walk the walk and talk the talk. You could play fast and lose. You could swim with the sharks. You could be from Venus or Mars. Or perhaps dream about taking a ride in a

UFO to scan the celestial fireworks shows 17 million light years away. But what about a really new idea? Never mind repeating the old time-worn ones, but do come up with some- thing. Or how about starting up the new school year with no attitude at all? Just walk in with your new underwear, nice brief case, and a genial smile. Let others be as bad as they want to be. Let’s you and me just do the stuff and that will make us big.