

# 1 The Big News



*Wednesday, June 22*

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Subject: URGENT - PLEASE READ - Louisville

To All Louisville-Based Associates:

URGENT - PLEASE READ

Your presence is required at an all employee meeting at 10:00 am this morning in the lower level conference room. Note that the meeting is mandatory and should take priority over any other meetings or scheduled work. No associates will be required to stay behind to cover the phones. Other arrangements have been made to ensure adequate phone coverage.

Thank you for your assistance.

Ann Singleton  
Human Resources Manager  
Mettle Life Insurance

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This type of email could mean a few things in my line of work. Spam would be the obvious guess, even if on the surface, it appears to have originated from someone inside the company. At least, I assume this lady works here. Her email signature line looks legit, and as I squint at the phone list (printed at roughly 8 percent to fit on a single side), I find her name.

However, spammers could easily fake this email. The problem, though, is there are no links to porn sites or VI@GR@

pitches, no politicians-in-drag attachments, and no Nigerian here's-15-million-dollars-I'm-dying schemes. There's not even a random paragraph of words below the message that spammers use to discombobulate email filters.

And why would a hacker want to fool everyone here into surfacing at the downstairs conference room? Would he be providing coffee and doughnuts during a seminar titled "Your Email, Your Profit"?

No, this email probably means something much worse, like mass firings. That's about as final as you can get — well, unless they are planning to kill us, bury us in the parking lot across the street, and continue to spam our unused email accounts.

Don is packing. He lives in a cubicle diagonal from mine. I peer around the partition and watch him thump books into a cardboard box, which sits on top of another box already full and sealed.

Where did the boxes come from? I don't even think he knows. Did the spammers leave a trail of containers for believability? Don doesn't appear to be concerned with the reason; he just wants to be the first one out the door and beat the traffic in the funnel-shaped parking garage.

After reading the email one last time, it occurs to me that the meeting might be a way to warn us of a terrorist attack. But through my eighth day, I'm not so sure that would be much of a change here.

Let me clarify. There haven't been any weapons involved (to my knowledge), and I haven't had to watch any telecasts that are months old regarding our mission to destroy a religiously oppressive country. Mettle Life Insurance, located in Louisville, Kentucky, is just a blip in the financial world, trying to overthrow the gargantuan pecuniary players in the global market by offering somewhat different products.

Instead of jihads, we sell annuities, from what I understand.

Then again, I haven't actually seen an annuity, let alone a sold one. It's not like I've been to the gift shop yet.

Or maybe people purchase them through the website I'm supposed to be maintaining, but in less than two weeks, I haven't gotten that far yet. Jeff said he was going to train me on a few things, but he's on the phone. He sits across from me, but I can't see him. Our computers face each other, but cubicles separate us. We can't even play footsie.

"Oh, I see," says Jeff to the person on the phone. "Well, I've been calling around to find out what's up. No one up here seems to know. OK, let me know if you find out anything."

He hangs up, possibly with some info about the mysterious email. The good thing is that I don't have to leave my cubicle; Jeff will come over and tell me. To this point, I have noticed that he is the glue that holds our web development team together, delivering messages faster than Western Union and Hermes.

Jeff rolls his seat into my cubicle, spinning two full revolutions, which is good for at least a 9 in the Olympic Swivel Chair competition.

"Raj's not positive, but he thinks something big is going on," Jeff says.

"Big?" I say. "Like what?"

"So big that he apparently doesn't have any details," Jeff says. "No one on his floor does."

"How could no one know?"

"Who knows? Oh well, I guess I'll go think about it a little more on the crapper."

Regardless of what happens, packing does seem like a good idea. At least I don't have much to store; the only thing on my desk, besides my computer, is the corporate handbook, which I use to keep dust from reaching my desk.

I decide to ask Barry for his opinion, because he's been with the company for a fairly long time. I walk over to Barry's cube and notice he is frantically calling people on his phone.

"Well hello there, Jason," Barry says. "Don't ask about the email. I'm not sure what to make of it. So can you sub for volleyball tonight or what?"

Possibly his next call will reveal something important.

“No, no, we’re still on for lunch. I’d like to go earlier, I’m already hungry, but I have to go to this stupid meeting at 10. And it’s not even 9 right now!”

Not wishing to loiter any longer, I pass by a few other cubes and wander over to Ken’s and Diya’s areas. They both appear to be working, but they are also both experts at moving windows around on their machines to pretend they are doing something noteworthy.

Ken is talking on the phone at a whisper level, reading and sending new email. Diya, on the other hand, has her head buried in a command line window, perhaps analyzing data. However, I keep my distance because according to Ken, interrupting Diya can cause the systems to crash.

Ken notices me standing between the adjacent cubes, and at the same instant, Jeff returns to propagate the latest news.

“Raj doesn’t know anything,” Jeff says to Ken, also catching Diya’s attention.

“No one on our floor seems to know, either,” Ken says.

“Why is he packing?” I say, peering over to Don’s area.

“Don is always doing his own thing,” Diya says.

I just reached the point where I can remember the names of my team members.

As the new guy, I have no freakin’ idea who may actually hold the truth behind the email. Let’s face it, though — the spammers and terrorists could make their moves at any time.

During the next hour, numerous other questions enter my mind. Are they firing everyone? Are we moving? Will my position be eliminated? Do you have to move to Nigeria to run a Nigerian spam scheme? My coworkers on the seventh floor continue to mull the responses they have received so far. Most comments point toward something big, and Don continues to stock his boxes. Barry, meanwhile, continues to look for that elusive sixth player for his Wednesday night volleyball team.

I can’t help but consider that I am being set up for an

unprovoked catastrophe with the job I began just eight days ago.

“Why would they even hire you to start with if they are going to let you go?” Ken says.

“I don’t know. It’s a little odd they didn’t tell me that when I started,” I say. “Surely this isn’t something they came up with overnight.”

“If they are announcing something today, they’ve known for a while. But the head honchos at Northern Lineage don’t always let everyone know what’s happening. A few years ago, they hired a guy specifically for one type of programming, and a week later, they stopped using that program.”

“So what happened with that guy?”

“He fell into a vat of lava downstairs,” shouts Don from his cube. “Beware of that first left when you go to the basement.”

“He was just a contractor,” Ken says.

That really doesn’t make me feel any better. Not the part about the lava — of course, that scares the shit out of me — but I just spent three-and-a-half months looking for a job, and I’m not ready to start looking again. The people here are nice enough and extraordinarily quirky.

I wander back to Jeff’s cube to see if he’s ready to head to the meeting in the basement. It’s already teetering on 10 a.m. I think he’s doing maintenance work, but separating work from play is sometimes difficult with Jeff. He’s one of the few people I know who can seemingly get almost as much work accomplished while screwing around as he does actually concentrating.

Barry and Ken also gather outside Jeff’s cube, which I found out last week is the official town meeting place. Jeff pushes away from his desk and heads behind us toward the seventh-floor elevator. We descend to the basement, packed like beef jerky in a cardboard box, minus the individual plastic wrapping.

I follow Jeff, Barry, and Ken to the middle rows, although

I'd rather find Diya and sit next to her. Let's face it: She's a female programmer, and she's cute. How often does that appear in a non-virtual world setting? She hasn't appeared yet, but I do find a seat next to the guys. Up front, there are a handful of important-looking people, none of whom I've ever seen.

"Who are these guys?" I ask the others.

"That's Ryan Bender, the president of Mettle," says Jeff, pointing to the man on the left. "And the other guy is Claude Simpson. He's the president of Northern Lineage Financial. This is huge ... I wouldn't have expected him to be here."

The two men seem to be having a jovial time, exchanging short comments and jokes.

"They look like the best of buds," I say.

"When your company makes \$100 million a year not doing much of anything, it's easy to joke," Ken says.

The lady on stage introduces herself as Ann. I assume she's the email creator/spammer. She speaks briefly and calls Bender to the podium. Bender glares out to the crowd for a fortnight. He then locks his eyes to the paper in front of him. This is a bad signal to me. I brace for the worst.

"This has been a difficult decision to make, but in the end, we think this will be a huge step up, and the best scenario for Mettle Life Insurance as a whole. We are announcing today that essentially all of the staff based in Louisville will move to Cincinnati and merge forces with the parent company. It will be a challenge, but an exciting challenge that we hope all of you will accept."

Jeff and Ken both have looks of indifference on their faces, yet I can sense their minds are churning. I try to make eye contact with Diya, who is in the back, but she's still looking at Bender, probably hoping for more information. I scan the room for Don, who must have already departed.

Barry, seated to my left, has his head buried in his lap. I go over to console him, but I realize he's just scanning a takeout menu for one of the local Chinese restaurants.