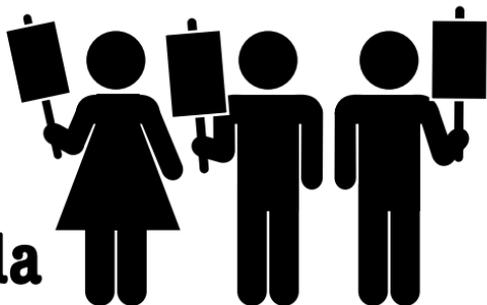


# 4 Propaganda



*Wednesday, June 29*

I listen in disbelief as representatives from a Realty company in Cincinnati answer questions from Mettle employees regarding relocation. The reps from Community Choice Realtors seem to be avoiding unveiling any useful information, instead opting to change the subject and/or ignore the question altogether.

“Could you tell us how property taxes differ in northern Kentucky and in Ohio?” someone from the crowd asks.

“Well, we know they work differently,” the woman rep says.

“Oh yes, they are different,” the man chimes in. Both of them nod their heads.

“Yep, it’s crazy how they are different,” the woman says. Then they both pause and await the next question.

Maybe they think this is supposed to be a comedy routine, and they are just trying to find the best time to work in the juggling-four-chainsaws-on-a-unicycle segment. Now might be appropriate, but someone else raises a hand.

“Does the city have a good snow removal plan in place?” asks someone else in the crowd.

“They do usually remove the snow, if it snows,” the man says. “I guess it’s pretty much like any other city with snow removal.”

I think of all the snowplows they use in Florida.

The show, a grand finale of “relo info” sessions, continues through more bizarre and worthless exchanges between the Community Choice people and Mettle employees. Since Tuesday, our parent company has been pumping us full of details through large and small informational get-togethers. At least the others gave me insight as to what to expect if I do move.

First, there was our weekly team meeting late Tuesday afternoon.

“I’m trying to get all of the information to you guys as quickly as I can,” Chris said. “Right now, they are telling us things sporadically, but they want us to wait until they have all the results.”

“Results?” said Barry, starting to jump a bit out of his chair. “I’ll give you results!”

We waited for Barry’s punch line, but he was too fidgety to give it. Barry continued to bob gleefully in his chair without saying a word, like a child on the mechanical horse in front of the grocery store. I wondered if I should fetch a cowboy hat that’s probably in one of his desk drawers.

“So are they going to start firing people?” Ken said. “That’s something we should at least know now.”

“From what I’ve heard, no one is being let go,” Chris said.

“Yeah, Northern Lineage can’t just drop someone because they don’t know enough yet about Mettle processes,” Jeff said.

“But they’ll send people down to learn it,” Don said. “It’s just like an alien invasion.”

I wanted him to expand on this theory, but Chris cut in.

“There are a couple of things I can tell you now,” Chris said. “First, everyone will have an opportunity to take a business day trip to Cincinnati to see the offices and meet with your new coworkers. You can sign up for a trip after we finish. Second, people will be down from Northern Lineage tomorrow and Thursday to go over various items with you regarding the move. There are a handful of meetings planned, so you should be receiving invitations in your inbox before you leave this

evening. Also, Marshall MacDougal will be meeting with each of you individually to see if he can answer any of your questions.”

I looked at the others to gauge their emotions about this news. As usual, everyone’s eyes looked more glazed than a Krispy Kreme doughnut. I was all for receiving more information about this craziness, and even I knew Marshall MacDougal. He’s the VP of technology for the parent company, and he was at Mettle on the day of the announcement. From what I had heard, he’s a go-getter, and I was curious as to how he would respond to our individual questions and requests.

Besides the always-wiggling Barry, everyone sat motionless as Chris continued his spiel to the peons. I have to admit, I feel bad for our boss. He has a wife and two kids with another on the way. This is not a good time for him to pack up and ship out, but it doesn’t appear he has much of a choice. Furthermore, Barry and Jeff mentioned the other day that some of the middle managers could be expendable to Northern Lineage. The relocation is an obvious way to cut expenses. Assuming that Chris moves, and he’s one of the first ones to say so, he is almost guaranteed to survive.

“If no one has anything else, then I guess we’re finished,” said Chris nonchalantly. Barry immediately jumped from his seat and exited.

“Do you have any clue what any of the meetings are about tomorrow?” I said as everyone else left.

“They’ll be overviews of the company’s dealings,” Chris said. “Actually, it says the first one will deal with annuities.”

“That should be interesting,” I said, “considering I’m supposed to be programming annuity stuff, and I know nothing about them.”

“I think you’ll find it interesting,” Chris said. “The annuity business is quite bizarre, if you haven’t already figured that out yet.”

This morning, I learned a little about why Northern Lineage

needs something larger than a single money vault. Jeff, Ken, and I again headed to the downstairs conference room as Anita Williams, the chief financial officer of Northern Lineage, exhibited a fascinating PowerPoint presentation to a fairly crowded Mettle audience.

The slide show turned out to be much more than a bunch of 10-point Helvetica words sliding across a bright yellow and paisley background. As a Fortune 500 company, Northern Lineage is currently one of the top mutual life and health insurers in the United States. Last year, the company ranked in the top five among both insurers and total profits per assets. And while the company is privately held, it is one of just a handful of companies that hold an AAA rating.

It sounded good, but it really meant nothing to me. Then the dollar-figure slide show portion began. The company profited more than \$20 billion six years ago and \$35 billion last year, which came to nearly a 10 percent compound annual growth rate. Altogether, the company now serves approximately half a million customers. Two weeks ago, the company purchased Indiana Life, based in Indianapolis. It appeared that Northern Lineage was still in expansion mode.

I continued to review the slides and listen to Anita, wondering what the others in the room were making of the presentation. Did anyone have any clue what goes on at headquarters? Jeff had made a comment that corporate pretty much did its own thing and left the Louisville office alone. That was made evident when I saw a slide saying the Mettle brand will remain. What was the point in offering multiple, perhaps identical, products through what will soon be the same company?

After the presentation, Jeff, Ken, and I grabbed lunch, and then we returned to our battle stations on the seventh floor. There was another meeting scheduled at 2, which gave us time to check email (of course, I had none) and plan additional work for later in the day. I noticed Don and Barry speaking to a man I didn't recognize, so I decided to be nosy. As I approached

Barry's cube, I overheard enough of the conversation to know that the man must be Stephen Payne. He used to work in IT at Mettle but moved to Cincinnati two years ago. He is still our point of contact on most server issues, because the actual hardware sits in a climate-controlled room at Northern Lineage. I wondered if the server had to sit through all of these meetings when it was relocated.

"The working hours are pretty flexible," Stephen said. "As long as you are there for the core hours, from 9-3, you can work pretty much whenever. I leave my house at 8:30, and it takes me 30 minutes to get there, but I'm always out by 4:45. Of course, I occasionally have things to work on over the weekend, but it's usually not very much."

Jeff and Ken also approached the small congregation at Barry's cube.

"How's the cafeteria?" said Barry. It was amazing how Barry never missed a chance to bring up food.

"It's pretty good overall," Stephen said. "It's your typical cafeteria. They offer a couple of different main dishes, a bunch of sides, box lunches if you can't get away from your desk."

"Not bad, and much better than Mettle!" Barry said. "I still haven't found the cafeteria here."

"What about the dress?" Ken said.

"You want to wear a dress to work?" said Barry, turning to expect a high five after spouting another vacuous comment.

"As long as you wear a decent shirt, dress pants, and a tie, you'll be all right," Stephen said. "I had to buy new clothes when I first moved up here. It took awhile to get used to, but now, it doesn't bother me at all."

"You have to wear a tie every day?" Barry said.

"Pretty much," Stephen said. "Well, on dress-down days, you don't."

"Oh, so you can wear jeans?" Ken said.

"No, you have to wear the same stuff ... you just don't have to wear a tie," Stephen said. "Well guys, it looks like it's about

time for the meeting. See you in a few minutes.”

I always thought dress-down days meant business casual, but according to *Dress Casually for Success ... for Men*, there are various levels of casualness, from traditional (polo shirt and khakis), dress traditional (oxford shirt and khakis), contemporary (jeans and shirt), and dress contemporary (black slacks and black shirt).<sup>1</sup> The book apparently leaves off vegetarian casual (salad and khakis), which is popular among herbivores, and causal casual, which involves wearing nothing until you are told to dress casually.

At Mettle, the normal dress code is a shirt with a collar and khakis. The thought of wearing a dress shirt, slacks, and a tie every day, however, seemed unbearable for us.

“I’m not too interested in wearing a tie every day,” Barry said.

“You don’t have to wear one every day,” Don said. “They have dress-down days!”

“Of course ... dress-down days,” Barry said. “I can’t wait.”

We tried to catch up with Diya, who was already headed to the elevator, but she was the last one in yet another sardine-packed ride downstairs to the large conference room. Our ride, consisting of myself, Jeff, Barry, Ken, Don, and two IT guys, was much more comfortable.

Ann Singleton, the same woman who sent that fateful urgent email regarding the relocation announcement, was again on the stage. This time, she was a pseudo talk-show host, asking questions to the Northern Lineage panel of experts: Stephen, Boris Granger, and Mike Mann. Ann finished a quick introduction and began to ask questions to the panel:

**Ann:** Why did you move?

**Boris:** I was briefly in the human resources department in Louisville, but I wanted to get into the other side of things, the more technical side in Cincinnati.

**Stephen:** Northern Lineage seemed like a stable place, and

I received a pretty nice package to move.

**Mike:** I needed to redefine my focus and myself. I saw a lot of growth potential in moving, so I reviewed it and realized that could be just the thing to re-energize my career.

**Ann:** Were there any surprises from the move?

**Boris:** The cafeteria is really good. Hardly anyone goes out to lunch.

**Stephen:** When I was in Louisville, I was always under the impression that Northern Lineage was a big, stagnant company, stuck in the '60s. Even the decor seemed outdated. But once I moved up there, I was amazed at how quickly I bonded with everyone.

**Mike:** Most of the time, when you're stuck in a big company, there's a sense of depersonalization. But the atmosphere has never felt like that. Everyone is nice, and there is a lot of camaraderie.

**Ann:** How do you feel about the professional dress?

**Mike:** Personally, I don't care for professional dress. But it kind of grows on you after a while.

**Stephen:** I've always believed that how you dress is how you feel.

**Boris:** It's really a non-issue with me.

**Ann:** Name a negative of your job or the move.

**Brett:** At the job level, honestly nothing comes to mind.

**Stephen:** The thing that was the hardest was making the initial decision to move. Since I did that, my wife and I are 100 percent happy that we made the choice.

**Mike:** Any move is going to be stressful. It's difficult because people don't stay in touch. But in the end, I'm glad this was the outcome.

**Ann:** How does the company treat its associates?

**Boris:** It's pretty cool because they have various events, like associate appreciation week and discount days. It really makes you feel like you belong to a family.

**Stephen:** They do a lot of things that just don't have to be done.

**Mike:** I've found it remarkable the amount of time people have stayed with Northern Lineage. Just recently, someone had a 20th anniversary, and he was just 100th in line in Information Services.

I jotted down as much as I could. I planned to compare some of these things with impressions from my team ... people who have been around long enough to give their own reactions. One conclusion was evident: Northern Lineage had chosen the panelists wisely. The trio appeared confident in its answers, and the Mettle audience seemed interested. The three guys had given responses that, for the most part, could be trusted by former cohorts.

As an outsider, I felt as if some of this was Northern Lineage propaganda, making it appear that the only choice was to move. At one point, I could have sworn that Ann plugged the robot-like Mike Mann into a wall outlet.

Regardless, Northern Lineage was serious about giving Mettle employees all of the information they could handle. I appreciated that, but I also realized my appointment with Marshall MacDougal was just five minutes away. Ann closed with a handful of questions from the crowd, and just as we were dismissed, I scurried to catch the first elevator.

Back on the seventh floor, I found Marshall, who was in an office just beside Sally's. I told him what I did at Mettle (at least, what I had done during my 13-day tenure) and my previous experience. Then he asked me what I wanted to know. I was curious how he ended up in his current position.

"I bounced around a couple of places before coming to Northern Lineage 10 years ago," Marshall said. "I came here

for three reasons. First, it's a very strong financial company. When I worked at one of the large telecom companies, they had grandiose ideas, but they could never complete what they started. Second, there is a strong CEO-level commitment to technology across the board, from mainframe to distributing. Finally, the employees at Northern Lineage are good people, and all things are possible, including data mining, target marketing, etc.

"That telecom company had good vision in a lot of areas, but they just couldn't execute. Good companies focus on execution and grow conservatively. There are a lot of smart people at Northern Lineage."

"Do you think we'll run into many conflicts with the technologies we use down here and what you use up there?" I said.

"We're in the process of moving a lot of our stuff from Visual Basic to .NET," Marshall said. "And of course, you guys use Java down here, and we don't use Java much. But this isn't a matter of choosing between Java and .NET — you can't have just one. Our web services need to interact with both. Our application developers do a tremendous job, and the quality of work is high. I'm also looking forward to Project Giza, but that is sort of under wraps for now."

I thought I would try to catch Marshall off guard by asking a somewhat negative question.

"So far, I've heard a bunch of reasons why I should go to Cincinnati," I said. "Can you give me a reason why I shouldn't go?"

"I can think of three reasons not to go," Marshall said. "If you want to work only for a software company, you might be out of place, because we're doing much more than just software. Or, if you're into consulting, and you build maybe 10 to 12 websites a year, without any maintenance, that's not Northern Lineage either. We are constantly improving on what we build internally, for the end user. The other reason not to go would be if you wanted to work in a really large shop, because

again, that's not what it's about."

Marshall was about as convincing as a soaking-wet meteorologist shilling ponchos. And his assurances made the earlier meetings seem even more tantalizing. I liked that Northern Lineage is not trying to take over the world. Companies that grow too fast also wither fast as well. Another thing that struck me from Marshall's responses was the importance of exploring emerging technologies and not being pigeonholed as one specific type of development company. When comprehensively describing the company's departments, he mentioned that another possibility was moving around to work on different projects.

I was also interested in this aforementioned Project Giza. I wondered if that relates to the great Egyptian pyramid by the same name, though I've never seen a pharaoh wear a tie.

After the meeting, I returned to my desk. Jeff was still in the office, but he mentioned that Barry and a few others had gone to a nearby Mexican restaurant to hang out before the evening meeting with the Cincinnati Realtors. He was planning to go meet them as soon as Laura, his wife, called.

Minutes later, we were inside the restaurant, which I would later learn doesn't always keep a 183-degree temperature for its patrons. The air conditioner was busted, but that didn't stop the Mettle clan from taking up most of the seating.

When I envision an outing involving a large group of people from a typical place of business, one word comes to mind: boooooooooo-ing. At one table, people usually sit around and try to one-up one another with stories about their children, and at the other table, the discussion involves trying to decipher the entire current state of world affairs or the rationale behind why reality TV shows still exist. This can be stimulating for longer than 42 minutes, but without an unlimited supply of Ping-Pong and/or alcohol, the partygoers mellow by 9:30 and begin spewing every possible reason to leave early, including the old the-apocalypse-begins-tomorrow-and-I-can't-find-my-can-opener excuse.

However, the Mettle employees seemed anything but typical when describing an outside-of-work experience. Most of the people I've come in contact with here like to have fun with their coworkers, in a weird best friend/family-like way. And when people do talk about their children, they somehow don't annoy the people listening.

The restaurant emptied just before 7, and we walked back to even more food and drink in the basement meeting room. We had forgotten they were serving sandwiches. I grabbed a cookie and a Sprite and took a seat for the day's final meeting.

And now, unfortunately, the slapstick show still hasn't ended. At least we received handheld back massagers, which were sitting on our seats when we arrived. The freebies didn't have much to do with relocating to Cincinnati, but then again, neither did most of the answers that the Community Choice representatives had given.

Someone in the back asks the reps if they know anything regarding the difference between sale prices for houses with or without finished basements. Jeff immediately hones in on the answer.

"Off the top of my head, I'm unaware of a distinct difference between houses with finished and unfinished basements," the woman says.

"I think it just comes down to a matter of square footage," the man says. "The more square footage, the more likely the house will sell for more."

"The reason I'm asking," the man in the crowd remarks, "is because here, there are different rules for what is classified as a finished basement. Maybe it's worth more if there's an exit, or if there is some type of escape, unlike basements with extremely small windows."

The Realtors look at each other with puzzled expressions.

"We will have to get back to you on that," the woman says. "We can get additional information you need. Just leave your questions with Ann in HR, and we would be happy to discuss

options one-on-one with you.”

Jeff looks disappointed, but at least the Community Choice reps did an admirable job of dancing around a solution. Maybe we expected too much out of this meeting; everyone has different needs when finding a new residence, and especially under these circumstances, it can be even more cumbersome to find the appropriate place.

Raj, who is sitting directly behind me, and Jeff spend the final 10 minutes cracking jokes. Jeff told me at dinner that Raj’s wife is transferring within her company to a Cincinnati office, meaning that Raj is already in. Jeff has talked highly of Raj and says he’s one of the people who knows what’s going on at Mettle. I believe Jeff, even though I usually don’t like to blindly presuppose someone’s credentials.

The audience finally gives up asking questions, and we walk to the parking garage.

“I guess we’re going to have to find our own information,” I say.

“I suspect once we have an actual Realtor to work with, they’ll have answers for us,” Jeff says. “Northern Lineage wants us to move up there, so they won’t just sit on their hands with the housing crap.”

“You would think so,” I say. “They’re going to have a hard time getting us to move without having a place to live.”

“There’s an obvious answer for that,” says Barry, heading to a different parking garage. “They want you to live at work. Do you think they would be going to all of this trouble if that’s not what they wanted?”