

THE PRICE NOBODY CHARGED · CHAPTER TWO

The Favour on a Friday

Work delivered and never written down is neither charged for nor received as a gift.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

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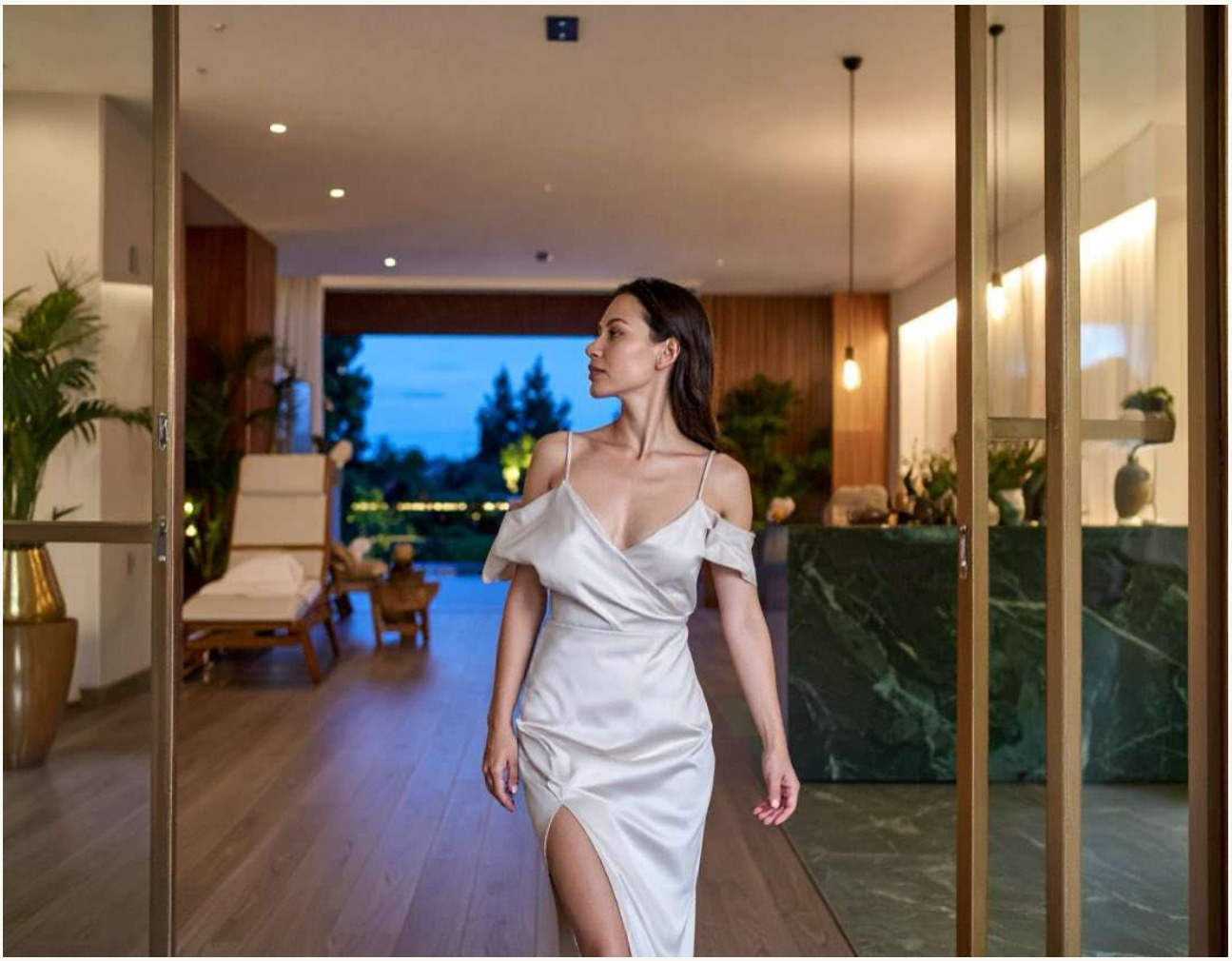
ABSTRACT

Work delivered and never written down is neither charged for nor received as a gift. It is twenty to six on a Friday, and the office of a structural engineering practice has mostly emptied for the weekend. An engineer in her sixth year is finishing her timesheet, the last thing she does every week, at a desk by the window where the last of the light has gone flat and grey over the car park. The project is an extension to a primary school: four classrooms and a hall, on a fixed fee agreed in the autumn. The timesheet has a row for the project and a row for "general office", and she is deciding which row this week belongs in. It was not a planned week. On Monday the architect moved one of the classrooms a metre and a half to save a tree, and the drainage layout had to be redrawn. On Wednesday the client's project manager rang to ask, kindly and apologetically, whether someone could come to site on Thursday, because the contractor had found an old culvert where the drawings showed none. She went.

CHAPTER TWO

The Favour on a Friday

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The Favour on a Friday

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Twenty to six, the timesheet

It is twenty to six on a Friday, and the office of a structural engineering practice has mostly emptied for the weekend. An engineer in her sixth year is finishing her timesheet, the last thing she does every week, at a desk by the window where the last of the light has gone flat and grey over the car park. The project is an extension to a primary school: four classrooms and a hall, on a fixed fee agreed in the autumn. The timesheet has a row for the project and a row for "general office", and she is deciding which row this week belongs in.

It was not a planned week. On Monday the architect moved one of the classrooms a metre and a half to save a tree, and the drainage layout had to be redrawn. On Wednesday the client's project manager rang to ask, kindly and apologetically, whether someone could come to site on Thursday, because the contractor had found an old culvert where the drawings showed none. She went. On Thursday evening and Friday morning she answered eleven questions from the contractor that the project manager had forwarded with the line *could you just have a quick look at these?* None of it was in the scope the fee was written for. All of it was work the project needed.

The fee for the stage she is in was spent two weeks ago. If she books the week to the project, the project report on Monday will show it further over budget, and the director will ask why. If she books it to "general office", the project will look as it looked last week, and nobody will ask. Her shoulders are already up by her ears. She types the hours into the second row.

She is a composite, drawn from the way these Friday evenings are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. Anyone who has worked in a firm that sells its time has filled in that row.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon has a name for what she has just done, though it was written about families and teams rather than invoices.[4] Every relational field, it says, "also contains what family systems theorists have called an invisible ledger — the unspoken accounting of what has been given and received, what is owed and what remains unpaid." The client does not know the week happened. Her director does not know. The only record of it is a row on a timesheet that says, in effect, that it did not.

This chapter makes one claim. A great deal of the revenue a professional firm loses is not lost to clients who refuse to pay. It is work the firm delivered and never wrote down, given away without anyone deciding to give it, and because it was never seen, it was neither charged for nor received as a gift. The cure is not to charge for every favour. It is to make every favour visible, so that the firm chooses, each time, whether it is a sale or a gift.

Work nobody can see

In 1999 the sociologists Susan Leigh Star and Anselm Strauss published a paper on what they called the ecology of visible and invisible work, in a journal devoted to how people work together with computers.[5] Their subject was the way some kinds of labour disappear from the record: the work that is so expected it is never counted, the work done by people whose role makes them hard to see, and the background work that makes the official work possible. Their examples ran from nursing to office systems. Their concern was what happens when organisations design their records, and later their software, around the work they can see, and so lose the work they cannot. The paper is an argument built on years of field studies, not a measurement, and its text was not reopened for this chapter; its central idea has since become a common reference in the study of work.

The engineer's week is invisible work in exactly their sense, and for all three of their reasons. It was expected: a good engineer goes to site when there is a culvert. It was done by a person whose role makes it easy to overlook: a sixth-year engineer, not the director whose name is on the appointment. And it was background: the redrawn drainage does not appear in any deliverable the client will notice, because the drawings were always going to show drainage. The project's records are designed around stages and deliverables. Her week fits neither, so it fits nowhere.

Santa Anna's canon, writing about the roles that hold an organisation together without appearing on its charts, states the consequence in seven words: "You cannot distribute what you cannot see." It was written about recognition and the weight of hidden labour, and it applies with uncomfortable exactness to money. A firm cannot bill what it cannot see. It cannot decide to give away what it does not know it is giving. It cannot even learn that its fees are too small, because the evidence for that has been booked, week after week, to "general office".

The canon is careful not to make the invisibility sound noble. It considers the temptation to praise the quiet people who hold everything together without credit, and answers it bluntly: "No. It is not beautiful. It is often unjust." The engineer will not be thanked for the week, because nobody will know it happened. She will, in the spring, be asked why her utilisation looks low.

Why the fee was always too small

The second reason the week was unbilled is older than the week. The fee was too small from the start, and there is good evidence about why fees like it usually are.

In 1994 the psychologists Roger Buehler, Dale Griffin and Michael Ross published a series of studies on what Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky had called the planning fallacy.[6] They asked people to predict how long their own tasks would take, academic and otherwise, and then checked. The predictions were reliably too optimistic. When people thought aloud while predicting, they focused on how the task would go

if it went to plan and paid little attention to how similar tasks had actually gone before. When their past predictions had failed, they explained the failures as the result of particular, passing circumstances, which made the past seem irrelevant to the next estimate. The most useful finding for anyone who writes a fee was in the fourth study. When people were told to connect their prediction to relevant past experience, the optimistic bias disappeared. And when they predicted other people's tasks, they were, if anything, too pessimistic.

These are laboratory and classroom studies, mostly of students, and they measure predictions of time, not the pricing of professional work. But the mechanism they describe is easy to see in the engineer's practice. The fee for the school was written by the director, in the autumn, from a plan: so many drawings, so many site visits, so many meetings. It was not written from the record of the last five school extensions, because that record does not exist in any usable form. It is scattered across timesheets in which the overruns were booked to "general office". The planning fallacy and the invisible week feed each other. The fee is too small because past overruns were hidden, and the overruns are hidden because the fee is too small.

Santa Anna's canon has an observation about project plans that the engineer would recognise: "The relational labor that holds a team together is invisible on the project plan." It is written in the same chapter on keystone roles, and it names the same gap from another angle. The work a fee does not foresee is very often the work of holding things together: the extra call, the site visit, the eleven questions. It is the work clients value most, and the work the plan was least able to see.



A favour is not yet a gift

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A favour is not yet a gift

There is a defence of the engineer's Friday, and it deserves to be heard properly, because it is the reason most firms keep doing it.

In 1971 the psychologist Dennis Regan ran a small experiment on favours.[7] In the version usually retold, a participant and a confederate rated pictures together; in some sessions the confederate left the room and came back with two soft drinks, one for himself and one for the participant, unasked. Later the confederate asked the participant to buy raffle tickets. Those who had received the drink bought more, and the effect held whether or not they liked him. The study is small, and its details are given here as it is customarily described, not from the paper itself. It has been read ever since as evidence that a favour creates a felt obligation to return it.

A decade later the economist George Akerlof gave the same idea a larger setting.[8] Some employers, he argued, pay more than they strictly need to, and workers respond by giving more than the minimum, because effort follows norms about what a fair day's work is, and those norms respond to how the worker is treated. He called the arrangement partial gift exchange. It is a theoretical argument, built on a case of clerks who exceeded their standard, and it has been tested and debated since. Its point for a professional firm is simple. Relationships between firms run partly on gifts, and the gifts are not waste. A client who has been helped generously in a difficult week is more likely to come back, to recommend, and to be reasonable when something goes wrong.

So the director's habit, which the engineer has learned from him, has a real basis. *Don't nickel-and-dime a good client* is not a foolish rule. It is a rough version of everything Regan and Akerlof found.

But both of them describe a gift the other party knows about. Regan's participant saw the drink arrive. Akerlof's workers knew they were being paid above the market. A favour creates obligation, goodwill and loyalty only when it is received as a favour. The engineer's week was not received as anything. The project manager who asked for the site visit does not know that it fell outside the fee, because nobody told her. As far as she knows, it was part of what she bought. The firm has given away a week and received, in return, a client whose sense of what the fee includes has quietly grown.

That is the precise difference between a gift and a leak. A gift is chosen and named, and it enters the relationship as a gift. A leak is the same work, given without anyone deciding to give it, and it enters the relationship as an expectation.

The kindness that leaks

The canon explains why the leak feels like kindness to the person causing it, and why it so often turns into something else.

Writing about the capacity to ask for what one needs, the canon's chapter on constructive development lists the people who have lost it, and its first example is uncomfortably close to a professional firm: "The therapist who cannot charge a fair fee." It goes on to say what happens to generosity without that capacity: "Without it, generosity becomes martyrdom. Service becomes self-erasure." The engineer does not think of herself as a martyr. She thinks of herself as someone who does not make a fuss. But a firm whose people cannot say *that is outside the scope, and here is what it will cost* has made a habit of self-erasure, and its accounts show it.

The house's Luminous 100 gives the managerial version a name. In its account of Kim Scott's Radical Candor it describes the quadrant most leaders fall into, high care without challenge, as "Ruinous Empathy (high care/low challenge — most common mistake)". The director cares about the client. He has never challenged the client's sense of what the fee includes, because doing so feels like a failure of care. The result is

the opposite of what care intends. The client is never given the chance to decide whether the extra work is worth paying for, and the firm's people carry the cost in evenings.

And the invisible ledger does not stay invisible. The canon is explicit about what happens when it is left unattended:

> *When one person consistently gives more than they receive, or when sacrifices go unacknowledged, or when one party bears disproportionate cost for shared benefit, the invisible ledger becomes imbalanced. This imbalance generates a kind of relational debt that, if unaddressed, will eventually surface as resentment, withdrawal, or explosive conflict.*

In a professional firm the resentment surfaces in familiar places. It surfaces in the engineer, who begins to dread the project manager's calls. It surfaces in the director, who decides at the end of the project that this client is not profitable and quietly stops bidding for its work. And sometimes it surfaces in the client, who is billed at the end for a lump of overrun nobody warned her about, and feels, correctly, that she was never asked.

In a firm that sells time, the hours a team spends that nobody budgets are not only a strain on the people who work them. They are revenue, earned and not recorded, and the record that would show it was emptied, every Friday, into a row called "general office".

The utilisation report

The invisible week has a second cost, and it falls on the person who did the most.

In April the practice runs its annual review of utilisation, the share of each engineer's hours booked to projects that clients pay for. It is a reasonable measure, and in a firm that sells time it is one of the few that tell a director whether the practice can pay its people. The engineer's figure is lower than last year's, and lower than two of her colleagues'. The director notices, and asks about it kindly, in the way that makes a person feel worse than a sharp question would.

She knows why the figure is low. It is low because she booked the culvert week, and four other weeks like it, to "general office". Her colleagues, on projects whose fees happened to be larger, booked the same kind of work to the project, because there was still budget to absorb it. The measure did not record who worked hardest or who helped the client most. It recorded whose fees ran out first. The engineer who did the most unpaid work for the practice's clients looks, on the one report the director reads, like the least productive engineer in the room.

This is the cruelty of an invisible ledger inside a firm, and it is worth stating without softening. The people who absorb the overruns are usually the conscientious ones, the people who would rather stay late than tell a client the scope has changed. A system that hides their work does not merely fail to reward them. It re-

cords them as the problem. Over a few years, the conscientious learn one of two things. Some learn to stop absorbing, and book everything to the project regardless, which at least makes the overruns visible, though in the worst possible way: at the end, as a surprise. Others leave, for a firm where their work is seen, and take with them the habits of care the practice most needed.

The canon on keystone roles names the purpose of seeing such work, and it is careful about what that purpose is. Its aim, it says, is "to make the invisible visible — and then to advocate for the recognition, compensation, and support that visible contribution deserves." In a professional firm, the first two of those words are plain. Recognition means the director knows the culvert week happened. Compensation means that somebody, either the client or the firm, decides on purpose who pays for it.

None of this makes utilisation a bad measure. It makes it a measure that is only as honest as the timesheets beneath it, and the timesheets are only as honest as the firm's willingness to see an overrun without treating it as a failure. A director who wants accurate timesheets has to make it safe to book a week to a project that is over budget. That is a matter of what he does the first time he sees one. The same is true of a medical practice's front desk, where a question nobody asked becomes a denied claim weeks later (Chapter 4): a record is only as honest as the first person who fills it in, and as safe as the response to what they write.



The ledger on the desk

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The ledger on the desk

What changes this is less a policy than a piece of paper, kept on the day.

The engineer's director decides to try something on the next project, and the engineer agrees to run it. They call it the scope ledger. It is a single page per project, kept by the person doing the work, and it has one line for every request that falls outside the agreed scope, written on the day the request is made, not at the end of the week. The line says what was asked, by whom, and roughly how long it will take. That is all. Writing it takes a minute.

The page is read every Monday by the project lead and the director together, and every line gets one of three answers, written beside it. *Change*: the request is real work outside the scope, the client is told the same week what it will cost, and it goes on the next invoice with the client's agreement. *Given*: the firm decides to do it without charge, on purpose, because the client is a good one or the request is small or the re-

lationship needs it, and it appears on the next invoice as a line at no charge, so that the client sees the gift. *Declined*: the request is not the firm's to do, and the client is told who it belongs to.

The middle answer is the one that surprises people. It does not reduce what the firm gives. It may increase it. What it changes is that the gift is now a gift. The project manager receives an invoice that says, in one line, *site visit following discovery of culvert, Thursday 12th: no charge*, and she knows, for the first time, that the firm did something for her it did not have to do. Regan's drink has arrived, and she has seen it.

The client's side of this is worth a moment, because firms tend to assume that clients prefer not to know. The project manager at the school has a budget of her own and a governing body to report to. A firm that tells her, in the week it happens, that a request falls outside the scope and what it would cost gives her something she needs: the chance to decide. Sometimes she will say the extra work is worth it and find the money. Sometimes she will say it can wait, or that the contractor should answer his own questions. Sometimes she will ask the firm to do it as a favour, and the firm will say yes, and both will know a favour has been done. What she will rarely do is thank a firm that tells her at the end of the project, in a single line on a final invoice, that she owes it for a dozen things she never knew she had asked for.

The first answer needs a sentence, and the canon's chapter on governance supplies one that works as well with a client as with a board. It is the sentence it gives a member who holds a commitment the circumstances have outgrown: "I need to request a renegotiation — the scope has expanded beyond what I can deliver in the original timeline." Said early, in a call, before the work is done, it is an ordinary professional conversation. Said at the end, on an invoice, it is a dispute. The difference is not the amount. It is when the client was asked.

The page also does something the director did not expect. By the end of the first project it holds a record of every request that fell outside the fee, with a date and an estimate of time, and when he writes the fee for the next school extension he reads it first. Buehler, Griffin and Ross found that the optimism in an estimate disappears when the person making it is made to look at what happened last time. The scope ledger is the record that makes that possible, and it is the first such record the practice has ever had. The overruns that used to vanish into "general office" are now evidence.

There are predictable ways for it to go wrong. The page becomes a form with twelve fields, and nobody fills it in. The director reads it and answers *given* to everything, which is the old habit with paperwork attached. The client is told about a change only after the work is done, which turns the conversation back into a dispute. Or the firm begins charging for things it always gave freely, without telling the client that anything has changed, and a relationship built on generosity learns overnight that it was being metered. Each failure is visible on the page itself, which is why the page is read every week by someone with the authority to answer it. Chapter 7 carries the scope ledger as a run sheet, with the page, the three answers, the sentences for the call and the signs that it is failing, and Chapter 6 places it in the order of a first ninety days.

The gain is easiest to see on the timesheet. Every week booked to "general office" that was really project work is revenue the firm earned and did not ask for, or a gift it gave and was not thanked for. Recovering it does not require the firm to become less generous. It requires the firm to know when it is being generous, and to say so. The same discipline matters when the work is not an hour but a promise written into a contract, which is the clause nobody enforced (Chapter 3).

It is also the reverse of the concession that outlived its reason (Chapter 1). One leaks because nobody wrote it down, the other because nobody read it again.

Keeping a scope ledger

The scope ledger is simple enough to start on Monday and easy to let lapse by the third week. The book can carry the finer points the article left out.

The first is knowing what the scope is. Most out-of-scope work is not recognised as such by the person doing it, because nobody has told her what the fee covers. Before the ledger starts, the project lead reads the appointment or the statement of work with the team and writes, on the first page of the ledger, three or four lines in plain words: what is included, what is not, and the requests that most often arrive and are not included on projects of this kind. In the engineering practice of this chapter the list was short. Changes after the architect's design is frozen. Site visits beyond the number stated. Answering the contractor directly rather than through the client. Most practices find their list is equally short, and that the same three requests recur on every project.

The second is the minute rule. A line is written on the day the request arrives, by the person who receives it, and it takes no more than a minute: the date, who asked, what for, a rough estimate of the time. It does not need the price or the answer. A ledger that asks for more than a minute will be filled in on Fridays from memory, and memory is exactly where the invisible week went.

The third is who answers. The three answers, change, given and declined, are given by someone with the authority to commit the firm, usually the project lead with the director, once a week. The person who wrote the line should never have to decide alone whether to charge for her own work. That decision is what she was avoiding on Friday evening, and the ledger works because it takes it out of her hands.

The fourth is the sentence for the client. A change is raised in the week it arises, by telephone or in the next meeting, before the work is done where that is possible, and confirmed in writing in two lines. The words matter less than the timing, but a plain form helps: what was asked, that it falls outside what was agreed, what it will take, and a question, would you like us to go ahead? Where the work has to be done at once, as the culvert visit did, the call is made the same day and the confirmation follows.

The fifth is the named gift. A request answered *given* appears on the next invoice as a line with its description and no charge. It is not hidden in a discount or left off. Some firms are uncomfortable with this at

first, because it seems to draw attention to generosity. It does. That is the point. A gift the client has seen is a gift; a gift the client has not seen is a leak that the client experiences, later, as the normal level of service.

The sixth concerns fixed fees and time-based fees, because the ledger works differently in each. On a fixed fee, the ledger protects the fee: it is the record from which changes are priced and the evidence for the next fee. On a time-based fee, the danger is the opposite. Out-of-scope hours are billed without the client having been asked, and the client discovers them at the end. The ledger serves both by the same rule: the client hears about the request in the week it happens.

And the decision that most changes the result is what the director does with the ledger when he writes the next fee. Read it first. Count the lines on the last few comparable projects, and what they took. That reading is the outside view the planning-fallacy research found removes optimism from an estimate, and it is the first time most practices have had one. A second change is worth making at the same time: the utilisation report shows absorbed hours, the hours booked to a project over budget, as their own column, so that the engineer who absorbs the most is seen as the engineer who did the most. Chapter 6 places the ledger in the ninety days, after the waterfall and before the register, and Chapter 7 gives the ledger page, the scope list, the sentences for the call and the weekly review.

Twenty to six, a Friday in June

It is twenty to six on a Friday in June, and the engineer is finishing her timesheet at the same desk by the window. The light is longer now. The project is a medical centre, and its scope ledger has nine lines on it, each with an answer beside it. Four are changes, agreed with the client by phone and on the next invoice. Three are gifts, and the client's project manager mentioned one of them in a meeting on Tuesday, unprompted, with thanks. Two were declined, politely, and passed to the architect.

The timesheet still has a row for "general office". She does not use it this week.

She books the week to the project, saves it, and goes home.

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