

Jo's CASE Award

Confidentially...

Act I Mixed blessings

What a bonus! A Research Council grant to carry out my PhD research, and a CASE award to bring me more income from SOON, my co-operating body. I visited the SOON office with my supervisor and another academic who had previously liaised with SOON to set up the studentship. At this meeting, Mr George, on behalf of SOON, agreed to pay me a monthly salary whilst I was carrying out fieldwork at SOON's offices.

My delight was shortlived. Enclosed with my first payslip from SOON were a number of other documents. There were two copies of the Official Secrets Act (1911), as amended by the Official Secrets Act (1920), a consent form for the release of personal medical information from my GP or hospital specialist, a health declaration, a character inquiry, a personal details form, and a personal summary form requiring information about past addresses and employment etc. I was requested to complete all the forms and sign both copies of the Official Secrets Act, one of which I was to keep. I was then to return all the other forms and my birth certificate - which would be returned promptly - to the undersigned administration. I was horrified. I was utterly unprepared for this. With urgency I made an appointment to see my Head of Department.

Q1. What should the Head of Department do now?

Q2. Any other comments on the situation?

Act 2 Act, action and act of omission

My Head of Department suggested one way of dealing with the forms was to leave them unsigned and unreturned and to see what happened. The expectation was that a busy administrator would have little or no time to chase up forms from a student researcher. He also advised me to seek advice from someone in the Law Department of the University with regard to the Official Secrets Act, which I did. I was told that signing the Official Secrets Act was merely a formality. The act of signing is intended to draw attention to what is, in fact, every British national's duty. The fact that one has not signed the Official Secrets Act is no defence in law.

In a way, I was relieved by this. I was concerned that if I signed the Official Secrets Act, SOON would use it against me to deny me the right to publish. It seemed that it didn't matter either way. But I also had the other forms to consider. I particularly objected to consenting to the release of personal medical information. It seemed they wanted my secrets too.

Q1. What should Jo do now?

Q2. Any other comments?

Act 3 Divided loyalties

I decided to take my Head of Department's advice and 'lose' the forms in a pile of paper. I continued my field work at the SOON offices. At the end of the next month another crisis arose.

It appeared that a misunderstanding had arisen between SOON and the University. One of the conditions of my CASE award was that SOON was to pay me, and also to pay the University a sum of money. SOON had then objected upon receiving a bill from the University, saying they would pay one or the other, but not both. I was informed that this was not my fault at all, and that it would have to be resolved between the University and SOON. Nevertheless, I felt my research was under threat. I thought of little else all weekend.

Q1. What should Jo do now?

Q2. Any other comments?

Act 4 Hush hush

My solution was to withdraw my right to payment in favour of the University. Receiving payments from SOON had made me feel uneasy. Where did my loyalties lie? By giving up the payments from SOON, I felt I would be able to work independently. Also, those formal documents were still lying uncompleted and unsigned. If I was no longer on SOON's payroll, I would not be required to sign and return them. My Department and SOON were grateful for my offer. It saved a few faces. It seemed ideal. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Back into the lions' den I went.

Later that year I needed access to another organisation: WEX. Mr George of SOON gave me my first introduction to Dr Short, the Director of WEX. After that I was on my own.

On my first visit to the WEX establishment I was shown around and introduced to several staff members by the liaison officer, Mr Pearson. Mr Pearson informed me that if I was to be allowed to carry out my research at WEX, I would have to sign the Official Secrets Act. Later that day, Mr Pearson pressed me to answer directly whether I had signed the Official Secrets Act. If I had not, he said he would have to make the necessary arrangements for my next visit. I answered, "yes I have signed the Official Secrets Act". I did not add that this had occurred twenty years previously whilst I had been serving in the RAF. I thus gave myself a breathing space in which I could decide what to do next.

Q1. What should Jo do now?

Q2. Any other comments?

Act 5 Catch 22

I was in an impossible situation. If I did not sign, and they found out, doubtless I would be thrown out of WEX and SOON. If I overtly refused to sign I would not be allowed to do the research. If I wanted to continue my research, I had to sign and accept the conditions and subsequent ramifications.

I had a week before meeting Dr Short, the Director of WEX. By then I had to justify making repeated visits to WEX, and have a means of dealing with the persistent Mr Pearson.

At the meeting with Dr Short, he made a point of asking if I had signed the Official Secrets Act. At the time, Mr Pearson was in the room and I had already told him I had, so there was no going back. As a result of the mounting pressure I decided I would have to sign it the following day when I would be at the SOON offices. It crossed my mind that because WEX and SOON had organisational links, it would not be difficult for a 'persistent' investigator to discover that a copy of the Official Secrets Act bearing my signature was not held by either organisation.

Q1. What should Jo do now?

Q2. Any further comments?

Act 6 Symbols

I immediately 'phoned the SOON administration office when I reached home that day and spoke to a clerk who was already known to me. I threw myself on her mercy. I asked her if it would be alright if I came down to sign the Official Secrets Act. I told her I was now working at the WEX organisation and that they were apparently scrupulous about this procedure. She happily arranged for me to do it the following day.

At the office, I made abject apologies about my omission, and entreated her to treat this episode confidentially as I did not want Mr George to know. She laughed, saying, "he wouldn't worry about it at all". I signed the paper - and backdated it eight months. I felt dreadful afterwards, sort of impotent. Not about my own machinations, but signing the Official Secrets Act had been extremely symbolic.

A month later, on a regular visit to WEX, I was engaged in negotiations with the Deputy Director when he suddenly asked me if I had signed the Official Secrets Act. "Yes", I replied.

Coincidentally on this visit, I came across a faded notice caricaturing two women. It was stuck on the side of a cubicle in the women's toilets. It read:

"Powder and hush-up. You never know who's listening.
Keep our secrets to ourselves."

Secrets? What secrets?

Question for group discussion

Discuss the issues raised by Jo's experience and suggest rules of guidance for:

- 1. Jo's university**
- 2. Jo's department**
- 3. postgraduate students**
- 4. collaborative bodies**

to cover this kind of case.

Please write these rules clearly on the acetate provided.