

**Promotion**

by Chris Rose



Name: Don Jenkins  
Age: 35, single, no kids.  
Current Position: Regional Director of Alpha Telecommunications. Looking for promotion.

At least that's what my CV says. If you could read between the lines, you might find a different story.

You might find a story about a brilliant graduate in electrical engineering, one of the brightest students in his class, a student who went on to become a whiz kid – director of his own company at 25...

It all looks perfect, doesn't it? And it was perfect, up until I was twenty-five. You see, I was great at the theory, and terrible at the practice. I was a telecommunications wizard, but a lousy businessman. My company had registered several important new patents but we still managed to lose money. After three years, we were in debt, and we were practically forced to sell out to a bigger company, Alpha

Telecommunications. To be fair, Alpha were OK – they didn't sack me, but let me stay on as their Regional Director. Which is where I still am today.

I've been Regional Director for Alpha for nearly ten years. I wanted to go into R&D, research and development, that's where my heart is really, and it's what I think I'm really good at doing too. But with a huge international corporation like Alpha, there are always some mysterious politics at work. I don't understand it, never have. Right now there's an important vacancy coming up: Director of Innovation Technology. It's the job I want – interesting work, great money. I've got the right experience and lots of ideas. The job should be mine. I really want to get a promotion – I've worked hard for it and I deserve it. But unfortunately it's not that simple. Some of the important managers here think that the company is like a game of chess – and all the people who work for the company are to be moved around by them in complicated strategic games. Right now, I'm pretty sure that I'm a piece in a huge game of chess. Somebody in Alpha's head office is moving me around as if I were part of a game of strategy that I don't understand.

At this minute, I'm on the Eurostar train, heading from London to Paris. It's great – a very nice, very luxurious and comfortable train. I can watch the beautiful French countryside speeding past outside as I sip a coffee. I should be happy. But I've just taken a look at the file I was given before leaving my office.

It all happened at the last minute, you see. This morning seemed just like any other day. I was pushing my pen across endless pieces of paper, when my mobile started ringing. Most phone calls come in on the office phone – my secretary passes them through to me. Only a few people have my mobile number. I looked at the display and was surprised to see that Tom Werther was calling. Tom Werther is Vice-President of Alpha Telecommunications. An important character, a key player. I only remembered speaking to him once before – when Alpha bought out my company. He shook my hand and said, "I like what you do, boy! Why don't you stick with us!" I

remember that he called me 'boy', and I had disliked him ever since.

I couldn't imagine why Werther was calling me, so I was curious when I answered the call.

"Hello?"

"Dom!"

"Er, it's Don!"

"Sure! Listen, this Tom Werther and I need you to do a favour for me. Can you do that?"

"Well, could you tell me what the favour is?"

"Sure! There's a big conference in Paris – EuroTelecom Now! – you must know it!"

"Of course – it's the biggest European trade fair. Some of our R&D people are going, and Rob Dean, our head of European operations, will be there too."

"No he won't!"

"Well, Mr. Werther. I think he will – I saw him yesterday. He'd already packed his suitcase."

"Sure he'd packed his suitcase. And now he's unpacking it."

"Why's that?"

"Because I told him to!" Werther roared with laughter. "No, I'm only joking. Listen, Rob's got one or two personal problems. He called me this morning, and he won't be able to go to Paris. But we need somebody there, and that somebody is going to be you!"

"You're asking me to go to the conference in Paris?"

"Exactly!"

"But it starts tomorrow morning!"

"Well you get on that train that goes through the tunnel under the sea, and you'll be there in a few hours. I'll call you later!" The line went dead. Our conversation was over.

I didn't want to argue – I thought it was a nice change anyway, a couple of days in Paris! Great! The conference would be interesting too. I picked up the phone, booked my ticket to Paris, grabbed my briefcase and walked straight out of the office. Luckily, I had time to go home before the train left, so I could at least pick up a change of clothes.

When I got back to my flat there was a message on my answer phone. It was unusual to have a message on the answer phone – most people who know me have my office number or call me on my mobile. If it's not urgent, people send me e-mails. I didn't often use the answer phone. I

pressed the button to see who had called me. The machine clicked, and I heard a voice:

*"Don, hi! Listen, it's Rob Dean here. I'm not going to be in Paris – I don't know if they've told you yet. It's a long story. I think they'll probably ask you to go instead. If you go, there's one thing you absolutely must do. You need to go into my office and look in the bottom left drawer in my desk. It's where I keep my personal stuff – there's nothing much in there, a few old newspapers and a lot of junk. But at the bottom, underneath the old junk, you'll find a file. Take the file, don't open it in the office, and don't show it to anybody, but make sure that you read it before you get to Paris. That's all. I'll try and contact you again, but it could be difficult. Good luck!"*

I couldn't imagine what he was talking about. It all seemed ridiculous. I'm just an ordinary manager in an ordinary company, I thought. Just an ordinary man. And now I felt like Tom Cruise in Mission Impossible, or something like that! I've been watching too many films, I thought. This is probably just nothing, nothing serious.

Rod's phone call made me curious enough to go back to the office, though. I looked at my watch. I had just about enough time to get a taxi back to the office, run into Rod's room and find the file – it was there, half-hidden under lots of old newspapers and an ancient sandwich, an ordinary yellow folder with a few documents in it. I didn't open it, but just shoved it into my briefcase and ran out again, back into the taxi, off to Waterloo station and onto the train a minute before it left. Just made it. I sat down and relaxed for a second before I took the file out of my briefcase and opened the file.

I should have guessed that it was nothing important. At first glance I could see only a conference programme, a few notes and a list of the people Rob wanted to meet while he was there. I took a look at the list. It included Bernd Friedmann from our German operation, Françoise Mauriac who was one of the conference organisers, Susumu Yokota, who worked for one of our Japanese competitors and a few other names that I didn't recognise. One of these was underlined three times, and had an exclamation mark after it, so it was obviously somebody pretty important, but Rob's handwriting wasn't clear and I couldn't quite read it. It looked

like 'Susan' or 'Suzanne' something. The documents were mostly print-outs of e-mails. I looked through them.

From: françoismauriac@telecomnow.fr  
To: robdean@telecom.org.uk  
Sent: 02/02/00

Dear Rob,  
I heard a rumour that there may be some big changes at Alpha.  
Hope it's nothing serious. Looking forward to seeing you next week,  
Françoise

From: robwerther@alphatelecom.com  
To: robdean@telecom.org.uk  
Sent: 02/02/00

Rob,  
I heard a worrying rumor that you're not playing by the same rules that everybody in this company follows. I don't want to find out it's true.  
Listen – we can talk. If there's anything you want to talk about, call me. You have my private number,  
Tom

From: BerndFriedmann@alphatelecom.de  
To: robdean@alphatelecom.org.uk  
Sent: 03/03/00

Dear Rob,  
Thanks for your message – it was interesting, and also a little bit worrying. I think there's been some sort of a misunderstanding somewhere. I don't think you should talk to anyone yet.  
We'll meet up at the conference in Paris, and we should be able to solve things there.  
See you soon,  
Bernd

From: SusumuYokota@yokota.jp  
To: robdean@alphatelecom.org.uk  
Sent: 03/03/00

Dear Mr. Dean,  
I regret to inform you that I will not be able to meet you at the forthcoming "Telecom Now!" conference in Paris as previously arranged. My company has, however, made arrangements to see your Vice-President, Mr. Werther, directly.  
Yours sincerely,  
Susumu Yokota

I couldn't make sense of all this. Once again, I had the feeling of being a pawn in somebody else's game. What was this mysterious 'rumour' that everybody seemed to know about except

me? Why was Werther angry with Rob? What was the 'worrying' message that Rob had sent to our colleague Bernd in Germany? And why had Susumu Yokota risked seeming impolite by cancelling a meeting at the last minute?

I found one of the answers almost as soon as I arrived in Paris. I got off the train at the Gare du Nord and jumped into a taxi which took me straight to my hotel. It was only 7 o'clock, and I still had an entire evening in Paris ahead of me. I could go out, I thought to myself, find a nice little restaurant somewhere in Montmartre, have a quiet meal and a glass of wine, take an evening stroll around Paris, but I didn't feel like it. It seemed a pity to waste an opportunity, but I was very tired - and very intrigued by the mystery unfolding around me.

There was still the floppy disc in Rob's file. I locked the door in the hotel room and switched on my laptop. I looked at the disc while the computer booted up. There was no label on it, and it looked like a perfectly ordinary three and a half inch disk. I put it into the computer, clicked on the icon and found that it contained two files, one called 'resig.doc' and the other 'press.doc'. I opened the first file. It was the first draft of a letter.

*Wednesday March 1st 2000*

*Alpha House,  
London W1*

*Dear Tom,*

*Due to circumstances which have only recently come to my notice, I regret to inform you that I am handing in my resignation from the post of European Operations Manager for Alpha Telecommunications. My resignation will be effective as of now.*

*Quite frankly, and now I can speak frankly and openly, I think that the policies of this company have become intolerable. Decisions which affect everybody are being taken by a few ignorant and incompetent executives in the US without consulting important managers in Europe. This situation is not acceptable.*

*It has come to my notice – and I won't say how – that Alpha Telecommunications is about to be sold off to one of our competitors. We have not*



*been consulted, nothing has been explained to us, and we have not even been warned about this very important change.*

The letter finished there. I don't know if Rob had been interrupted while he was writing it, or if he simply hadn't finished, but there was no more. I assumed that the letter had never been sent. I noticed that the letter was dated Wednesday March 1st, the day before Tom Werther had sent the threatening e-mail to Rob.

I opened the other file on the disc, 'press.doc'. It was a press release, a statement to TV, radio, magazine and newspaper journalists.

**IMPORTANT NEWS FROM ALPHA  
TELECOMMUNICATIONS**  
*Wednesday March 1st, 1pm*

*Alpha Telecommunications is facing a buyout from one of its main competitors. It is thought that the entire company will be sold within the next few days. The name of the buyer cannot yet be made public.*

*It is not yet known what effect this change will have on Alpha's share prices.*

*Rob Dean, European Operations Manager for Alpha, will be resigning from his post as of today, as a protest against this decision.*

There were a few very unusual things about this press release. The first was that I assumed that Rob had written it himself. This was not usually part of his job – we have a special press office to do jobs like this. The second unusual thing was that this did not really seem like a press release. Usually, press releases are pieces of publicity, carefully written to make the company look as good as possible. This press release was very different. It was more like a newspaper story – more impartial and cynical than the typical positive press release. The other unusual thing was that it had obviously never been 'released' – it was written last Wednesday, and none of this news had been made public. This was obviously the mysterious 'rumour' referred to in the e-mails I had read on the train: Alpha was going to be sold. Werther was trying to keep everything secret, and Rob Dean had found out the truth.

This didn't explain everything though. There were some other simple questions: why was Werther trying to cover everything up? A takeover can sometimes be good for a company, it can make

their shares become more valuable. I couldn't understand why Werther was being so secretive. Added to this, there was the strange mystery surrounding Rob Dean. He seemed to have resigned, but then why had he also apparently disappeared? Why didn't Werther tell me that Rob had resigned? Why did Rob leave that cryptic, mysterious message on my answer phone?

I was thinking about these things when my phone rang. It was Rob Dean.

"Don?"

"Rob! What the hell's going on? What's all this mystery? And where are you?"

"Good questions, Don! Listen, I'm here in Paris.

There are some people I must see. I think I should talk to you as well. You seem to have ended up in the middle of this thing. They just wanted to put someone there who doesn't know what's going on – they chose you! I don't want to talk on the phone, let's meet."

"Just tell me where and when, and I'll be there," I said.

"Can you make it in about an hour or so?"

"Sure. Where?"

"Somewhere fairly central. At the Pompidou Centre. Do you know it?"

"Yes – in the square in front of it?"

"No, that's a bit too obvious. On the street just behind it. In an hour. See you there!"

The weather was cold for March, and I walked up and down to keep warm as I waited. It had been more than an hour now, and Rob still hadn't shown up. I wondered where he was. I tried his number a few times, but only got the message "The number you have called is unobtainable at the moment. Please try again later" several times. After a while I noticed a woman on the other side of the street who also seemed to be waiting for someone. At first I tried to ignore her, but it was obvious that she was waiting for someone as well. She carried on looking at me for some time until eventually she crossed the road and came up to me.

"You're waiting for Rob, aren't you?"

"How did you know? Who are you?"

"My name's Sue McGovern. I'm a financial journalist and an old friend of Rob's. You must be his colleague who they sent to the conference."

"That's right. Listen, where is Rob?"

"I don't know. I got a call from him about an hour ago, telling me to meet him here. He said you'd

be here too. I'm a bit worried about him to tell you the truth. There are some unpleasant people who work for your company."

"What do you mean?"

"Rob's a key person in your organisation, and he has a lot of information. Those people in America don't want him to go around telling everybody what he knows."

"That's nonsense! OK, there are pretty unpleasant characters who work for Alpha, I know, but there's nobody who'd threaten Rob with physical violence!"

Sue McGovern looked at me coldly and thought for a moment.

"It's true what Rob said about you."

"What did Rob say about me?"

"He said you were naive."

I didn't know if it was a compliment or an insult. I didn't know what to say. Sue continued.

"Listen, I don't think we should stay here.

Somebody could have intercepted Rob's calls.

Let's get out of here and go somewhere safer.

Rob can always contact us later."

We quickly set off along the street. Sue carried on talking as went.

"What do you know about the situation?"

"Next to nothing," I replied. "I was told to come to this conference this morning. Before I left, I found an answering machine message from Rob telling me to look at a file of his. I found the file – it had a few e-mails in it, a list of contacts, and a floppy disc."

"What was on the disc?"

"I'm not really sure I should tell you. It's highly confidential information."

"Oh don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "I think Rob might be in serious danger here, and you won't tell me something I probably know anyway!"

I hesitated, then said, "There were two files: one was his letter of resignation, the other was a press release."

"What was in the press release?"

"Listen," I replied. "If you tell me why you're so interested in all this, then I'll tell you what was in the press release. If you don't tell me, I won't tell you anything. Is it a deal?"

"Alright – you've got a deal. First, because it's a good story. I'm a journalist, and I'm always in search of a good story."

"I'm not sure that's a good enough reason for me to pass on confidential information to you!"

"Second, because Rob and I are a couple. We've

been seeing each other for nearly a year now. It's been difficult, because of our work schedules, but we were even talking about getting married. And now I'm really worried about him."

"Why are you so worried?"

"Rob found out some vital information, information which could ruin the company and some of the top people in it. That's why I need to know what was in those documents."

"There was a takeover bid. The company was about to be sold."

"Yes, I knew that. There's been a rumour going around for months. What nobody knew is why Alpha was going to be sold. It didn't seem to make sense, a big, prosperous company like Alpha should be buying other companies, not selling itself out. That's where Rob came in. He found out that the company was actually losing huge amounts of money. The next annual results announcement would have been a disaster!"

"But I don't understand. The company was doing really well. We were expanding into new markets, taking on new people, launching new products..."

"That's how it seemed to you. But some people can build empires on thin air."

"What do you mean?"

"Rob was European Operations Manager so he had a lot of access to company accounts. He found that most of Alpha's accounts were pure fiction, about as realistic as Alice in Wonderland!"

"I admit that I never was a good businessman, but I still don't understand how that's possible."

"I suspect that one of the possibilities is that your Vice-President, Tom Werner, wasn't acting altogether ethically."

"You mean he's been taking money from the company?"

"Huge amounts."

"Are you sure?"

"No, I'm not sure. But it's possible. And I'm worried that Rob found out it was true."

We carried on walking until we arrived back at my hotel. There was still no sign of Rob. We went into the bar to get a drink and stayed there talking until very late. Sue told me lots of stories about Alpha Telecommunications – I learnt a lot of things about the company I had worked for ten years, and I didn't like a lot of the things I learnt. Eventually, Sue said she was tired and had to go. "I'll give you a call in the morning," she said as she left. "Goodnight!"

"Goodnight!"

I didn't sleep well that night. I was too worried about Rob, and still confused from all the events of this crazy day. I dreamt about takeover bids and corrupt company bosses, about newspaper headlines and so-called 'creative accounting'. I woke up early in the morning feeling terrible. I had drunk too much the evening before, and I hadn't slept well. But I didn't only feel physically bad – the events of the previous day and the things that the financial journalist Sue McGovern had told me had made me feel bad about a lot of things – about the company I worked for, about some of the people I worked with. One of my colleagues was still missing in mysterious circumstances.

I called for a taxi to take me to the conference centre and as I was sitting in the taxi, watching the Parisian streets go past, everything became clear to me. I had to do something. For the last ten years I had sat at my desk pushing a pen and tapping away on a computer, becoming increasingly unhappy and frustrated. I had kept quiet in the hope of earning a promotion which I felt I deserved - but now it looked as if any promotion was impossible anyway!

When I reached the conference centre, I had made my mind up. I knew what to do. I walked in, stopped to register and pick up my pass, then went straight to the press office.

"Hello, my name's Don Jenkins and I'm from Alpha Telecommunications. I know this is unusual, but we have some important news to announce, and I wondered if it would be possible to organise an impromptu press conference."

"Well Mr. Jenkins, I'm afraid I'm not sure that we can organise that immediately."

"How soon could we do it?"

"The press suite is booked up all day, I'm afraid. We have one very small room that's free between eleven thirty and twelve, or if you can wait till after lunch, you could have ten minutes in the main conference hall. Would that be enough?"

"Ten minutes will be fine!"

"I'll announce your speech during the lunch break. Would that be OK?"

"That would be great, thanks."

I still had a couple of hours before making my appearance, and decided to take a look around the exhibition centre. There were the usual stands there, all displaying new products. There were a lot of people I knew or recognised around.

I said hello to lots of them, and we chatted a bit about nothing in particular.

I saw Françoise Mauriac, the conference organiser, and Bernd Friedmann from our German office. They were both surprised to see me. They were very polite, and asked me why I was here, and said that they hadn't been expecting me. I could see that there was something they weren't telling me – they both seemed to know something that I didn't. But I thought that I probably knew more than them.

As I was wandering around, mentally preparing my speech at the press conference, I saw Tom Werner in the crowd. He looked worried, anxious and tired. He was talking to somebody I didn't know, and you could see that although he was trying to be polite and pretend to be interested in the other person, he wasn't really paying any attention to them at all. He was preoccupied and distracted, and kept on looking around as though he was worried that somebody was looking for him. I wondered what he was hiding, or what he was thinking, or why he was worried.

When it was one o'clock, everybody took a lunch break. Some went out to look for a nearby restaurant, while a lot of the other delegates stayed in the conference centre and ate in the bar or restaurant there. At about 1.30 there was an announcement:

*"Attention, s'il vous plait! Could I have your attention please! Don Jenkins from Alpha Telecommunications will be making a special announcement in the main conference hall in thirty minutes. I repeat: Important news from Alpha Telecommunications in the main hall in thirty minutes."*

The news seemed to cause a lot of interest. Lots of people began talking to each other excitedly. Sue McGovern was right – I was naive. I had known nothing about the rumours about Alpha, but it seemed that a lot of other people had heard a lot of gossip, and now they wanted to know what was true and what wasn't.

I took my place in the main conference room fifteen minutes later, at a quarter to two, and already the enormous hall was nearly full. I looked out at the audience, and I could see Bernd and Françoise sitting on the front row looking nervous. I guessed that there were five or six hundred people there. There were a lot of

journalists there, with photographers too. Great! This was exactly what I wanted. I waited until five to two, by which time the hall was completely full. People were standing up at the back of the room because there were no more free seats. I stood up and the huge room fell into complete silence. "Good afternoon everybody! Thank you for coming at such short notice."

It was at that moment that I saw the doors at the back of the hall burst open. Tom Werner stood there, looking at me directly. He was a huge man, an imposing physical presence – his size made him frightening. He stared at me in an attempt to frighten me. He seemed to be saying, "If you say anything, I'll make your life hell!"

But it was too late now. I wasn't afraid anymore. "As I'm sure many of you have already heard, Alpha Telecommunications is going to be sold to one of our competitors. But that is not the only news. Our competitors may be interested to know that they are not going to buy a successful company, but a company which is about to go bankrupt."

I could hear gasps of surprise all around the hall. Some people started shouting.

"I have found evidence of large-scale mismanagement of company funds by one of our senior directors. This corruption has resulted in the bankruptcy of Alpha Telecommunications. The police have been informed, and will be making further enquiries."

The shouting in the hall grew louder. There were hundreds of flashes from the photographers' cameras.

"Moreover, one of my colleagues, Rob Dean, has gone missing in mysterious circumstances. The police have also been informed of his disappearance. That is all I wanted to say, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your time."

My speech was followed by an uproar in the hall. I have never heard so many people shouting at the same time. Questions, accusations, threats and applause were coming at me from all directions. The hall was in chaos. I decided to get out as quickly as possible, and ran for the exit. There was no sign of Werner. Outside the conference centre, I jumped into a taxi and headed back to my hotel. I planned to go back home and keep out of sight for a while. As soon as I got back to the hotel, I picked up my key from the reception and found I had a message.

"There are two people who would like to see you

waiting in the lounge, sir," said the receptionist. "Who are they?" I asked.

"I'm afraid they didn't leave their names, sir," replied the receptionist.

I was worried. I was afraid. I admit it. It could be Werner and some of his bullies. I walked very slowly to the lounge and looked in carefully.

In the corner of the room there were two people sitting down talking to each other. One was Sue McGovern. And the other was Rob Dean.

They both looked up when they saw me.

"Where on earth have you been?" I shouted at Rob, "We were all worried sick about you!"

"I thought it was better to keep out of the way for a while, that's all. Now it seems that Werner has gone missing. There are a lot of people interested in talking to him – especially the police!"

"I've just heard a report that Alpha's shares have crashed completely," said Sue. "It looks like your little speech had quite a big effect!"

"Yes," said Rob. "I think there are quite a lot of people who want to talk to you as well. Here's one of them now!" He pointed to a man walking into the lounge of the hotel. I recognised him – it was Susumu Yokota from our Japanese competitor. He bowed very politely. I held out my hand.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Jenkins. May I say that I found your speech very interesting. It was my company who was interested in buying Alpha Telecommunications. I must say thank you. You have saved us a lot of money and trouble."

"No problem!" I said. "There's no chance of me getting any promotion now though, is there?"

"Not with Alpha!" said the others.

"But Mr. Jenkins," continued Yokota. "My company has wanted to set up a European research and development company for a long time. It would be an independent company, but backed by our finance. You would be free to follow any research interests you have. Would you be interested?"

"Absolutely!"

"Shall we have lunch to talk about it?"

"Let's have lunch to celebrate!" said Rob.

"Good idea!" said Sue.

"Sushi?" asked Yokota.

"Moules marinières!" suggested Sue.

"No," I said. "Champagne! And I'm paying!" That's promotion.