

Bob, Bob, Bobbing Along

It's March – high fiction time. Yes, it's the Easter parade of the annual report. And while I am sure that the numbers all add up in their neat little columns, it isn't the numeracy that concerns me, but the literacy. Apart from commercials for political parties, the chairman's statement in most annual reports is one of the greatest pieces of "fictional" writing on the planet (Booker and Whitbread eat your hearts out!) : a masterpiece of the public relations department, with serious help from the legal division. The, "ooh!, we can't say that in case someone remembers this stuff in 20 years time," syndrome.

In recent years, the subject of "people" has been popular as a text for the chief executive or chairman to wax lyrical about. So much so that the phrase, "people are our greatest asset" has joined, "your cheque's in the mail" and "our computer is down", as the third great business lie. In fact, "people" has become a pejorative term, because annual reports don't talk about people as humans, they talk about them as commodities.

Annual reports have happy snaps of people : a white one, a black one, a male a female, an Asian and so on. They are the visual furniture that fills the annual report. They are the things you look at, ("hey, isn't that a happy looking person washing that rental car ... stacking those bananas ... stitching those sports clothes?") which means you don't read the boring old chairman's statement on pages three and four. And you never, ever get past the 124 pages of accounts.

This is a pity.

Why? Because, after page 124 – or thereabouts – there's one more photograph. In the biz, we call it the "Bob shot".

Turn to the inside back page of virtually any annual report and you'll find a photograph that – more than the words of the chairman on page three, more than the images of people "happy in their work", more than those pages and pages of numbers in eight point type – tells you everything you need to know about the state of that particular corporate culture. It's a photo (usually) of around 14 to 20 people and they all wear blue suits, white shirts and sober ties, they are all male, they are all white and they are all called Bob.

Where are we going with this? Simple: every major corporation likes to see itself today as being open to new ideas, celebrating diversity of culture and nation. As part of this there is a new – ultimately pointless – ritual at the top-end of corporations. They need a new man (let's leave it at that and not get into the gender thing) for their top team. What do they do? Call their pet headhunter that's what. The briefing goes something like this. "We want you to search the globe for the right candidate, leave no stone unturned."

One, two or three months later (the head-hunters will tell you, "it's a matter of weeks") there is the usual "beauty" parade of three likely candidates. One is French, one is a Chinese American and the other is a white, male with an engineering degree from the same school as five of the guys on the board; let's call him Bob. Who gets the job? Bob gets the job. Why? Well, he's a different kind of Bob, but he's still Bob and so he's safe.

And every year around this time – as 300 plus annual reports from the great and good of corporate America and Europe come dropping through my mailbox – I turn to the inside back page and look at THE picture: 12 Bobs stare out at me. True, from time to time there is a female face and possibly a minority as well, but they are Bobs too. They have been promoted to "honorary Bobs" as long as they show up and get their picture taken once a year.

And don't think that this is a particularly Anglo-Saxon habit. Try French, German, Spanish, even Dutch companies. Yes, it's Philippe, Rudi, Pablo and Wim.

There is a myth that corporations are global. They might be in their dealings, in their reach, in their influence. But those that occupy the corridors of power haven't moved forward in the past decade or so. Worse still they show little sign of changing in the future.

So next time you find yourself at one of those receptions with those guys in the blue suits try it. Sidle up to one of them and say, "hi Bob, how's business?" First, you'll get his name right. Second, you never know, if you are wearing the uniform too, he might ask you to join the board !