Money Madness at the Movies: How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying

“How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying,” is a comedy about the workplace. Written in the early 1960s and made into a 1967 movie, “How to Succeed” follows the adventures of J. Pierrepont Finch, a window washer who, with the aid of a self-help book, schemes his way up the corporate ladder.

Finch accomplishes this by using techniques that should be familiar to anyone who has spent time working in an office: shifting blame for mistakes; taking credit for the work of subordinates; flattering the boss; and crumpling up pieces of paper and strewing coffee cups all around the office to make it appear that he has worked all night.

Although “How to Succeed” is a work of fiction, at the time it originally came out, audiences would likely have viewed the musical simply as a humorous portrayal of office culture during the 1950s. From the initial scene in “How to Succeed,” it is clear to the audience that women and men, in this time period, are certainly not treated equally in the workplace.

A Secretary is Not a Toy – Sexual Harassment

As “How to Succeed” was written and first performed contemporaneously with the passage of Title VII, the musical offers an opportunity to examine how the view of women in the workforce has either progressed or remained stagnant during the past forty years.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is a federal law that prohibits employers from discriminating against employees on the basis of sex, race, color, national origin, and religion.

Today, World Wide Wickets would be a hotbed of sexual harassment litigation, and the EEOC would likely be called to investigate. Secretaries who refused men’s advances for sexual favors could bring a quid pro quo action for sexual harassment, and all of the sexual comments and innuendo would bring charges of a hostile working environment. With forty years of distance, it is widely acknowledged that sexual harassment constitutes an abuse of power and that it causes serious emotional and psychological damage. If for no other reason than avoiding liability, companies have begun training and education measures, and have begun to take the investigation of complaints – and the need for action on the complaints – much more seriously. Such measures are a far cry from the joking innuendo and horseplay that was widely tolerated, even encouraged, by the executives at World Wide Wickets.

The Noble Brotherhood of Man – Sex Segregation in the Workforce

In the musical, all of the executives at World Wide Wickets are men, and all the women who work there are secretaries. There is no discussion of a female executive: she simply does not exist. Even the highest-ranking of the secretaries, Miss Jones, who achieved her position through competence and merit, stands no chance of achieving the title of executive, because she is female. As for a male secretary, at World Wide Wickets, the thought is unimaginable. During the finale, the executives (joined by only one woman, Miss Jones) sing a song that bridges all of the differences and tensions between Finch, Frump, Bigeley, and Whomper. The song is entitled, “This Noble Brotherhood of Man,” and the sheer masculinity of this title underscores the absolute sex segregation that is present.
An EEOC study reported that while women represented 51.7 percent of professional workers and 45.9 percent of technical workers, the three categories with the highest concentration of women were clerical, service, and sales workers, where women comprised 80.3, 57.7 and 56.4 percent of the workforce, respectively. This tendency toward occupational segregation is typically referred to as the “pink collar ghetto,” that is, the concentration of women in certain lower-paid, lower-status workplace positions.

**Keeping Dinner Warm – Stereotypes About Women Workers**

For the women, “success,” economic or otherwise, had nothing to do with being promoted within the company. Instead, their entire aim was to find a man who could be a good provider, and quit working. Finch’s love interest, Rosemary, reinforces the dominant gender stereotype that women are in the workforce only because they are not yet married.

**Points to Ponder:**

- Although progress has been made toward gender equality, many issues highlighted in the musical are still problems today: sexual harassment; sex segregation of the workforce and pink collar ghettos; and the glass ceiling. Can you give examples from the workforce today?
- How has employment law and larger societal and workplace behaviors changed - and not changed - during the past forty years?
- The Company Way – The character who sings this song is a corporate “lifer” and suggests that the key to success in corporate America is to go along with everything the company suggests, however ridiculous. Does this outlook apply in today’s workplace?
- Grand Old Ivy – while superficially a foodtall fight song, this song can be read as suggesting that only an Ivy League education can help you get to the top of the corporate heap. This is rather an elitist message – how accurate is it today?
- Been a Long Day – in this song, Finch asks his secretary out to dinner. Is this behavior acceptable in today’s business environment?
- “If you have education, intelligence and ability, so much the better. But, remember that thousands have reached the top without any of these qualities.” - J.B. Biggley. This was spoken to a man that started out as a window cleaner, and eventually climbed his way to the top. What do you think this means?
- “I realize that I’m the president of this company, the man that’s responsible for everything that goes on here. So, I want to state, right now, that anything that happened is not my fault.” - J. B. Biggley. Is the boss responsible for what happens on their watch?
- Can someone “succeed in business without really trying”?

Sources: How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying (Cases): Gender Stereotypes and Sexual Harassment Since the Passage of Title VII by Miriam A. Cherry, *Hofstra Labor and Employment Law Journal*, 20015.