

I work in database development. This is my workplace's story.

In the beginning, there was the Architect. The Architect designed and/or developed some 80% of the software relevant to us, or so it seems. Very intelligent. Not really a people person. Exclusively maintains documentation for software he develops locally (in his brain).

One day Architect assigned one of his trusted advisors a task: develop two reports on a database for the benefit of User. He described the purpose of the two reports, what data they should contain, and how they should be set up. Then, he left. Several months later, I received three emails from Mid-Level Manager, Boss, and Project Lead in rapid succession. Taken together, they amounted to this slightly paraphrased message:

From: Mid-Level Manager; Boss; Project Lead

Sent: Thursday, 9:08 AM

To: bjamminon11

Subject: RE: [REDACTED] & Fee [REDACTED] Reports - Ready for Review

Dear bjamminon11,

We are once again asking for your support on the [REDACTED] project. Our client, User, is having trouble understanding the Fee [REDACTED] report, because she doesn't know what we mean by the word "Fee". Here are two obscure pieces of information. Please let us know what Fee means to us ASAP.

Thanks – Everyone on the project

To which I replied (emphasis added later):

From: bjamminon11

Sent: Thursday, 9:09 AM

To: Mid-Level Manager; Boss; Project Lead

Subject: RE: [REDACTED] & Fee [REDACTED] Reports - Ready for Review

I will see if I can figure anything out about it. No promises!

From: bjamminon11

Sent: Thursday, 11:51 AM

To: Mid-Level Manager; Boss; Project Lead

Subject: RE: [REDACTED] & Fee [REDACTED] Reports - Ready for Review

I have found the answer to User's question "what is the definition of a fee?" **There is no spoon fee**. I've attached an email that will help – and also, be sure to check out the attachment to that email. Here's what Architect had to say about fees:

The original email chain with [REDACTED] **doesn't mention fees**, that term was added at some point, but **it's NOT what we are attempting to produce** with reports. Just so we all stay on the same page because **it will get extremely confusing if someone uses the word "fee"**. There are fees in [REDACTED] and **we do NOT want to add fees** to these reports. **If you add fees, the reports is wrong**. If the client says "fee", they mean "payments"/"credits". What??? A fee is a payment? Confused yet? We are in the process of converting their historical fee and bill data to invoices. To keep everyone on the same page, **please only use the following**:

Invoices, Assessments, Installment Plan(s), Credits, and Debits.

Before we write any reports, I recommended that we discuss the reports with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] so we aren't making assumptions of what they need.

The first report is probably closer to ...

I cut it off here, but an explanation of the purposes of the reports followed. Also, the attached email chain traced back to when Architect originally requested the reports and what they needed to contain. All of them were copied on the quoted and attached email chains, while I was not. I received this reply 25 minutes later:

From: Project Lead

Sent: Thursday, 12:16 PM

To: bjamminon11

Subject: RE: [REDACTED] & Fee [REDACTED] Reports - Ready for Review

So do you think that I should add all of the fee amounts and then take that away from the check amount?

Suddenly, I found myself unable to form thoughts or words to express the emptiness I felt inside. I somehow managed to highlight some of what I highlighted above and reply with "No, I don't think you should. See below." Then I received more questions from Project Lead – not continuing the email chain – but branching new replies off my 11:51 AM email. I watched helplessly as zig-zagging emails began to spiral out of control. The project took the form of a massive Hydra, each issue splitting into two, maybe three or four more every time I attempted to kill one. I feared it would become our existence, destined to engage in futile battle forever, when at last the beast grew weary and withdrew for the day.

The next morning, I laid low. I thought perhaps if I don't feed this monster, it will starve, and I will never speak of it again. Just as I allowed myself a shred of hope, an email shows up:

From: Mid-Level Manager

Sent: Friday, 11:07 AM

To: bjamminon11; Boss; Project Lead

Subject: RE: [REDACTED] & Fee [REDACTED] Reports - Ready for Review

So what is your recommendations? Send the information below back to User? Schedule a meeting to discuss this with User?

Reality began to crack around me like glass. I decided not to touch it – perhaps if I left it alone and avoided sudden movements, it wouldn't collapse...

From: Boss

Sent: Friday, 12:01 PM

To: Mid-Level Manager, bjamminon11, Project Lead

Subject: RE: [REDACTED] & Fee [REDACTED] Reports - Ready for Review

Can we have a short meeting before? In an earlier email somewhere, I saw a copy of [REDACTED]'s Fee [REDACTED] report, does anyone have a copy handy or the email where it exists?

Slowly, but very surely, the cracks began to grow until Reality shattered into cobwebs, becoming opaque. Some unholy machine had taken control, and its leader did not like Architect. The machine chose to remove all statements made by Architect from its reality, particularly those I referenced above, indifferent to the fact that Architect originally requested the report and provided all relevant information about it. The machine chose to arrange for additional experts to come in for this pre-meeting – everyone with any knowledge of the database other than Architect. The machine worked out logistics and budgeted time for this critical task.

I sat silently on my couch during the meeting as the group of experts discussed a range of topics, jumping back and forth between them seemingly at random, for one full hour:

- *Maybe THIS is what fee means*
- *I don't think we need to do this project to begin with*
- *We definitely need clarification from User on XYZ*
- *What is this report supposed to be for?*
- *Maybe she really wants THIS*
- *Project Lead has been putting a lot of effort into this*
- *If pi was 3.00 it would be easier for kids*

I tried to tune out the madness – at times even attempting to bound over the vast logical chasms in the myriad arguments they made – but it amounted to nothing. The machine concluded that we would bill additional time and send our experts to talk directly to User. They were to advise User that she must provide us with enough information to make the report if she expects us to do it – like what she means by “Fee”.

Darkness surrounds me now. All is in limbo. I think back to the last time this project brought me to this place... and the time before that. The machine, now spinning violently but with purpose, establishes communication structures among its minions and schedules more meetings. When its hunger for madness is finally sated, the machine utters a phrase I've heard before: "And at that point, if we REALLY need to, we'll reach out to bjamminon11. bjamminon11, you haven't said anything, do you have anything to add?" No... no I do not. Words escape me. Now I wait in this purgatory until the day comes – could be a week, could three months – when this project suddenly reappears in my life, somehow in worse shape than it was before. All meaning escapes me, and I embrace the madness.

TL;DR: I need a new job.