



My colleague Julius

by *Ploum* on 2024-12-23

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Do you know Julius? You certainly know who I'm talking about!

I met Julius at university. A measured, friendly young man. He always wore a smile on his face. What struck me about Julius, aside from his always perfectly ironed clothes, was his ability to listen. He never interrupted me. He accepted gratefully when he was wrong. He answered questions without hesitation.

He attended all the classes and often asked for our notes to "compare with his own" as he said. Then came the infamous computer project. As a team of students, we had to code a fairly complex system software using the C language. Julius took part in all our meetings but I don't remember witnessing him write a single line of code. In the end, I think he did the report formatting. Which, to his credit, was very well done.

Because of his charisma and elegance, Julius was the obvious choice to give the final presentation.

He was so self-confident during the presentation that the professors didn't immediately notice the problem. He had started talking about the C virtual machine used in our project. He even showed a slide with an unknown logo and several random screenshots which had nothing to do with anything known in computing.

For those who don't know about computing, C is a compiled language. It doesn't need a virtual machine. Talking about a C virtual machine is like talking about the carburettor of an electric vehicle. It doesn't make sense.

I stood up, interrupted Julius and improvised by saying it was just a joke. "Of course!" said Julius, looking at me with a big smile. The jury was perplexed. But I saved the day.

Throughout our studies, I've heard several professors discuss the "Julius case." Some thought he was very good. Others said he was lacking a fundamental understanding. Despite failing some classes, he ended up graduating with me.

After that, our paths went apart for several years.

I've been working for nearly a decade at a large company where I had significant responsibilities. One day, my boss announced that recruiters had found a rare gem for our team. An extraordinary resume, he told me.

From the perfect cut of his suit, I recognised Julius before seeing his face.

Julius! My old classmate!

If I had aged, he had matured. Still charismatic and self-assured. He now sported a slightly graying three-day beard that gave him an air of wise authority. He genuinely seemed happy to see me.

We talked about the past and about our respective careers. Unlike me, Julius had never stayed very long in the same company. He usually left after a year, sometimes less. His resume was impressive: he had gained various experiences, touched on all areas of computing. Each time, he moved up in skills and salary. I would later discover that, while we held similar positions, he had been hired at twice my salary. He also got bonuses I didn't even know existed.

But I wasn't aware of this aspect when we started working together. At first, I tried to train him on our projects and internal processes. I assigned him tasks on which he would ask me questions. Many questions, not always very relevant ones. With his characteristic calm and his signature smile.

He took initiatives. Wrote code or documentation. He had answers to all the questions we could ask, regardless of the field. Sometimes it was very good, often mediocre or, in some cases, complete nonsense. It took us some time to understand that each of Julius's contributions needed to be completely reviewed and corrected by another team member. If it was not our field of expertise, it had to be checked externally. We quickly had a non-written rule stating that no document from Julius should leave the team before being proofread by two of us.

But Julius excelled in formatting, presentation, and meeting management. Regularly, my boss would come up to me and say, "We're really lucky to have this Julius! What talent! What a contribution to the team!"

I tried, without success, to explain that Julius understood nothing of what we were doing. That we had reached the point where we sent him to useless meetings to get rid of him for a few hours. But even that strategy had its limits.

It took us a week of crisis management meetings to calm down a customer disappointed by an update of our software. We had to explain that, if Julius had promised that the interface would be simplified to have only one button that would do exactly what the client wanted, there was a misunderstanding. That aside from developing a machine that read minds, it was impossible to meet his complex needs with just one button.

We decided to act when I heard Julius claim to a customer, panicked at the idea of being "hacked", that, for security reasons, our servers connected to the Internet had no IP address. We had to forbid him from meeting a client alone.

For those who don't know about computing, the "I" in IP address stands for Internet. The very definition of the Internet is the network of interconnected computers that have an IP address.

Being on the Internet without an IP address is like claiming to be reachable by phone without having a phone number.

The team was reorganised so that one of us was always responsible for keeping Julius occupied. I never wanted to speak ill of him because he was my friend. An exasperated programmer had no such restraint and exposed the problem to my boss. Who responded by accusing her of jealousy, as he was very satisfied with Julius's work. She was reprimanded and resigned shortly after.

Fortunately, Julius announced that he was leaving because he had received an offer he couldn't refuse. He brought cakes to celebrate his last day with us. My boss and the entire human resources department were genuinely sad to see him go.

I said goodbye to Julius and never saw him again. On his LinkedIn account, which is very active and receives hundreds of comments, the year he spent with us became an incredible experience. He hasn't exaggerated anything. Everything is true. But his way of turning words and a kind of poorly concealed modesty gives the impression that he really contributed a lot to the team. He later became the deputy CEO then interim CEO of a startup that had just been acquired by a multinational. An economic newspaper wrote an article about him. After that episode, he joined the team of a secretary of state. A meteoric career!

On my side, I tried to forget Julius. But, recently, my boss came to me with a huge smile. He had met the salesperson from a company that had amazed him with its products. Artificial intelligence software that would, I quote, boost our productivity!

I now have an artificial intelligence software that helps me code. Another that helps me search for information. A third one that summarises and writes my emails. I am not allowed to disable them.

At every moment, every second, I feel surrounded by Julius. By dozens of Juliuses.

I have to work in a mist of Juliuses. Every click on my computer, every notification on my phone seems to come from Julius. My life is hell paved with Juliuses.

My boss came to see me. He told me that the team's productivity was dangerously declining. That we should use artificial intelligence more effectively. That we risked being overtaken by competitors who, without a doubt, were using the very latest artificial intelligence. That he had hired a consultant to install a new time and productivity management artificial intelligence.

I started to cry. "Another Julius!" I sobbed.

My boss sighed. He patted my shoulder and said, "I understand. I miss Julius too. He would certainly have helped us get through this difficult time."

- [Picture by Max Gruber/Better Images of AI](#)

About the author

I'm [Ploum](#), a writer and an engineer. I like to explore how technology impacts society. You can subscribe [by email](#) or [by rss](#). I value privacy and never share your adress.

I write [science-fiction novels in French](#). For [Bikepunk](#), my new post-apocalyptic-cyclist book, my publisher is looking for contacts in other countries to distribute it in languages other than French. If you can help, [contact me!](#)

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