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# **Vermont Life Dotcom**

Culture and Economy in the Burlington, VT Web Tech Industry

Honors College Thesis

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The year was 1998. Two years from the new millennium. The Digital Revolution had ravished the world, and the Internet had quickly developed its own living, breathing form, capturing the imagination of entrepreneurs and igniting an excited buzz in homes all around the country. Having entered the Information Age, society was struggling to keep pace with the gushing river of new ideas and new innovations. With the growing affordability of personal computers and the evolving academic discipline of computer science, the question of who could be the next great entrepreneur became ever more uncertain.

Tucked away in the American Northeast, Vermont, in fact, was harboring many great thinkers and visionaries. Surrounding a small marble table at a pub in downtown Burlington, five friends – Mark Bonfigli, Rick Gibbs, Mike Lane, Jamie LaScolea, and Ryan Dunn – were enjoying burgers and beers while discussing ways they could capture the power of the web and use it to advance and empower the entire auto industry. At the same time, Brian O’Connell, a graduate from Babson College’s entrepreneurial studies program and an aspiring businessman from Hinesburg, VT now in his mid-30s, was looking for a way to build upon his recent success digitizing the accounting industry. He recognized the tardiness that plagued businesses trying to access information about accountants. Websites, he believed, were the answer.

Over the next few months, Mark et al. and Brian all took great leaps forward to bring their dreams into fruition. By the spring of 1999, Earthcars.com – a name

later changed to Dealer.com – had found its home in Burlington, while CPA Site Solutions had settled down in neighboring Winooski. Both still in their infancy, they would each grow tenfold over the next decade. The beer-guzzling, burger-consuming crew of Earthcars.com started to build its team of engineers, always collaborating and incorporating the latest technologies to create even better, more useful web platforms and products for dealerships. They also developed a unique company culture, one they termed the “Earthling Evolution,” which placed creativity and individuality, together, at the heart of their innovative and collaborative process. Brian’s business venture also soared. Guided by Brian’s personal business strategy – “Constant Improvement” – CPA Site Solutions focused on small, incremental improvements, building from one success to the next. Now, both companies – Dealer and CPA – have become leading figures in their respective industries: with a team of over 800 and offices on the East and West Coasts, Dealer provides web marketing solutions to over 40 percent of the auto industry; CPA’s office of 30 now manages and hosts over 6,000 websites for CPAs and other accountants from around the country.

Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions have established themselves as two players in the emerging hub of web tech companies in the Burlington, Vermont area. The growing presence of this industry has prompted questions about why Burlington has become a hotspot for these types of businesses. Why have employers and employees in the web tech industry set their roots in this region? What is it about these companies specifically and Vermont more generally that these individuals find attractive and meaningful? Are the reasons rooted in cultural

beliefs and values associated with this place and, if so, what are they? Do their motives reflect business goals or personal lifestyles and aspirations?

On the surface, these companies portray themselves as proponents of healthy living, a reimagined sense of work and play. Dealer.com's website has a page dedicated to P.E.A.C.E., an acronym outlining various components of its self-defined corporate responsibility: "Planet, Eating local, Arts, Community, Employees." Describing itself as a place committed to "environmental stewardship," "local food systems," "arts and culture," and "corporate citizenship," Dealer.com presents itself as an idealistic corporate community. Images of solar panels, a homely café, a muralist at work, gardeners in the field, and an aerobic exercise session contribute to this visionary presentation, depicting a career at Dealer as a life beyond the workplace. Interestingly, the design of the webpages devoted to the company's corporate responsibility is the exact same as those for its products and services, suggesting corporate social responsibility is just as important and just as central to Dealer's mission as the industry leading digital marketing it offers its clients. While the CPA Site Solutions website includes less information about its corporate philosophy, it has a special page devoted to intimately personal blurbs about every employee, recognizing the unique characteristics each one brings to the company. Undoubtedly, these both Dealer and CPA convey themselves as people-friendly places. From the outset, then, my goal was to identify how the ideal sentiments play out in the quotidian workday in an effort to understand what life is really like at these companies.



Exploring the experiences and stories of Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions specifically, my project gained a more general purpose: to shed light on the interplay between culture and economy within the Burlington web tech sector, to begin to understand how cultural factors influence the emergence and continued growth of the tech industry in the area. Vermont presented a particularly appropriate place of study as it promotes values of both individual freedom and communal citizenship, a dichotomy articulated in the State's motto of "Freedom and Unity" and one that has fascinating sociocultural and economic implications. Most studies on Vermont businesses and culture have been centered on tourism and notions of space and place, which certainly have broad connections to the growth of the web tech industry in Vermont but fail to address more contemporary economic and sociocultural phenomena at play in the region today (Brown 1997; Kaufman and Kaliner 2011). Other Vermont researchers have examined the relationship between rural and urban environments, a dualism that returns to the "Freedom and Unity" paradox (Dunkley 2007; Vanderbeck and Morse 2003). The romantic visions of pastoral hills and dense forests might be seen as distinct from the growing towns and cities in which technology companies are settling, and yet the two are intimately related. Many moving into Vermont do so to be closer to the surrounding natural areas, and the continued preservation of these natural spaces relies upon Vermont residents to remain in love with them.

An anthropological perspective, incorporating ethnographic methods such as participant observation and oral history collection, became especially valuable, as the ideal narratives constructed about Burlington generally and the web tech

industry specifically are experienced uniquely by each individual in reality. Indeed, while many try to generalize the capitalist experience, reality is so much more complicated. Thus, I immersed myself in the worlds of two companies – Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions – and engaged with individuals at both on deeply personal levels, while also observing the broader work environments and interrelationships among colleagues. Using these intimate methods, I gained experience in, and knowledge about, the businesses firsthand, the voices of my informants guiding my understanding and filling my recorder for future reference. The different sizes and scales of Dealer and CPA – the former a large national company with hundreds of employees, the latter a mid-size firm with dozens of employees – broadened the contextual significance of the study, creating a comparative element to the project, as the diverse range of stories offered by informants at both companies contained curious points of convergence and deviation.

For Dealer and CPA, the cultural values that have come to define their spaces originated with the founding members – that cheerful bunch of pub-goers from Burlington and that Babson graduate from Hinesburg. The concept of “value” – defined by cultural preferences – becomes fundamental to our discussion, especially as it frames how we understand the ways these individuals conceived their businesses and tried to spark positive social change (Avruch 1982; Strathern 1972). The founders of Dealer and CPA put into motion a new definition of “success,” transforming the cultural base upon which their businesses – indeed, their communities – function.

In recent years, the relationship between the technology industry and organizational culture has gained significant scholarly attention. Some researchers argue that organizational culture is determined, in part, by the industry in which it operates; companies must function within competitive environments, consumer demands, and sociocultural expectations (Denison and Mishra 1995; Gordon 1991). There appears to be a growing correlation between culture, power, and agency too, as organizations find themselves grappling with these systems of capitalism and consumerism within a cultural context (Morrill 2008). Usually, the cultures of organizations are determined by leaders, whose behaviors and values have significant impacts on the cultural values and behaviors of employees throughout the organization (Giberson, et al. 2009).

Leaders within the web technology industry have not only redefined the meaning and purpose of work and the environments in which it is done. With the recent upsurge in technology use worldwide, other meaningful patterns have emerged. Global clusters of innovation have sprouted up in many corners of the world, including Israel and, most notably, Silicon Valley. Researchers have observed that environment and context affect the birth and development of these entrepreneurial ventures (Engel & del-Palacio 2011; Saxenian 1983). Certainly, there is a complex relationship between technology innovation and patterns of socioeconomic growth (Smith 1997).

To appreciate the broader themes and nuances of cultural experiences in today's economic conditions, I have included an ethnographic comparison threading throughout the duration of my discussion. Jessica Cattelino's intimate experience

with the Florida Seminole casino industry and Beth Buggenhagen's observations of the gift economy in Dakar, Senegal offer meaningful points of commonality and difference with the Burlington, VT web tech industry and between themselves. The economic transformation spurred by the booming gaming business in the Florida Seminole community and the struggle to balance local cultural forces within a broader global economy in Senegal share insight into the phenomena shaping the stories at both Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions.

Studying the messy relationship between economy and culture and using ethnographic methods to do so, my project grounded itself in the theoretical framework of economic anthropology. The field of economic anthropology is, at its core, a response to Adam Smith's assertion that social dynamics are determined by economic systems. Economic anthropologists assert the opposite: that economic systems are, in fact, products of sociocultural forces, born in response to environmental conditions and understandings of the surrounding world (Polanyi 1944). As discussed by Marcel Mauss in his foundational book *The Gift*, economies are value systems of exchange; in its most basic form, economic systems are often ones of gift-giving, which is a social act with not only economic significance but also with legal, moral, and social importance. Gifts, themselves, are not simply material objects; rather, they are social objects signifying social relationships (Mauss 1990[1950]). Economic systems, therefore, take shape in particular contexts in culturally relevant ways. Culture acts as a unique motivating force affecting economic behaviors in significant ways, perhaps even beyond rational and material explanation (Sahlins 1976). Economic anthropology today explores the concept of

globalization in particular; neoliberal, market economies are reimagining political spaces and human populations in profound ways, reconfiguring sociocultural relationships between the governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality (Ong 2006). Certainly, there are dire contradictions plaguing capitalism today, the fundamental ramifications of which were anticipated by Karl Marx nearly 200 years ago. Marx predicted that the conditions of pure capitalism ultimately led to utter alienation and estrangement of workers from their work, from their fellow workers, and even from themselves. Indeed, Marx believed a capitalist world broke down individuals to the point of total dehumanization, losing any sense of purpose or worth in the world (Marx 1978[1867]). Overlapping with Marx in time, Max Weber explored the roots and evolution of capitalism and the values at its core, tracing them historically and noting how values that once characterized hard work have faded away over time, leaving us stuck in capitalism's "iron cage" (Weber 2005). More recent economic anthropologists have expanded upon Weber's historical observations, using them to reinforce ideas that economic systems change over time, reflecting sociocultural values and conditions – not the other way around. Indeed, today we are left to study contemporary conditions and situations, seeking to understand how capitalism is felt and experienced by people in unique environments and contexts. The likes of Aihwa Ong have asserted the contextually dependent stories of capitalism, using this as a reason to support ethnographic methods as a means of learning about capitalism on a deeply human level and avoiding overly general statements about social life today (Ong 2006). Building upon this vast theoretical framework, my project attempted to locate

capitalism and study it within the context of the Burlington, VT web tech industry. As I began my ethnographic exploration, I grew ever more skeptical of purely philosophical analysis of capitalism; traditional philosophical narratives did not seem to fit with my observations. By virtue of the anthropological method, anthropological theory became fundamentally relevant to my study. Bits and pieces of the broader economic theory remained germane to my topic, but economic anthropological theory helped me interpret and articulate the points of discrepancy that I noticed. Thus, my thesis attempts to use economic theory to critique current experiences of capitalism and anthropological theory to reposition the conversation within a cultural context full of dynamic change and internal tension.

With this theoretical foundation as a guide for my own study, I have divided the core of my thesis into three chapters. Chapter 1 examines the career histories of numerous individuals at Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions, exploring the paths and obstacles they traversed over the course of their lives before settling in the Burlington, VT area. Incorporating Marxist and Weberian theories, we will begin to see how these histories speak to the type of “rat race” anticipated by Marx. Chapter 2 observes the various pull factors that encouraged these individuals to move to the Burlington community and, more specifically, accept positions at these two companies. Vermont’s motto of “Freedom and Unity,” curiously, becomes a meaningful paradox to guide our observations of the cultures and physical spaces of both firms. Here, ideas proposed by Weber and Polanyi also contribute to the exploration of how this paradox is both resolved and embraced by both Dealer and CPA. Finally, Chapter 3 studies the “growing pains” both companies currently

experience, as their efforts to navigate the “Freedom and Unity” paradox are not simple and straightforward. As Weber, Polanyi, and Mauss suggest, the social dimensions of economic systems are messy, requiring a great deal of active work in order for there to be any hope of balance and equilibrium.

Examining the relationship between a local economy and cultural dynamics is an important endeavor, as it sheds light on why social and economic landscapes form when and where they do and attempts to understand how this may play out in an increasingly technological world. This project also provides insight into how and why the city has become a place for sustainable growth in our ever-competitive world. For institutions like the University of Vermont and the local and state governments, this work is vital for policies and initiatives to retain college graduates and foster a flourishing professional community to support regional development.

## CHAPTER 2: THE RAT RACE (AND OTHER STORIES)

*“It became impossible to balance work with any sort of personal life. I would return to my hotel room late at night and the work just didn’t stop.”*

In order to explore the reasons behind Burlington’s emergence as a hotspot for the web technology industry, it is important to begin with a look at the conditions that pushed people away from other places, an examination of the career histories of those living and working in the Burlington tech world today. We have to investigate why these people decided to move to Vermont: what was it that prompted them to move their careers to this nook in the northeastern corner of the United States?

To appreciate the underlying nuances and unifying themes of these stories, it is useful to hear them from the voices of those who experienced them. The core of my fieldwork consisted of conversations in which employees at Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions shared these narratives with me, tracing their movements and experiences from early childhood to today. This chapter will be comprised of a short collection of vignettes about individuals at the two companies. Together, these life histories shed light on themes common to the lives of individuals working in the Burlington, VT web tech industry. Some folks hail from the West Coast and the Midwest, while others were born and raised in Vermont itself. Some worked at large, multinational corporations following their college graduations, while yet others hopped around from one small business to the next. Even still, their lives – as



articulated by them – begin to paint a picture about the economic, and thus cultural, forces shaping their paths through life, guiding their careers along the way.

As we glimpse into each of their lives, we should remember to consider the relationship between the big picture and minute details, the general and the specific. As participants in our capitalist society, these individuals speak to the cultural forces that underpin our economy by recounting the circumstances and emotions they experienced over their lives. We will look at these situations in terms of Freedom and Unity, paying close attention to their interactions in each case. As we will see, the relationship between these two entities – and the conditions that characterize them – will contribute to our understanding of Burlington’s growing web technology presence.

First, it is important to understand the theoretical conditions of modern day capitalism, many of which were first articulated by the early economic philosophers including Karl Marx. An exploration into the theoretical characteristics and consequences of capitalism will provide a foundation upon which we can appreciate the push factors driving people away from their former circumstances, the bumps along their career path, impelling them to find a job elsewhere.

Under the conditions of capitalism, Marx explains how society breaks down into two factions: the property-owners and the property-less workers. Defined by competition and avarice, capitalism becomes a corrosive commodity culture whereby everything – including labor – acquires a commodity value. Indeed, even the worker transforms into a commodity, assigned a value and bought by others for production. As Marx articulates, “the worker puts his life into the object; but now

his life no longer belongs to him but to the object” (Marx 1978[1867]: 72). In this way, the capitalist system – characterized by the division of labor, specialization, and the profit-motive – becomes a system of alienation, of estrangement. The worker feels alienation in many forms: from his products, from his fellow workers, and even from himself.

As production becomes more and more specialized, the work produced at each step along the production line becomes less and less significant; the attention, the focus, of workers narrows to the point of meaninglessness. According to Marx, “[an object] exists *outside* [the worker], independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien” (Marx 1978[1867]: 72). The final product is so far distant from each worker, stripping away any sense of ownership, belonging, or purpose felt by the worker to the finished good. Thus, the worker’s existence is not defined by his participation in the production of the object but rather defied by it, a phenomenon with troubling consequences on the worker’s health and wellbeing: “[The worker] does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself” (Marx 1978[1867]: 74).

As capitalism transforms everything – including labor and the worker – into commodities, into objects, they all acquire quantifiable values to define their worth, their relationships. For the worker, this is represented by the wage, a monetary payment for his work. In order to function economically and socially in the world –

in order to exchange with others for the necessities of survival – an individual must accumulate capital. In order to save money, however, an individual refrains from participation, stripping away any notion of self beyond the workplace: “the less you eat, drink and read books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save* – the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour—your capital” (Marx 1978[1867]: 95-6). “Success” in a capitalistic sense rises as the sense of self falls. Capital deposits grow at the expense of individual identity: “The less you *are*, the more you *have*, the less you express your own life, the greater is your *alienated* life—the greater is the store of your estranged being” (Marx 1978[1867]: 96).

Just as wages objectify workers and erodes their sense of self, so the medium of money destroys social connections. In order to be most economical, everything becomes “saleable, i.e., useful” (Marx 1978[1867]: 96). The world becomes a space of numbers and figures, and individuals strive to gain the most from the wages they have earned. In doing so, in an effort to be most productive with money, “you must also spare yourself all sharing of general interest, all sympathy, all trust, etc.; if you do not want to be ruined by illusions” (Marx 1978[1867]: 96). With everyone out for the best deal, for the most profit, an attitude of distrust permeates society, disrupting the relationships that bond us together.

In Marx’s perspective, capitalism not only alienates and estranges the worker from his work and the products he creates, it devastates the social relationships that tie us together, both in terms of labor and exchange. The division of labor and

increasingly specialized labor distances one worker from the next; while each loses a sense of identity and belonging, they both fail to appreciate the work of the other. In this way, estrangement exists within an individual and among them. The concept of money further transforms these relationships, as its fungibility inserts an added level of abstraction to the process of exchange; the story behind production is masked by the monetary cost assigned to it (Marx 1978[1867]).

The idea of money coincides with a discussion of the spirit of modern capitalism conducted by Max Weber, another foundational economic philosopher. According to Weber, money symbolizes the “result and expression of virtue and proficiency,” which we understand as a “calling,” a purpose in life (Weber 2005[1930]: 19). The notion of a “duty” or “calling” defines the social ethos of capitalist culture, a concept Weber traces back to its religious underpinnings. Even the Bible states, “Seest thou a man of diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings” (Weber 2005[1930]: 19). Righteous actions become selfish acts of utilitarianism: “The value of a strict maintenance of the appearance of modesty, the assiduous belittlement of one’s own deserts in order to gain general recognition later, confirms this impression” (Weber 2005[1930]: 18). Virtues are virtuous so long as they reap benefits for the individual. In other words, everything – objects, actions, behaviors – acquire a use-value intended for individual purpose.

Gradually, the notion of a “calling” and the imperative to earn money dissociated from religion and acquired a more modern significance: the spirit of capitalism. A machine now serves as a metonym for the “modern economic order,” defining the lives of those born into its depths (Weber 2005[1930]: 123). In this

way, the economic machine, once conceived in the name of religious virtue, has transformed into “an iron cage,” which confines our worldly understanding in terms of commodities (Weber 2005[1930]: 123). Trapped in the iron cage, we lose sight of our duties and purposes, oftentimes “[abandoning] the attempt to justify it at all” (Weber 2005[1930]: 124). Ripped apart from its religious and ethical significance, the pursuit of wealth and prosperity “tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport” (Weber 2005[1930]: 124). In this way, within the confines of the iron cage, the spirit of capitalism invokes competition amongst its players, a “rat race” of sorts, in which the pursuit of wealth becomes the objective and money becomes the means.

Together, Marx and Weber shed light on the conditions and consequences of capitalism. Marx’s ideas of alienation and estrangement speak to the ways capitalism in its most brutal sense – and labor in its more concrete form – transform humans into objects, lives into insignificance. The system of capitalism disrupts the social bonds holding society together, distancing the worker from his neighbor and heightening the hostility between him and his surroundings. In this way, according to Marx, capitalism is a travesty to the human experience, a force tearing apart society from the inside out. Weber explains how the spirit of capitalism has continued to survive over time, coaxing society to construct an iron cage and imprisoning itself within it. Naturally, it is important to remember the world observed and described by Marx and Weber is different than that of today.

We must examine the lived experiences of those participating in capitalism’s core in order to understand what the effects truly are, how alienation and

estrangement are felt and interpreted. A glimpse into the past histories of those working in the Burlington web tech industry will help us appreciate the circumstances pushing them away from their previous lives and, ultimately, towards new ones in Vermont.

Kyle is a project manager at Dealer.com, where he has worked for about a year and a half:

*“Hi there, you must be Luke,” a man called out, as he stepped around the corner to greet me in the reception area of Dealer’s Howard Street site. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, I’m Kyle.”*

*Dressed in a polo shirt, khaki shorts, and flip-flops, Kyle looked like he had just returned from the beach, not as though he was starting a busy day full of meeting with managers about ongoing projects, brainstorming with other members on his team about collaborative endeavors across projects, and analyzing the latest statistical reports about newly implemented processes.*

*We walked down the same corridor from which he had come and turned into the spacious main hub, a humming of conversation rising from behind the partial walls of the many team pods. Finally, we entered the “center pod,” an open, geometric space full of curved couches and comfy chairs.*

*“Let’s sit down here for a little bit, get to know each other,” said Kyle. “I’ve managed to free up a chunk of time this morning just for you.”*

*“Sounds good to me,” I replied.*

*We sat down on one of the couches, and I prompted Kyle to tell me about his career, where he started out and how he ended up here.*

*Kyle began to recount his story. He was originally from California, living in a suburb of Los Angeles until age ten. His family moved to Williston, Vermont in the early 90s, a marked switch from Southern California. He seemed to adjust well to his new home, investing much of his time and energy into music. After graduating from Champlain Valley Union High School, Kyle enrolled at Plymouth State to study music education. Quickly, however, he discovered his true passion was not in the classroom. His love of education stemmed from his eagerness to work with people. He switched his major to business and never looked back.*

*“I realized I was good at negotiating, speaking in front of large audiences, organizing and planning things,” Kyle explained, his tone filled with certainty.*

*After graduation, the job market was nonexistent in Vermont, so he ended up working at the hospital as a pharmacy technician. Even still, his natural tendency to manage projects surfaced. In 2009, he started a big project to improve the efficiency of their medical software, becoming the department’s internal project lead to work alongside an outside vendor. The assignment was so successful, the external project manager pulled him aside afterward and offered him a job at his company.*

*With pride swelling in his voice, I could tell this must have been a pivotal moment in Kyle’s career: “While I was comfortable in my routine at the hospital, I knew I had to change things up. I couldn’t pass up this opportunity.”*

*Kyle accepted the project manager position at this small private company. His new job was based in Colorado, so he made the move out west. Travel, it seemed, would start to characterize his life.*

*“Immediately, they had me traveling all over the place, working with hospitals that had recently signed up,” Kyle said. “Instantly, I became fascinated by the critical thought necessary to take a problematic process and implement a better, more efficient one, to make positive change.”*

*Not long after settling into his new job, things changed.*

*“Our small company was bought up by two huge Fortune 500, global conglomerates, which later turned into Baxter Healthcare. Our projects became all about the money. At first, it was easy to enjoy, as we were often showered with gifts. We would attend a two-day, internal conference, and the company must have dropped \$15 million on the weekend, an over-the-top experience.”*

*Soon, however, Kyle became disillusioned. The once-small company he had first entered now lost significance, as it became an abstract number in the eyes of the bigger corporation.*

*“All that they had promised us, they took right back. They left us hanging. Suddenly, the intensity and volume of our projects skyrocketed. Our workloads increased tenfold, and I had to spend three weeks each month traveling, and not just regionally. One week I’d be in Seattle and the next in Illinois. It was work, work, work.”*

*By the sharpness in Kyle’s tone, I could tell these memories had once plagued him with anxiety and stress. Here, in front of me, however, he was calm and even-keeled. He spoke of this period in his life with a smile on his face.*

*“Everything had become impersonal,” Kyle continued. “My support team was located in Florida, and they communicated mostly via email. It was increasingly*



*difficult to focus my attention on the tasks at hand. I had to make conscious efforts to dedicate specific allotments of time to each project. The increased travel, though, made this especially difficult, nearly impossible. While in Seattle, I couldn't give my attention to other customers. I was there, so my Seattle clients received it."*

*Another guy dressed in a shirt, shorts and flip-flops passed by. Kyle must have recognized him, as he called out to his colleague with keen interest and a big smile. After a quick hello, the man walked off and Kyle returned to his story.*

*"Sorry about that, I just wanted to check in with him. He and I worked on a project together recently. Now, where were we?"*

*"Seattle," I replied, waving away his apology.*

*"That's right, okay. It became impossible to balance work with any sort of personal life. I would return to my hotel room late at night and the work just didn't stop. I would catch up on emails from other clients, listen to all the missed calls I had received that day. It was never-ending. People burned out very quickly; most of my team quit. Some people lost pay, many lost happiness. We liked what we were doing but not how we were doing it."*

*Kyle, too, soon lost the energy to cope with this lifestyle. It proved too intense for him. He started to look elsewhere, as he needed a change. On his birthday, in fact, a friend had mentioned the name "Dealer.com" and he typed it into Google. When the top hits popped up and he looked at the current job openings at DDC, he saw it, right there: "the job."*

Kyle's tale is emblematic of the alienation and estrangement described by Marx. Coming out of school, he felt impelled to find a decent job. The job market at

the time was not conducive to the prospect of a meaningful, career-track position. In Kyle's mind, his self-worth, the meaning by which he defined himself, was determined by his career. Finding a purposeful job was like finding himself, his identity. Even still, while frustrated initially by his inability to find a job of his liking, Kyle continued to work hard, eager to pull himself up and discover a career more suited to his skills, goals, and aspirations.

Unhappiness permeated Kyle's life at the hospital, where he developed a routine, becoming ever more efficient in his work. For Kyle, this routine was comfortable but not satisfactory. While his job as a pharmacist paid the bills, he needed to do more in order to quench his thirst for "success." In a way, Kyle became disconnected from his work, from his "production." Without sufficient intellectual stimulation, he worked as a "servant of the wage," continuing in his position to earn money to survive. Sentiments of estrangement resurfaced at his new job in Colorado, where his work became an "activity not belonging to him" (Marx 1978[1867]).

Kyle's early feelings of optimism and excitement in Colorado quickly gave way once the company merged with a large, multinational conglomerate, a transition that brought with it deteriorating effects on his wellbeing. A major corporation – one of the big "players" in capitalism – epitomizes the behaviors necessary to compete in today's global economy. The economy, as Marx points out, is based upon a "war amongst the avaricious" – that is, competition. Striving for a competitive edge, these companies must seek to increase their efficiency and accumulate capital. Driven by the profit motive, they often consider their workers

outside of their humanity, as numbers, as cogs in a machine. As Kyle observes after the acquisition, money becomes the company's sole obsession, its ultimate goal; the forgotten promises become representative of the growing sense of alienation felt by employees. The disillusionment, the abstraction, Kyle feels illustrates the estrangement described by Marx. For Kyle, work started to consume his life. Physically dislocated from his home three weeks each month, living out of hotel rooms and catching up with work in his "free" time, he could not keep up with the pace and the intensity. He became depressed. He gained weight. His estranged self lost interest, lost energy, to continue in this way. There needed to be a newfound sense of happiness, a newborn sense of meaning to his life.

Many of those competing in the "rat race" – the scrappy battle for profit and wealth – willingly and enthusiastically participate early in their careers. The spirit of capitalism, the prospect of fulfilled duty and the possibility of financial security, covers the iron cage in a veil of hopeful prosperity. For Kyle, his participation happened slowly and picked up exponentially; others are thrust into the throes of the war for capital from the outset. After time, still, there is often a moment when it becomes necessary to reevaluate the situation; goals and aspirations throughout life change, and it becomes necessary to alter paths.

Frank, a professional services manager at Dealer.com, has worked at the company for a few years now. His career history sheds light on other experiences in the "rat race," some that parallel those of Kyle and others that are noticeably different. And yet, curiously, the two ended up at the same company.

*Stepping inside after our 10-minute walk back to Dealer.com's Lakeside facility from the company's central campus, the soft autumn sunshine and light breeze begging for us to stay outside, Frank and I realized we had a short break before our next meeting. We sat down in the empty café located on the ground floor, and Frank asked if I wanted anything. I graciously declined, so he headed off to order himself a cup of coffee.*

*While I waited, I glanced around and noticed a couple of people walking by, chatting quietly, one of them holding an open laptop. As they drifted away, I started to listen to the quiet hum of conversation coming from down the hallway, where the building opens up into a cavernous space, hinting at its former warehouse self.*

*Frank returned, coffee in hand, and joined me at the table. In spite of the brevity of our break, we started to talk about his past. I was hoping to better understand the person behind the professional services manager who sat beside me, the trials and tribulations that had led him to this point in his life.*

*Growing up in southern Vermont, Frank developed a knack for computer technology. He attended the University of Vermont starting in 1992 to study business and information systems. Upon graduating in 1996, he had already lined up what he considered to be his "dream job," a consultancy position at Anderson Consulting Group in Boston.*

*At this point, his voice picked up, and I could see nostalgia and pride sweeping over him. He described this transition as a radical one, moving from a place committed to the jeans and plaid look to an environment where suits and ties were the dress code.*

*While at Anderson, he occupied a management consultant role, which had him moving around the country every six months and working on big projects for Fortune 500 companies. He lived in Chicago twice, spent some time in St. Augustine and San Francisco, had a short stint in Seattle, traveled to New Jersey and Massachusetts many times, experienced big city life in Dallas, and met his wife out in Denver. The experience exposed him to a variety of industries, companies, and regional lifestyles. He worked for companies in the oil industry, in consumer goods and packaged goods, in the food industry.*

*“It was interesting to see the behind-the-scenes at Fortune 500 companies like Amoco and Johnson & Johnson. Although they’re portrayed as ideal organizations, these perfect machines, you realize they are people, they are not perfect.”*

*His youthful energy made it easy for him to adapt to each new job. At first, this movement felt exciting, opening his eyes to new challenges, new ideas, and new people. Soon, however, as he began to consider his future, he had to reassess his situation.*

*Curious about what he meant by this, I prodded him to tell me more. Frank stared off into space and, after a minute or so of reflection, returned his gaze back to me.*

*“While I gained exposure to so much,” Frank said, “that lifestyle just wasn’t great for establishing roots anywhere. I would live in these places during the workweek, returning to Boston most weekends. This was what it looked like: Monday morning, you were on the first plane out of Boston, and by Thursday night or Friday you were on your way back.” The frenzy that once felt so invigorating started to take its toll.*

*“What did you do at this point?” I asked, glancing up at the clock to check on our time.*

*“My wife and I talked about settling down. The driving factor behind our decision was lifestyle: what did we want for our family, where did we want to raise our kids? We talked about Denver, but I couldn’t get Vermont out of my head.”*

As a recent college graduate, Frank was eager to jump into the turbulent world of big business. He felt prepared and ready to prove himself. His movement around the country, hopping from one site to the next, echoes Kyle’s former frantic work pace. Interestingly, Frank’s reflection on Fortune 500 companies highlights the irony laden within them: while they present themselves as “perfect machines,” they are as imperfect as the people that comprise them. While Frank was not fazed by this contradiction at the time, it illuminates many of the troubling flaws of modern-day capitalism. Companies like Amoco and Johnson & Johnson employ thousands of employees, each with their own specific tasks, contributing to the cogs that, together, make the machine run. Individually, however, they account for nothing significant. Frank, though, seemed to enjoy his assignments, confronting a plethora of new challenges each step of the way. He did not feel any symptoms of alienation until he considered his future beyond himself, when he had to answer the question about where to raise a family.

The trials of his labor, in a way, became a source of self-sacrifice; if he continued his jet-setting lifestyle, there would be little hope to build a unified family. At this point in his life, his divided existence – between Boston and all corners of the

United States – had ruptured his sense of home. Frank redefined his “calling” by identifying his family as the most important facet of his life.

For some, the ability to flee from the iron cage or, perhaps, to curb its imprisonment represents an ideal for which to strive. Unlike Marx, Weber believes there is still hope to find this kind of refuge. Marx considers alienation and estrangement as inevitable with a capitalist system, whereas Weber appreciates the potential for change or, more likely, the uncertainty of the future inside the iron cage: “No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance” (Weber 2005[1930]: 124). With a different spirit, we might get out. For Weber, there is never a universal certainty or truth with capitalism. There is room for a different future, a new direction.

There is more to the stories of employees in the Burlington web tech industry than Marxian alienation and estrangement. While there are still “push” factors driving people away from other places and many face struggle and strife professionally, there are other factors at play, new imaginings of what is important and meaningful in life.

For George, a programmer and technology director at CPA Site Solutions, his formative years in rural Ohio grounded his way of life in the countryside. It took the pull of love to lure him into a city, an environment he quickly confirmed was not for him:

*We made our way into a room extending off the main floor space at CPA Site Solutions, into a small rectangular room with a desk and computer on one side and a bookcase along the other. It contrasted sharply with the area where most of the activity takes place. There, the bright, open space with wooden rafters and skylights had the feel of a log cabin rather than a site of tech business. I dragged a spare chair up to the side of the desk while George sat down at the desk.*

*Wearing a camo hat, t-shirt, and jeans, George sat back in his wheelie chair, hands behind his head, and asked me about my project. After a quick introduction, I wanted to learn more about the director of technology, a programming expert and tech strategist, who sat in front of me.*

*George began to recount his tale. He spent his childhood living in northeastern Ohio, about 30 miles east of Cleveland, in farm country. While he spent much time outside hunting with his father and exploring the woods, he also developed a passion for computers and video games, writing his own programs by the tender age of seven.*

*By the end of high school, George's passion had turned into a career. He decided to forgo college and instead pursue his programming work on his own. Starting out as a systems administrator at a local Internet service provider, George managed new clients and helped set up their accounts, all while doing web development on his own time.*

*Not only was the Internet a newfound love of his; it also was the medium through which he found true love. He met his wife through an online dating website, a long-distance relationship that stretched from Cleveland to Boston. Their relationship continued to kindle, so he decided to move to Beantown.*



*"I was satisfied in Ohio," George explained. "I was content. I was happy to live in a place that was slow-paced. But, for our own sanity, we needed to be together. I had to move to Boston."*

*"What was that transition like?" I asked, curious to hear how urban life compared to his rural upbringing.*

*"It was tough," George laughed. "I was raised country, so Boston was a new world to me. My wife, she was raised city, had lived in Boston her whole life. Moving there was the best decision I had ever made, but it was also clear that big city life just wasn't me."*

*George got sick of Boston quickly. His wife could sense the anxiety building in him, so they looked for a change. They needed a place where the drivers were less crazy, where the commute wasn't so stressful. At the same time, his wife wasn't a huge country girl. They needed to find a balance.*

In Ohio, George had lived a life removed from the centers of capitalist production, spending his time in the fields and woods of the country. His decision not to attend college further highlights his insulated lifestyle, as he pursued passions for his own satisfaction. He managed to balance his need to earn money with his curiosity about web development, making work not so much a means for money but a mode of learning; for Marx, one way to defy alienation is to do labor that is reaffirming and stimulating, where the individual finds meaning both in work and outside of it.

A long-distance relationship unraveled George's ties to rural life. Whereas family pulled Frank from the heart of capitalism, it pushed George toward it. In this

way, the juxtaposition of Frank's story with that of George illustrates the nuances of career histories in today's capitalist society: the same factor that draws one person out of alienation pushes another one towards it. For George, the distance that separated him from the love of his life wore away his sanity, the same sense of insanity Marx attributes to the alienation produced under capitalism. While the laborer is deprived of humanity, George experienced his own privation of intimacy.

At the same time, we can question why George had to uproot himself and move to Boston, to his wife. George knew he would have professional opportunities there, while the same was not true for his wife in Ohio. Career – and thus money – undoubtedly affected their decision. They remained dependent on their ability to earn a living. For George, the pressures he encountered in Boston were exponentially greater than those he faced in Ohio. In this way, Boston becomes a contemporary space where the effects of Marx's analysis of capitalism continue to resonate, where hypercompetitive behavior pervades from the workplace to the traffic. In this environment, according to Marx, people lose their sense of self. The city becomes a living, breathing machine, and those working there become less significant. With alienation comes anxiety, with estrangement comes stress. Aware of their situation, George and his wife recognized the need to leave, to find a quieter place to live.

Intriguingly, depending on the perspective, Burlington can be seen as either a big city or a refuge from it. Compared to Boston, Burlington is a pastoral haven; yet it is also the largest city in the state. For some, the move to Burlington is a transition into big city life, where professional goals and aspirations take center stage. Coming

from the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, Nora, a sales rep at CPA Site Solutions, considered her move to Burlington as one to a hip, urban center. As we will see, she viewed it as a step forward in her career, a way to challenge herself professionally:

*Sweating from the midday summer heat, I finally reached the CPA Site Solutions office, one of the suites in a revamped ranch-style complex, a two-story brick building situated on West Canal Street overlooking the Winooski River. I opened the door, greeted with a whirl of cool, air-conditioned breeze.*

*A woman on a nearby computer turned around and welcomed me inside. I mentioned I was looking for Nora, and she pointed to someone on the other side of the room. I headed in that direction, and Nora looked up with a smile.*

*“Are you Luke?” she asked, extending her hand in anticipation.*

*“Yes, and you must be Nora,” I replied, accepting her warm welcome.*

*“Give me one quick second, I just have to finish uploading something.”*

*A few clicks later, she swiveled around, stood up.*

*“Perfect. Let’s chat in this room,” she said, beckoning me into an empty office nearby.*

*I followed her inside, only to notice a golden retriever sniffing at my heels.*

*“It’s okay, he can join us,” she laughed, undoubtedly due to the look of shock on my face. “We’re dog lovers here.”*

*She offered me the chair behind the desk, which I gladly accepted, and sat down opposite me.*

*We started talking, and quickly I learned about the evolution of her career.*

*Nora was originally from the Northeast Kingdom. Upon graduating high school, she*

*felt she needed to get away and decided to enroll at a small liberal arts college in New Hampshire. She graduated in 2006 with a degree in literature, a field she admitted held little practical promise.*

*“I hopped around from one job to the next, trying out different things. I worked in publishing for a few years and then gave restaurants a go. I moved around a lot, living in the South, Alaska, and a few spots in New England. This nomadic experience was great, and I met people from all walks of life, each sharing with me a unique perspective on life.”*

*“What made you return to Vermont?” I asked.*

*“Well, nothing seemed to click. My Vermont upbringing had impacted my belief system, my politics. I wanted a place that aligned with my passions, my interests. Vermont was the place for that.”*

*Over the years, she had become friendly with successful web developers and programmers. She decided to teach herself some of the basics, and she quickly found her stride. Upon her return home to the Northeast Kingdom, she got a job at a small development firm.*

*“I learned so much there, and my passion for coding and problem-solving flourished,” Nora explained. “It just was not the place where I wanted to be. The company was a two-person deal, and I started to outgrow it. The Northeast Kingdom had become too small, too confined, and I needed to get out again.”*

*The dog, an aging golden retriever, sat up from under the desk, and Nora reached down to pet her.*

*“It’s not just small,” Nora said, continuing her description of the Northeast Kingdom. “It’s definitely not as progressive as Chittenden County. There’s a lot of drug use, substance abuse in general. My professional and personal lives there were not aligning. I was trying to move forward with my career, but the possibilities there are limited. There’s not much pay, and you can only grow so far. I wanted to be able to grow, I wanted to be able to learn more, and I wanted to have a place where I felt comfortable to live. Burlington became the place where this could happen.”*

This counter-narrative reminds us that Burlington is not immune from the symptoms of capitalism; the web tech industry in the area still competes for business, for growth. In the Northeast Kingdom, Nora’s professional life was stifled, unable to develop unconditionally. The two-person enterprise of which she was a part limited her ability to hone the critical skills that she wanted to develop for her career, as extraneous responsibilities preoccupied her as well. While perhaps this was sufficient in the remote community of the Northeast Kingdom, it inhibited the possibility for continued growth as individuals and as a company, something that Nora aspired to achieve.

The interconnectedness between Nora’s professional wellbeing and personal happiness rematerializes Marx’s notion of the loss of the self at the expense of labor. As we invest our time and energy into work, we so often come to define ourselves by it. Our feelings about “success” are determined by our economic status, reviving a sense of alienation. For Nora, the limitations of her work environment kindled a similar sort of alienation, as though her own success was suffering as a result. In an effort to break away, she needed to find a place that offered space for her to grow

professionally, a place that would offer her financial success. At the same time, she needed to rediscover her sense of self and belonging.

Burlington, therefore, seems to be a place of equilibrium, of balance, where the economy is inevitably tied to capitalism and its tendencies, but also where there exists a spirit beyond that of capitalism, beyond that of profits and the bottom-line. For Kyle, Frank, and George, the big city had drained their sanity, their mental wellbeing. Their work had reached a tipping point. While running in the “rat race,” they had started gasping for air. Burlington offered a refuge, a place to recover and enjoy life. For Nora, the Northeast Kingdom was too slow, too restricting. She sought greater intensity, greater profits. Burlington for her was a center of capitalism, a big city where her dreams could come true. In this way, Burlington embodies a paradox: it is a place that both accepts and subverts the spirit of capitalism. It lives in a flexible iron cage, where rigidity and fluidity exist in tandem, where the ultimate goal is to balance economic prosperity with personal health and wellbeing. It is a place where the scale of Freedom and Unity shifts back and forth, oscillating slowly into equilibrium.

## CHAPTER 3: FREEDOM AND UNITY

The previous chapter identifies some of the push factors that had prodded people to leave other places, whether from big cities or rural towns. Now, we will examine the pull factors; that is, why did these people then decide to come to Vermont, and what do these web tech companies offer them? In other words, what cultural values reside in the Burlington community that resonate with these individuals, and how do the companies embody them?

As we have seen, many individuals have tried to escape conditions that drain their minds, exhaust their bodies, and suppress their personal wellbeing. In this chapter, we will begin to understand what the Burlington community generally and Dealer.com and CPA Site Solution specifically do to attract these individuals and appease their former distresses. We will start to see how, while the web tech industry in the area continues to engage in capitalism, there is a reevaluation, a redefinition, of what this engagement looks like and how people experience their day-to-day lives. In contrast to the “rat race” stories, many of which depicted lives devoid of Freedom and Unity altogether, the narratives and descriptions shared in this chapter will revolve around a balance between these two concepts in various ways. As we have seen, Burlington can already be viewed as a paradox: for some, it is a quiet sanctuary from the hustle and bustle of big city life, while for others it is a fast-paced urban center. Now, we will begin to explore the Freedom and Unity paradox, where Burlington and the web tech companies themselves become places that represent individual freedom and communal wellbeing. Before we return to

the personal stories of those working at CPA Site Solutions and Dealer.com and explore the ways they interact with, and relate to, the balance between Freedom and Unity, it is helpful to revisit the theoretical framework framing the possibility of this dynamic within modern-day capitalism.

Commenting on the evolution of capitalism from its early stages to its present state, Max Weber hints at the possibility of a change in the future experience of capitalism, a shift in value and ideology that pushes society beyond the iron cage. Just as capitalism diverted away from its religious underpinning – people with a virtuous commitment to hard work in the name of salvation – and towards an irrational devotion to profit for its own sake that explains current experiences in capitalism, so there is the potential for a new direction, a new experience, guided by new “prophets” (Weber 2005[1930]: 124). Weber’s commentary about the historical development of capitalism and his postulation about its future demonstrates a recognition that the economic systems guiding our lives can change. They are dynamic, evolving with the cultural environment in which they exist. The critical perspective offered by Weber laid the foundation upon which the likes of Karl Polanyi could delve even deeper into the relationship between economics and our social world.

For Polanyi, economic life springs from society, reflecting social values and cultural priorities. Ultimately, economic systems are defined by social relationships: “Man’s economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships...He acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end” (Polanyi 1944: 46). Polanyi’s assertion



counteracts and even criticizes the likes of Adam Smith, who insisted the capitalist system defined the natural state of the human race and the market system defined the social relations amongst its people. As Polanyi points out, while economies have varied over time, “man as a social being” has remained the same (Polanyi 1944: 46). Using two primary examples – a small hunting community and a despotic society – he demonstrates how their economic interests differ and yet they both “run on noneconomic motives” (Polanyi 1944: 46). In many tribal societies, social connections become paramount, while individual interests fall by the wayside. As we will explore a bit later, generosity and reciprocity become intimately intertwined with social prestige and communal reputation. Thus, there is the possibility for communities to function economically in the “absence of the motive of gain; the absence of the principle of laboring for remuneration; the absence of the principle of least effort; and, especially, the absence of any separate and distinct institution based on economic motives” (Polanyi 1944: 47). The question of production and distribution – the ability for a society to produce and survive collectively – finds its resolution in ideas of reciprocity and redistribution. The people in these societies, then, share cultural values that contribute to their understanding of the world as a place where production and subsistence is done in a community as a community, where social motives take precedence over individual ones. Consequently, “the economic system is, in effect, a mere function of social organization” (Polanyi 1944: 49). In this system, cultural dynamics work to satisfy both social and individual needs. Drawing on the example of the Kula Ring in Western Micronesia, Polanyi extends this perspective to a larger, more complex society, illustrating that other

economic systems – ones guided by different cultural values from traditional capitalism – can be elaborate and extensive in nature. Through this detailed anthropological analysis, Polanyi ultimately argues that economic systems reflect the social relationships and cultural values of a society. While the motives and experiences within various economic systems may be different, they share this common feature: “The organization of the economic system may still be based on the same principles, though accompanied by very different culture traits, according to the very different human relations with which the economic system is intertwined” (Polanyi 1944: 53). For Polanyi, capitalism is just another type of economic system, fashioned by a certain set of cultural values and beliefs that have directed society into a world of market systems and profit margins.

The critical framework established by Weber and Polanyi provides an important foundation for our conversation about the way the Burlington web tech industry – as seen through CPA Site Solutions and Dealer.com – has created a space in which values of Freedom and Unity balance and counteract the pressures inherent in capitalism. While the companies continue to engage in capitalism, still governed by the bottom-line, their values extend beyond those central to capitalism. They are capitalist and yet not entirely so. They have questioned the authority of the iron cage metaphor, turning it into something less rigid and lonely.

Now, we will examine how this plays out in three main forms: lifestyle, family, and the work environment itself. It is important for me to note, however, that this exploration is not an attempt to sanitize capitalism; rather, it is a means to comment on the cultural complexity in Burlington’s web tech industry, as

businesses have reimagined the values guiding their lives and their businesses, a shift to a new set of values that speaks to the possibility of a new experience within capitalism envisaged by Weber and contributes to Polanyi's idea that economic systems are, in fact, products of a society's sociocultural context.

## ***Lifestyle***

With alienation bearing down on individuals participating in the cutthroat, high-pressure rat race of capitalism, their sense of self and wellbeing diminishes. Many fleeing those types of environments, including the likes of Kyle, Frank, and George, do so to regain a healthy lifestyle. Burlington becomes a place where these individuals can discover health and wellbeing, where they can join a community of likeminded individuals. For those like Nora, who move away from places that feel alienating due to reasons of lifestyle and environment, Burlington becomes a community where those points of disconnect finally align. In a world guided by profit, sometimes the notion of "success" fails to recognize health and lifestyle as fundamental components. The web tech companies in Burlington, then, seem to appreciate this broader notion of success, reimagining themselves to foster healthy lifestyles by promoting community development and upholding individual freedoms.

Noted for their company climates and cultures, Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions focus much of their time and energy on fostering safe and comfortable communities dedicated to healthy living and wellbeing. In this sense, there is a core value of unity, to take care of each other and to take care of each place. At the same

time, the notion of freedom emerges as a defining characteristic, as great agency is placed in the hands of the employees to take care of themselves. In this way, freedom is a core value as well. Together, freedom and unity each become fundamentally necessary for healthy living and wellbeing in Burlington.

For Kyle, working at Dealer.com has given him a chance to establish a balance between his work and personal lives. Before, traveling so much, he had no personal life. If he did, it was on a Saturday, but that depended on whether he landed in Boston at a reasonable time the previous night. At Dealer, if he wants to leave early, he can leave early. If he wants to golf, he can play golf. There are few restrictions on employees; almost anything goes so long as deadlines are met and the work is up to par. Dealer gives its employees tremendous freedom, with the expectation that they will still perform exceptionally. Kyle explained to me that working from home is entirely acceptable. The Monday before our meeting, in fact, Kyle was, for whatever reason, not focused. He was distracted and could not concentrate:

*"I was like, 'I have to get out of here. I need to change it up.' So I took my laptop and went home. My manager doesn't mind, because the work gets done. They really want to make sure we're doing okay. They really want to make sure we're doing okay. It's nice to be able to work from home for the afternoon, and it was amazing how much I completed on Monday."*

*Given the opportunity to leave work early – either to work from home or to pursue leisure activities when work is slow – Kyle has revived his love of all that Vermont has to offer.*

*“Sometimes, on a Friday, I’ll say I’m going to leave at three and go golfing, and there’s no question. I make sure to arrive extra early that day and work hard all day, knowing I’ll have personal time in the afternoon to have fun on the course. And because of that, I’ve been able to rediscover why I love Vermont so much. This year, I’ve even had the chance to play hockey again, something I’ve missed since high school.”*

*Reflecting back on his former job, Kyle remembered how the work would follow him everywhere. If he worked from home, he would get an email at ten o’clock at night from a West Coast account. At Dealer, he can leave work and disconnect until the next day.*

*“Here, when I go home at the end of the day, that’s it. I don’t have email on my phone. I don’t take my laptop home unless I’m planning to do work. I leave work at work, and it’s fantastic. I have become a new guy, I’m so full of energy. I love coming to work.*

Dealer also places great emphasis on physical health and wellbeing, providing a wide variety of facilities for its employees to stay active and maintain fitness. On its campus, Dealer has tennis courts, a fully equipped gym, a weight room, Ping-Pong tables, and even a putting green. While some take advantages of these resources before and after the workday, many use them as work breaks during the day. There is even a special department called the LIFE team dedicated to satisfying the health needs of DDC employees, offering fitness classes and massages, hosting fun workshops and events daily, and organizing healthy living

activities for all to enjoy. For Kyle, the LIFE team actually transformed him physically and mentally.

*“The LIFE team runs a lottery for six or seven employees to receive one-on-one personal training for six months, working closely with the fitness trainer and the nutrition consultant. When I first arrived at Dealer, I needed it. I was fat. I was depressed. All I did during my last job was eat; I didn’t have time to exercise because I was traveling so much. The LIFE team has turned me into a new person, into the person I want to be physically, mentally, emotionally. I’ve been able to hit the rest button.”*

Kyle’s physical and mental transformations symbolize the difference between values of companies participating in the “rat race” and those attempting to operate outside of it. Before Kyle’s arrival to Dealer, there was no balance between his personal and professional lives; his work consumed his life, and his body deteriorated. Sentiments of alienation and estrangement wore away his health and wellbeing. As Kyle articulates, Dealer.com saved him. It provided him with the encouragement and the means to transform himself, to regain his fitness and improve his outlook on life.

Many others in addition to Kyle reap the benefits of Dealer’s mindful practices. Casey, a Quality Assurance Engineer in her late-twenties who previously worked for CPA Site Solutions before moving to Dealer, participates in the LIFE team’s walking challenges. Wearing a computer chip in her shoe, she records the distances she walks everyday and syncs them to an online database. Every time she reaches a certain checkpoint, the LIFE team gives her a prize, ranging from water

bottles to \$100 Amazon gift cards. She also tries to attend a yoga class at least once a week, sometimes before work and occasionally around her lunch break, especially if she just had a stressful morning. Charles, a young Digital Advisor in his mid-twenties, shared with me the ways he makes use of the healthful opportunities at Dealer. He lifts weights every morning before work and runs outside with one of his colleagues every other day in the afternoon, all of which helps him focus and recharge in the face of the inevitable stress of the workweek. The list goes on, but the abundance of activities and facilities at Dealer demonstrates the company's commitment to sustainable, healthy lifestyles for its employees.

CPA Site Solutions shares a similar sentiment to individual freedom for the purpose of health and wellbeing. In particular, CPASS commits itself to a fun and upbeat atmosphere, ensuring its employees enjoy their workdays and seek a healthy lifestyle inside and outside of the company's walls. Arriving from the Northeast Kingdom looking for a company whose values align with her own, Nora has appreciated the company's commitment to individual freedom and voice.

*"There's a climate of respect here. While we're expected to work at least 40 hours per week, we can decide, individually, how to distribute them. If you want to have a four-day workweek, you can work four ten-hour days. It's all within reason, of course. But there's the openness for that possibility. The company understands our lives are not solely dedicated to work, and they give us the freedom to relax and enjoy our personal time as well."*

The confidence and trust exhibited in this policy – to allow employees to decide when they work – epitomize CPA's commitment to providing its employees

with individual freedom and agency and promoting healthy, balanced lifestyles. Many of CPA's employees live in Burlington for all of the natural and cultural opportunities it has to offer. From hiking and skiing to fine dining and theater going, people actively engage with the greater Burlington area. Even those employees who self-define as "geeky" or "nerdy" – those who enjoy sitting in front of their TVs and computers playing online games – also enjoy spending time outside, whether actively biking along the Burlington Bike Path or passively reading a book on a bench in the park. The people comprising CPA have a diverse array of interests and hobbies, which both highlights the commonality of balanced lifestyles and underscores the uniqueness of each individual.

While CPA offers fewer amenities to its employees relative to Dealer – likely due to its smaller size – the climate of respect resonates in a way that often bridges Freedom and Unity.

*"We make sure we have fun with each other. We all have nerf guns, and if we need a quick laugh, we launch surprise attacks on neighboring teams. There are always dogs running around, playing with each other. We not only allow but highly encourage people to bring their dogs into work, making it easy to take a five minute cuddle break and lightening the office's overall mood."*

While we will discuss the work environment in further detail later in this chapter, it is important to note how individual freedoms – such as the ability to bring dogs into work or the trust to play nerf wars during the day – contribute to the health and wellbeing of the community as a whole. For those at CPA, the traditional



workspace transforms into a place of both Freedom and Unity, where a healthy lifestyle arises by balancing work and play.

Healthy living encompasses so much more than simply a well-defined work/life balance and maintenance of personal wellbeing and individual freedom. As the folks at CPA demonstrate, it includes community engagement and social happiness as well. Similarly, the Dealer.com community unites around its common value of a balanced, healthy lifestyle. With so many healthful amenities situated directly on the main Howard Street campus, from the athletic facilities to the organic and locally sourced *Dealer Dot Calm* café, it is inevitable for employees to interact while enjoying the perks of balancing work with play, strengthening Dealer's bonds as a community.

The friendship Kyle shares with his colleague Bradley, a business intelligence analyst, demonstrates the ways Dealer's commitment to balancing work with freedom further strengthens its internal unity:

*"There are days when we're in the trenches, getting tired, losing focus. We have the strangest form of communication in these moments. We just look at each other, raise our eyebrows, and we know it's time for some Ping Pong. We played a full hour of tennis yesterday.*

*"Dealer offers a lot of opportunities to unwind. And they're there because we sometimes need to hit the reset button, take a step away from the desk, refresh ourselves, rejuvenate ourselves, get some energy back.*

*"There's even a mini putt course on the roof deck, so we have a mini league. Every Friday, if it's nice, we go up there and have a bit of fun. There's a lot of great*

*things here to keep us in check, keep us from losing our minds. There's a lot on everybody's plate. There needs to be a chance for us to take a chill pill for 15 minutes and do something. Things like that go a long way."*

The strides Dealer.com employees take to find balance in their lives, both outside of the workplace at home and inside the building during the workday, represent clear efforts to counteract the degenerative forces of capitalism as described by Marx. In Kyle's own words, even small steps, like periodically taking 15-minute breaks during the day to burn off some steam with coworkers, "keep us from losing our minds," "rejuvenates" them, gives them life again. At the same time, the threat of alienation diminishes, as the community unites in their pursuit of fun and joy.

Dealer places great emphasis on community development and company camaraderie, building relationships and creating a sense of place and belonging. Many DDC employees participate on one of the many recreational sports teams sponsored by the company, whether playing kickball or softball in one of Burlington's adult leagues or biking on the company's very own road racing team. A more direct engagement with the surrounding Burlington area also happens through volunteer work, a prized value of Dealer and its people. Employees each have a paid volunteer day, where they work in the community with fellow team members on projects ranging from housing construction with Habitat for Humanity to tree planting, from cleaning up the Burlington waterfront with folks at the Community Sailing Center to serving food at a local shelter. By fostering a close-knit community at work and outside of it, Dealer manages to promote healthy, well-

balanced lifestyles for its employees while simultaneously developing a space of belonging and camaraderie.

The Dealer community gathers periodically throughout the year at various holiday parties and celebratory events, establishing connections amongst its employees and their families outside of the confines of the workplace. The range of events put on by the company is vast, ranging from winter dance bashes to summer picnics for the family. While these parties change in character and theme, they are always designed to be fun and to allow employees to enjoy themselves free from the pressures of work. The company invests its time and money into these extravagant parties, which illustrates the value it places in fostering a unified community that balances work with play, stress with happiness.

CPA carries on similar traditions. One of the weeks during which I was shadowing was spirit week, an entire week dedicated to fun activities and themed events. The moment I walked into the office, I was greeted to a display of beach balls and Hawaiian shirts, space robots and spooky aliens, and trench coats and “WANTED” posters. As I would learn, each team had chosen a theme and transformed their team spaces into vastly different worlds. Some had baked treats, while others had brought drinks to share after work. Throughout the day, everyone took breaks to play games, share laughs, and take part in a photo shoot. Each day that week, the themes and activities changed. Spirit week culminated in a company-wide barbecue cookout Friday evening, where everyone enjoyed a warm summer evening chilling out together.

## ***Family***

With such great emphasis placed on developing community and healthy lifestyles, Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions have placed the idea of family at the core of their existence, both in terms of spending time at home with family and building families amongst themselves while at work. In other words, everyone has, to some degree, a family at home *and* at work.

The value of family coincides with the value of individual freedom, as the ability to leave work at work allows people to devote time at home to their families and friends. With this free time, they can enjoy all that the greater Burlington area has to offer. Burlington is often perceived as a balance between the luxury of a big city and the quietness of the country. As we previously learned, George needed to escape the pressures of Boston. For him and his wife, Burlington became an appropriate middle ground:

*“In the Burlington area, you have the convenience of a big city, but drive ten minutes in any direction and you’re out in the middle of the country. I saw our move to Burlington as a perfect compromise. Now, we have a house 20 minutes away in the middle of the country, with a hayfield and apple trees in our backyard. But drive 20 minutes and here we are. I like how it satisfies all of our wants and needs. While the biggest city in Vermont is not comparable to the likes of Boston, it still has many of the conveniences of it.”*

For Todd, Dealer’s Director of Field Sales, the Burlington community has been a refreshing change for his family from their previous home in Florida, which

was plagued by crime and instability. Chatting over lunch at *Dealer Dot Calm*, he shared some specifics about how the move to Vermont has changed his family's wellbeing:

*"Here, I can let my daughter go outside to play with her neighborhood friends and not be worried about her safety. I keep an eye on her, of course, but I let her go outside. That just wouldn't happen in Florida. That was out of the question. It's such an inviting change for us. Now, we make the most of the outdoors. We're skiing every single Saturday, we're out on the lake every single weekend. The schools are much better here too; my daughter went to Catholic school down south, but it was too strict. She's in public school here, and she loves it.*

*"It's funny to compare the news here with that in Florida too. Down there, it's about mass shootings on a daily basis, kids getting attacked by pit bulls. Here, it's about positive things, community events, new dog parks. Miami-Dade County is fraught with lawlessness. In the years that I lived there, my car was broken into, my house was broken into. I was even mugged. Here, that just doesn't happen. You still have to be careful, but you can be much more carefree."*

The family friendly environment in the greater Burlington area makes it easy to enjoy the surrounding community, to participate in fun family activities. For many, including Frank, one of the big "pull factors" drawing him and his family to Burlington was the hybridity of it as a site of quiet country and busy city, offering a wide-range of opportunities for families to bond together and live in a well-balanced community:

*“Originally, we talked about moving out to Denver, but I have family here in Vermont and my wife came from a small family and wanted us to maintain ties to all sides of our family. We felt Burlington was a great place to live, it was a great place to raise a family. It offered the things that we wanted in terms of a lake, mountains, skiing, four seasons. But it was small enough that we weren’t in a big city and where we could actually buy a nice house and not have to spend a million dollars on some little, tiny place that we didn’t really want to live in if we were in Boston or San Francisco. For us, it provided the right balance between quality of life, career, and family.”*

Frank nicely articulates how the various subsections in this chapter – lifestyle, family, and work environment – overlap significantly. Seeking a place that promised a healthy lifestyle that was suitable for a family and beneficial for a career, Frank and his wife believed Burlington was just the spot. In Frank’s own words, “We got lucky. We found our home.”

Just as community occupies a central role in the health and wellbeing of families outside of work, so the communities within the walls of CPA and Dealer acquire characteristics quite reminiscent of families. While people make the most of their Freedom beyond the hours of the workday by spending significant time with family and friends, the Unity expressed through the communities with which they engage become forms of families unto themselves.

At Dealer, there are noteworthy linguistic features that demonstrate the familial undertones that permeate the company. Employees know the main DDC campus, located at 1 Howard Street, as “The Mothership.” All DDC employees are

referred to as “Earthlings” as well. The geeky sci-fi connotations of these terms not only speak to their love of the fantasy genre; they also point to the family-like unity that encompasses the entire firm. The lengths Dealer takes to share stories of its employees – from daily newsletters to weekly video broadcasts – turns the community into much more than a simple place of work. It becomes a homely place, full of familiar and friendly faces.

All new hires at Dealer undergo an extensive training that lasts a few weeks. Over this period of time, Earthlings new to the Mothership experience a form of acculturation, not only learning Dealer’s policies – which are known to be so few, they fit on a single page – but also, perhaps more significantly, learning how to act and function within the space of Freedom and Unity. In a sense, they are entering a new “family,” a new society, and they must learn how to live in harmony within it. Due to its large size, the process of “acculturation” is necessary in order to introduce new folks to the Dealer way of life.

At CPA Site Solutions, its smaller size makes the familial climate more easily felt. Those at CPA work closely with each other day in, day out. Working with the same people every day in such close quarters inevitably establishing strong bonds. For Nora, the climate at CPA certainly has the feel of a family, at times:

*“When you’re as small as we are, it does become kind of like a family and so that’s great. We spend so much time together, and we get to know each other personally while working. From the goofy times we share during our spirit weeks to the company dinners and cookouts we periodically have to celebrate company*

*achievements, we share so much time together. During these times, we bond, we hang out as friends, and sometimes it feels like we're a big family."*

For many, family is one of the most important factors when it comes to life decisions. As Frank previously explained, the conditions of the "rat race" make it difficult to raise a family outside of work. By balancing Freedom and Unity, by dedicating themselves to the health and wellbeing of their employees, CPA and Dealer allow their employees to dedicate themselves to their families at home, while also gaining a "family" in the workplace to bolster their sense of purpose and belonging while at work.

## ***Work Environment and Workflow***

The actual physical spaces at Dealer and CPA reflect the balance between Freedom and Unity, combining fluidity and rigidity, autonomy and direction, into the work environment itself. The bland cubicle and hotel room desk – typical sites of work in the "rat race" – are nonexistent. Instead, the workspace and workflow have been reimagined and redefined to coincide with the goals and values of the companies; the floor plans tend to be open and full of light, with some structure between various teams and departments, providing a space for individuality – Freedom – and collaboration – Unity. By redesigning their work environments in this way, Dealer and CPA revise the physical conditions in which people can still engage with capitalism.

Dealer, like most companies, organizes itself by departments, each of which breaks down into various teams. The departments at DDC range from Digital



Advisors, client-facing advisors who engage with car dealerships and offer them feedback on their performances, and Support, those working with clients to fix any front-end issues and answer any questions or concerns about their products, to SEO Analysts, those generating search engine optimization reports, and Project Management. The Engineering Department is a bit more distinct from the rest of the company, organized in its own special way according to a new, progressive model.

On one of our walks from Dealer's Lakeside facility to the main campus on Howard Street, Frank shared insight into the details of the Agile philosophy and "Scrum" team dynamic. A professional services manager, Frank oversees a few Scrum teams himself. As he explained to me, Agile software development is a methodology built upon pillars of collaboration and evolution, where cross-functional Scrum teams work together to develop, test, and revise a product's development. Utilizing this method in its practice, Dealer has created a space to accommodate it, refurbishing an entire section of the former warehouse into a sequence of "pods" that house individual Scrum teams. Endowed with whiteboards, bouncy exercise balls, and desks of all shapes and sizes, each pod has been designed to meet high ergonomic standards, making the workspace comfortable, aesthetic, and conducive to collaboration. Within each pod is also a "storyboard," which displays the current status and progress of each "story" – that is, each project or assignment. The storyboard shows the tasks for which each team member is responsible, with each "story" assigned a "point" – a somewhat arbitrary numerical value based upon the story's difficulty and complexity. Working collaborative, the Scrum team addresses each story, developing each one in two-week "sprints." The

Scrum “master” leads a planning meeting at the start of a sprint, a time when the objectives and stories for that sprint are articulated and decided upon. Each day, project teams have morning scrum meetings; usually, as I observed, the Scrum team forms a semicircle around the storyboard and, together, everyone shares progress, identifies concerns, and agrees upon the goals for that day. At the end of a sprint, there are review and “retrospective” meetings. During the review, each Scrum team assesses the work completed and that left unfinished; the retrospective meeting is a time when the Scrum Master leads a discussion about the team’s process, addressing questions of its effectiveness and brainstorming ways it could be improved. Between sprints, the entire Engineering department also puts on a “science fair” of sorts, where each Scrum team presents its progress from the latest sprint to other teams circulating from one pod to the next. After this reflective time, the entire department gears up for the next sprint, a continuous process that is highly iterative and collaborative both within and amongst the Scrum teams.

The nature of the Scrum teams and their Agile philosophy reimagine the process of work in capitalism. Unlike traditional models of the division of labor and skill specialization, the Engineering division within Dealer promotes future growth and success through a system of collaboration, repetition, and reflection. By working together and constantly revising their process and strategy, the Scrum teams tackle complex problems by balancing unity with flexibility. While each team member has defined responsibilities – various components of the “stories” – they all work together towards a common goal. Of course, the Scrum teams and DDC as a whole are all working within the realm of capitalism; yet, they have implemented a

methodology that redefines the way employees relate to each other and the ways the work itself gets done. For Frank, this work environment becomes tremendously satisfying, turning work into something meaningful and purposeful:

*“This is the most satisfied I have ever felt at a company. I feel like there’s so much opportunity. If there’s a situation and someone says ‘Hey, I need you to do X, Y, and Z,’ you have to figure out where the problems are and apply yourself to try and fix them or help get it across the finish line. There’s a lot of opportunity to use your energy in a positive way here. I can remember moments from my old job at General Dynamics, there’d be nights when I was driving home and felt as if work was soul crushing. I wondered, ‘What am I doing that really makes a difference or really satisfies me?’ I’ve never had a day at Dealer where I went home and wished I could have an impact on something. I feel like my work now has meaning, is impactful. Usually, I’m working on stuff that is high-impact or has high-visibility in the company, and that’s in large part to their trust in their employees and their willingness to give them opportunities and let them work together to fulfill them.”*

CPA Site Solutions has designed a similar layout and practice in its own space. The office’s building has an apartment-like feel, as you step inside the front door and walk up a staircase to reach CPA’s floor. With carpets on the floor and wooden beams and skylights overhead, the main space is full of light and warmth. Like Dealer, CPA divides its employees into teams. Naturally, due to its smaller size, CPA composes its teams quite differently. With fewer departments across the company, CPA mixes many responsibilities and positions within the same team. In the main office space, there are about four or five teams, each comprised of about

four employees and each separated by partial dividers and desk to resemble little team nooks. Within each team, there are folks with specialties in web design, client support, and account management, and each team focuses primarily on a particular set of clients. Even still, however, as I witnessed while shadowing a few of the employees, there is constant dialogue between teams, whether someone has a question about a specific website feature or needs someone to cover a call while they address an issue with one of the programmers. The graphic designers are housed at the end of the main floor, separated by a knee-high metal dog fence, helping to keep the excitement of the graphic designers' dogs under control.

Interestingly, just like Dealer, CPA isolates its Engineering team of programmers and web designers – a total of four or five – in a space distinct from the client-facing and front-end teams. In this way, there remains a thread of rigidity and structure to the work environment; yet emphasis is still assigned to teamwork, solving problems in a place of Freedom – of thought, energy, and independence – and Unity – of camaraderie, cooperation, and collaboration.

The aura of Freedom and Unity plays out in the general dress code – whether explicit or implicit – at both companies as well. At Dealer, there is a universal acknowledgement, or even disapproval, of the associations that come with suits and ties. A message printed next to the front entrance, in fact, says, “No Ties Beyond This Point.” Not only are suits and ties not common; they are forbidden from the premises. While at work, people get to be themselves. They have the freedom to express themselves without conforming to traditional business expectations. Flip-flops and Birkenstocks are normal. Sundresses and plaid shirts are encouraged.

Any and all styles are welcome. By promoting this culture of expression and individuality, Dealer unites its employees through its values of Freedom and Unity.

Similarly, while CPA has no explicit dress code, its employees have no real restrictions on their dress. The expectation is not to dress formally; rather, it is to be yourself. Of course, for some, this is to wear business casual clothes; for others, however, it is to wear a t-shirt and jeans or a flannel shirt and corduroy pants. Even as the former CEO and current owner of CPA walked into the office for my interview with him, he was wearing a white Polo shirt, salmon khaki shorts, and a pair of boat shoes. Regardless of their positions and responsibilities, employees – and, indeed, employers – reside on equal ground.

By maintaining work environments that foster individual self-expression and propagate sentiments of openness, CPA and Dealer transform themselves into noticeable communities while simultaneously engaging in capitalism and working towards profits and a bottom-line. In this way, they split the values and visions guiding their companies, dividing their attention and energy so that the health and wellbeing of their employees become a critical priority in addition to their need to compete in a competitive world.

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The balance between Freedom and Unity, the reimagined relationship to capitalism, prevalent in the Burlington web tech industry does not appear to be an isolated phenomenon. Numerous ethnographic cases illustrate how changing cultural values are redefining the fundamental goals and purposes of economic systems in many spheres throughout the United States and around the world.

Beth Buggenhagen presents an ethnography portraying the balance between Freedom and Unity within a space situated both inside and beyond the traditional capitalist system. Focusing on the social and economic experience in Senegal, Buggenhagen shares insight into the relationship between social values and ideas of economic profit and cultural authority. While tradition lies rooted in a gift economy, modern Senegalese must also engage in the bigger global economy. Buggenhagen studies the implications of this through two main characters: Bintu and Musa. Their marriage unites the two forms of economy, forming a mutual reliance between the two, necessitating a balance of them both. For Musa, a merchant working overseas, his engagement with the global economy brings him great monetary wealth but threatens his social wealth back in Senegal. For Bintu and her mother Sokna Géer, the gift economy is fundamental to their social wellbeing, while they depend upon Musa's success abroad to satisfy their material needs (Buggenhagen 2012: 126). The central goal in the gift economy, in which material exchanges dictate social obligations and affinities, is to give everything away. In doing so, gift-givers acquire respectability and honor, rising in social standing (Buggenhagen 2012: 130). In order for Musa to retain his status and a meaningful life in Senegal, he must trust Bintu and Sokna Géer to redistribute his wealth around their community and strengthen his social reputation. Ultimately, the marriage between Musa and Bintu fails, as he is unable "to sustain the relations of kinship and alliance that are created through the marital process" (Buggenhagen 2012: 139). The codependence among Bintu, Sokna Géer, and Musa breaks down, as his inability to support them financially and materially hurts Sokna's reputation within the community,

threatening “her reputation of liberality and reciprocity” (Buggenhagen 2012: 140). Even still, this ethnography account reveals the entanglement between the gift economy and the global capitalist economy, demonstrating the necessity to balance the two. Here, the two forms of economy do not exist separately from society; rather, their intersection highlights the notion that social systems guide economic systems, so the latter adapt and change based on the sociocultural context in which they exist. Consequently, Buggenhagen’s study identifies the possibility of redefining “success” within the multidimensional complexity of today’s world, striking a balance of values that both contribute and defy the modern capitalist system.

Jessica Cattelino’s study of the Florida Seminole gaming industry sheds light on the changing cultural landscape in the tribal community and how this relates to the radical transformation of the area’s economic landscape. In spite of the Seminole’s troubled past, a tale of exploitation common to all Native American groups, the tribal group in Florida has acquired newfound sources of great wealth from the recent construction of casinos and the tourism they have attracted. Cattelino paints a vivid ethnographic picture of the Seminole community as it grapples with this radical transformation, focusing especially on its consequences on power dynamics, sovereignty, and political rights. One specific section of the ethnography stands out within our discussion about Freedom and Unity: per capita dividends.

Similar to the communities at CPA and Dealer, the Seminoles have attached different cultural values to the capitalist system, revising what it can mean to

participate in a market-based economic system. Per capita dividends – commonly referred to as “per caps” – represent the form of redistribution used by the Seminoles in order to share the wealth derived from the casinos. For Cattelino, “understanding the choices by some tribes to distribute casino revenues in per capita dividends to all tribal members can help to evaluate the social and political meanings of money in its value-laden circuits of distribution” (Cattelino 2008: 103). In the tone of Polanyi, this egalitarian redistribution practice correlates to the emphasis placed on tribal wealth, not that of the individual. Instead of building their casinos into a commercial empire grounded in a belief of growth and prosperity, the Seminoles are rather guided by cultural values whose roots reach deep down into the community’s history. Cattelino refers to conversations she had with some Seminole members that related the existence of per caps to ancient Seminole ceremonies, specifically the Green Corn Dance. One particular day during the ritual, the men go hunting and later return and distribute the meat equally among all of the families. Cattelino explains how this cultural practice models current expectations and behaviors of Seminole leaders, particularly with regards to the collection and distribution of money. Similar to reciprocity in character, those in political power gain support and wealth, which is “determined by sharing rather than accumulation” (Cattelino 2008: 107). Through distribution via per caps, the Seminole community benefits from its own financial success, allowing individuals to not only take care of themselves but, more importantly, also those around them. Per caps raise the standard of living within the Seminole community, as they all work collectively to reinvest in the infrastructure around them.



At the same time, their financial success not only contributes to a resounding sense of Unity, strengthening social wealth and bonding the community together; it also reinforces a sense of Freedom, of sovereignty, of independence. In spite of its turbulent history grappling with anti-Indian racism, the Seminole community has developed a commercially successful gaming industry. The per caps, then, symbolize “a welcome contrast to dependency,” solidifying the community’s ability to sustain itself (Cattelino 2008: 106). While some Seminoles believe the dividends have heightened the dependency on the *tribal* government, the fact that “these are Seminole checks, not U.S. checks, takes on historical significance against the backdrop of anti-Indian racism” (Cattelino 2008: 106).

Even while engaging with today’s capitalist economy system, the Seminoles, just like Dealer and CPA, function under a set of values that allow them to participate in capitalism but that also give them space to operate outside of it. In doing so, they unveil the possibility of living with both Freedom *and* Unity, maintaining individuality and independence while also intensifying the sense of purpose and belonging within a broader community.

The balancing act between Freedom and Unity, however, can be difficult at times. The Florida Seminoles continue to confront internal and external conflicts with regards to their gaming industry. Some tribal members fear the monetary gains and newfound wealth perpetuate conformity and actually undermine their efforts to achieve total sovereignty and control over their cultural identity. The community’s sudden and growing financial success has raised questions over the future sustainability of cultural identity and sovereignty in light of continued

participation in an intensely capitalist industry. Similarly, Dealer and CPA find themselves confronting new challenges and obstacles to maintain a stable balance between Freedom and Unity, to remain true to the values that have come to define them. Their growing success threatens the very social underpinnings that have made them successful. Consequently, the companies must actively work to find equilibrium, to remain in balance, to undermine the pressures of the iron cage.

## CHAPTER 4: GROWING PAINS

Now, we have examined various factors and circumstances that characterize the movement of people engaged in the web tech world away from some places – from locations of the “rat race” – and ultimately towards the Burlington, VT area – a site actively working towards equilibrium between Freedom and Unity. This growing trend has started to establish the Burlington region as an emerging hotspot for businesses in the web tech industry, capturing the attention of employees and employers from around the country and even the world. As the previous chapter explored, much of this “success” stems from a delicate balancing act between Freedom and Unity, both within and beyond the walls of the companies themselves. Yet, with their growth in size and success, they now face more challenges, emergent obstacles, that weigh down the scale on one side or the other, making the balancing act that much more difficult. Ultimately, it is important to consider how these companies are contending with these changes and what sort of impact they have on the lives of the employees. While Chapter 3 explores how the economic and social priorities of the companies work, this chapter will study the consequences of them, the effects they have on each company’s trajectory.

Before we dive back into the contextual depths of CPA and Dealer, it is important to revisit the theoretical foundations underpinning this entire conversation. Max Weber’s speculation about the future of modern-day capitalism claims that there are various possibilities that lie ahead: there is a potential for new values, new ideologies to be reattached to economic activity:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. (Weber 2005[1930]: 124)

By providing this insightful yet ambiguous postulation about the future direction of capitalism, Weber underscores the unpredictability of our social and economic worlds, spheres of activity that are in dynamic movement. Our desire for material goods was once a “light cloak” worn “on the shoulders of the saint...which can be thrown aside at any moment. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage” (Weber 2005[1930]: 123). The uncertainty underlying Weber’s commentary on capitalism’s historical development and his speculation about the future speak to the messiness, the ambiguity, the disorderliness of change. Perhaps the iron cage cannot be demolished or contorted instantaneously; rather, any change to its structure requires great effort and patience.

Polanyi’s assertion about the submergence of economic activity in the vast ocean of our social relationships – economy as a product of sociocultural values and interactions – reiterates a similar message. By drawing on a diverse range of ethnographic case studies to support his point, Polanyi reveals the diverse range of socioeconomic systems, its many nuances and various shades across time and space. In doing so, Polanyi critically breaks down any claims to a universal human economic experience: “While history and anthropology know of various kinds of economies, most of them comprising the institution of markets, they know of no economy prior to our own, even approximately controlled and regulated by markets” (Polanyi 1944: 44). Many economists during Adam Smith’s time

“attempted to base the law of the market on the alleged propensities of man in the state of nature,” an effort that not only simplified but also utterly ignored the fact that “economic motives spring from the context of social life,” that economic systems are nuanced and variable from one sociocultural context to the next (Polanyi 1944: 45-7). Polanyi’s observations here provide a perspective from which Aihwa Ong later critiques the general claims proposed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their trilogy *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth* about universal disenfranchisement in today’s global capitalism. Ong presents anthropology as a discipline that sheds light on the peculiarities and nuances prevalent in contextual narratives of the contemporary global economy: “Anthropologists have always preferred a low-flying approach...Indeed, by hovering close to the surface of observable human practices, we discover not the structural uniformity of capitalism’s deprivation but, rather, highly varied economic, social, and cultural outcomes” (Ong 2012: 25). The generalizations laden in modern-day capitalism oftentimes overlook the infinite variability of economic experience, a variability that is never static but rather constantly changing with each passing social interaction.

The material objects inhabiting our world embody much more than strictly economic value, an idea scrutinized by Marcel Mauss in his renowned text *The Gift*. Not only do these objects reflect their use-value, their exchange value, their position on the supply-and-demand graph; social relationships saturate any exchange of objects, of gifts, a feature not truly assessed or appreciated by the excessively general story of capitalism. For Mauss, “the producer who carries on exchange feels once more...that he is exchanging more than a product of hours of working time, but

that he is giving something of himself – his time, his life” (Mauss 1990[1950]: 77). The exchange of items not only represents the intensity of their production; it also signifies the social relationship between giver and receiver. The transaction is not done in isolation; rather, it is performed in a social context, containing weight beyond the physical. In this way, economic systems acquire a radically new meaning, characterized by movement: a recognition of economics as social allows us to “perceive what is essential, the way everything moves, the living aspect, the fleeting moment when society, or men, become sentimentally aware of themselves and of their situation in relation to others” (Mauss 1990[1950]: 80).

The restlessness identified by Weber, Polanyi, and Mauss lays a foundation for an explanation as to why economic experiences are never without stress, flaw, and tension. Each exchange, it seems, adds to the complexity of an even bigger web of social interaction, disrupting any sense of stability and shifting the way people perceive their relationships to others. Each “success” brings with it new questions or concerns about how to be successful – how to satisfy hopes and desires – in the future. Each step forward arrives at a new crossroads, requiring yet another decision about which path will be the “right” one, which direction will be the desired one. Of course, “success” here is determined by the social and cultural values defining a particular community; still, each new exchange, each new decision, raises newfound questions and concerns about the future, about how to maintain the community’s culture in a space that’s ever changing.

Before we return to CPA Site Solutions and Dealer.com, it will be helpful to reexamine Cattelino’s experience with the Florida Seminoles and their gaming

industry and Buggenhagen's observation of socioeconomic relations in Senegal. As we will see, many of the same points of tension evident in these case studies resonate with the emergent pressures and stresses facing the web tech businesses in Burlington. They all struggle to balance their cultural identities in the face of capitalism; they all must actively work to strike a balance between the two.

As we witnessed in the previous chapter, the Florida Seminole gaming industry has brought tremendous wealth to their community, prompting new avenues through which they can maintain cultural identity and significance. However, there have also emerged points of contention: the newfound wealth has disrupted tradition and changed the way people relate to each other in some contexts. "Rez cars" – the cars driven by locals on the reservation – have become symbolic of this change, of the "growing pains" facing the community. Previously, it was widely known that cars on the reservation reflected the destitute poverty there; people drove beaten down, rickety cars, including ones "with holes in the floor that let passengers see the road below, not to mention one truck with a tear in the seat that was ideally placed for the discreet passing of gas" (Cattelino 2008: 84). The battered and bruised rez cars also became a means of social connection, symbolic of social relationships. Driving down the reservation's quiet roads, simple gestures and waves linked those in the car to those outside, an intimacy reflecting the community's internal unity. With growing wealth and financial success, however, people have started to buy newer, luxury cars, vehicles with tinted windows and austere personalities, a shift that has had disruptive social implications. The inability to decipher the drivers and passengers in the car illuminates the newfound,

“casino-era” threats facing the reservation community: “Material goods – and the values they embody – get in the way of meaningful social relations and undermine the intimacy and familiarity that once characterized reservation life” (Cattelino 2008: 85). Additionally, rez cars have intensified the cracks and fissures within the Seminole community, as those who cling to tradition, to values of community and family, criticize those who throw all of their money into the purchase and maintenance of Lexuses and Cadillacs: “Fancy cars [have become] a signifier of misplaced family priorities...Here, fancy cars represent interrupted social reproduction and corrupted social ties” (Cattelino 2008: 85-6). Even more so, perhaps, the modern rez cars signify the “growing pains,” the imperfections, the side effects, of participating in the consumer culture of modern-day capitalism. While the Seminole’s recent upsurge in wealth has allowed the community to reinvigorate and maintain cultural identity through self-sovereignty and independence, it has also had consequences on social stability and cohesion. Indeed, while the Seminoles have, in a way, carved out space to redefine the values associated with profit and capital, the process is never stable. Rather, the community must actively work to contend with dissonance, to rebalance itself in light of new pressure points.

Buggenhagen’s account of wealth and social exchange in Senegal contains similar undertones of tension and instability. Sokna Géer – the matriarch of her family, the person at the heart of material and social exchange for her relatives, a representative of the older generation committed to tradition – finds herself at the intersection of this contention. One moment, in particular, seems to speak to the growing pains facing her family and her community in a space of growing markets



and consumption behavior. Attending the naming ceremony of a newborn in the community, Sokna found herself participating in a ceremonial gift exchange; based on her social status, there was an expectation for certain gifts to be given to honor the new baby and its family. The ceremony and feast are sites where Sokna's reputation is put to the test, where she must engage in acts of gift-giving in order to satisfy her social obligations while simultaneously developing new debts from those around her and thereby strengthening her position within the community. As Sokna tried to leave the room, a few scantily dressed young girls stepped into the doorway, blocking her way, expecting a financial payment from Sokna to "recognize their role in the day's events" (Buggenhagen 2012: 172). Sokna extended a few bills but, to her surprise, they girls rejected them, letting the banknotes fall to the floor and responding, "That is not enough money" (Buggenhagen 2012: 172). She extended a few more bills and, again, the girls refused to accept them. Finally, one of the other older women helped Sokna, throwing "wadded banknotes from under her waistband...in the girls' direction without looking at them" (Buggenhagen 2012: 173). As the girls reached down to pick up their new wealth, "Sokna Géer pushed her way past [them], saying 'You have no shame,' and headed toward the parlor" (Buggenhagen 2012: 173). This episode highlights a distinct and palpable tension between old generation and new; the youthful girls wearing underwraps with "embroidered sexual imagery demonstrating their reproductive power and potential" embody those who have shifted their values beyond those of tradition, undermining the social expectations accompanying the exchange of money and gifts. Shocked by this confrontation, this blatant rejection of tradition, Sokna experiences

a moment of imbalance between tradition and modernity. Previously, Sokna straddles the socially saturated gift economy in Senegal and the profit-driven world of capitalism abroad; here, the young girls defy her expectations, throw off her balancing act. Her effort to live in the domestic and cosmopolitan socioeconomic spheres takes a hit, marking the demands required to engage in both simultaneously. It takes great work physically and emotionally to manage the two. Sokna demonstrates how even those who attempt to reimagine the values linked to capitalism and exchange face significant stress to do so effectively or even at all. In this way, Sokna becomes a physical representation of how dynamic this process is. At times, capitalism outpaces her, changing popular feelings about power and value, constantly changing the way even those who work within a gift economy understand themselves and their relationships to others.

With this theoretical and ethnographic foundation, we can finally start to look at CPA Site Solutions and Dealer.com with more critical eyes. Undoubtedly, we can recognize that both companies are engaged in capitalism; they are widely considered successful, profitable, and productive. Their growing “success” has translated into tremendous growth as players within their respective industries. Dealer has become a global leader in web products for the auto industry, while CPA has developed a leading presence in the creation of websites for CPAs and other account professionals. Consequently, as capitalism predicts, others have taken notice. Both companies have recently undergone mergers. By the middle of 2013, CPA Site Solutions had merged with ProSites, a similarly sized company located in Southern California that builds websites for medical and dental professionals. Later

that same year, Dealer merged with the major auto conglomerate Dealertrack Technologies, whose headquarters in Lake Success, NY oversees dozens of branches in all corners of the United States and Canada. With all of this growth and success, however, new challenges and obstacles have emerged, similar to those witnessed in the Seminole and Senegalese communities. Both CPA and Dealer must actively work to maintain the balance between Freedom and Unity; the process is never static for the two of them but rather constantly dynamic and ever changing. With each success comes a new question or concern, a new weight added to one side of the equation, throwing the environment into imbalance and beckoning the companies to find ways to rebalance themselves, to retain their grip on the values they strive to embody while engaging in capitalism. The stories at CPA and Dealer are unique, each distinct to their contexts. Thus, our exploration into the growing pains facing both companies will be done one at a time, allowing us to explore and understand the newfound pressures facing each one and the steps that have been taken to mediate them.

Within the past five years or so, CPA has grown from a small, three-person startup into a company managing thousands of websites for clients across the country and employing dozens of employees to do so. For many, the merger with ProSites signified the company's upward growth and success in recent years. George, who has worked at CPA since its infancy, has tracked the company's radical changes, witnessing how they have impacted CPA's work environment and his own personal life. He shared many of these sentiments and insights during our conversation in his office:

*“When we were just a small startup, I had to work 60 hour weeks. It was intense, but there was so much to do, so much excitement. I had anticipated this would maybe ease up as we grew, but that hasn’t really been the case. My responsibilities have grown; we have more clients, more data to manage, more everything. Before, when it was just me and the president, we could say, ‘Okay, today we’re going to build so-and-so,’ and we’d do it, jumping from one cool idea to the next. Now, we’re more corporate, we have more hoops to jump through. When we want to do something, we have to propose it, design it, budget it, and get it approved. The spontaneity has withered away.”*

*I could sense a bit of melancholy sweep over George.*

*He sighed and continued on. “My job is much more managerial than before. I’m spending 50-60% of my time in meetings, away from the coding that I love. While we still get to design and have fun with our work, it’s still part of a bigger process. I gotta track capitalizable time, do capitalization rundowns. We’ve got metrics and key performance indicators to send off to the board. It’s much more paperwork. It’s a process that everyone has to abide by.”*

*Curious about his feelings toward this change, I asked him whether he likes the process’s rigidity.*

*“You know, I don’t really mind it. I’m working with great people on interesting tasks. I’m managing six or seven projects at any given point. It’s kinda the growing pain between simple startup and corporate entity that you see. It really is like the aging process. As we grow old, there are new struggles to face. Growing up means more responsibility, more accountability. Now, we’ve bought another company, we’ve*

*got private equity behind us, we've got a board to report to, investors to report to. It comes with the territory."*

*"What has that acquisition process looked like," I asked, probing him further.*

*"Well, with the signing of a bunch of pieces of paper, we've doubled everything. We've doubled our staff size, our revenue, our overhead. And we've got that integration issue: how do we fold them in here and us out there?"*

*After a slight pause, George laughed, adding, "So that's fun!"*

*Joining in his laughter, I tried to explore this transition even further. "How has your relationship with the California company developed?"*

*"Ultimately, the merger has caused a lot of travel to California for the executive team, including myself. Especially at first, we head out there to manage projects. It's tricky being so remote; we have to rely on a direct video feed that's in the next room over. But, below the surface, there's many differences in style between Vermont and California."*

*"How so?" I replied.*

*"It's very subtle. Here, everyone's willing to run towards a problem, saying, 'Okay, let's do this, let's do that.' Over there, you get a lot of 'that's not my job!' and 'someone else will take care of it.' It's a different mentality. Maybe it's the general California tech personality that we've run into. There's a lot more competition out there, so people are more forward in terms of putting themselves out there, wanting to take ownership of things that succeed and distancing themselves from problems. There are a few exceptions, of course, but it's tough to manage a project remotely. I can't walk over and see what someone's doing. We just have to meet daily and trust*

*that they're doing what they have to do. It gets tricky, and it feels disconnected at times."*

*"How do you see this difference in mentality affecting the way you each handle growth, now that you're all working together?" I asked.*

*"When we started to grow, we continued to treat everything as though we're a startup, trying to keep everything lean. When they were just a startup, they were trying to display themselves as a leading corporate entity. That's something you need to do over there to attract the talent; you need to be more forward facing, more embellishing. But it's important to note that the integration process hasn't all been negative. We want to move towards the more standard proprietary CRM that they have. We can both learn from each other. It's really, as I said before, a slow process. We're just working through the growing pains that come with pulling together two different personalities."*

George's account of the "growing pains" facing CPA underscores the difficulties that the company continues to face. While the company's environment and personality cater to the values its employees desire, a place of health and wellbeing, of camaraderie and individuality, the work continues to engage them in the world of capitalism, a world of profit and bottom-lines. While socially they enjoy fun and games, their work remains deeply professional and competitive. The process of balancing both, of molding the iron cage in such a way to maintain Freedom and Unity, is a difficult one, requiring active work and compromise. As George so nicely articulated, the company is striving to grow and succeed; the value of financial gain remains mixed in with the company's other values. At times, the

scale sometimes tips out of balance. Whether it is seen in the occasional 3 a.m. wake-up call on a Saturday morning or a weeklong trip to the West Coast for business, capitalist values can encroach on those of Freedom and Unity. With the recent merger, new obstacles are numerous, from mismatched processes to the vast geographical distance separating the two companies. Similarly, the growing corporate presence, in principle, rivals the laidback, rigidly fluid, independently communal space that CPA strive to create. To revisit Marx, the new challenges brought about by the company's growth have the potential to reignite feelings of alienation and estrangement, distancing people from the work and, ultimately, themselves. With more paperwork to do and less time to spend on the things he truly enjoys, George must find ways to balance the two. Fortunately for him, he is surrounded by people who share his values, who laugh at his jokes, who enjoy spending time with him at work. The extra distance – the corporate process, with all of its checks and balances – that separates him from the work he enjoys becomes a new challenge for him, something that he must do, but also something to which he can bring the same values of Freedom and Unity. George's metaphor of "growing pains," then, becomes exceedingly apt, as CPA is now learning how to manage the strains and consequences of its growth while holding onto its own personality, discovering ways it can reshape these new challenges to mirror the values at its core.

For Nora, CPA has managed to do this well so far. The merge happened just as she started her position at the company, making the changes feel particularly immediate and relevant for her:

*“A lot of the changes have been subtle. They have primarily affected the upper-levels of the company, not impacting everyone in the company on a daily basis. With the acquisition, there has been a shift in terms of roles and responsibilities, but it hasn’t been too drastic. It just means we have to constantly work on communication between the two companies. While the two cultures have been different, we’re making great strides in the right direction, bridging our ways of doing things with theirs. We also can’t get to know them on a personal level, which makes it harder to connect on a human level, you know? We can’t have a company cookout with them.”*

Nora’s insight into the ways the geographic distance causes an intimacy distance is especially interesting. Gaining a national presence and growing its competitive success, CPA now finds itself in a larger corporate world, interacting and indeed competing with companies participating in the “rat race.” Over a year since its merger, CPA has clearly retained its unique culture, its drive to be different. Working with another company on the other side of the country, whose vision has been guided by a different set of values, CPA has needed to adapt its behavior, its process, in order to work collaboratively. At the same time, as witnessed in George’s critical self-reflection, it has allowed the company to clarify and even solidify its goal to balance Freedom and Unity. There are undoubtedly changes and difficulties that coincide with growth; but these points of tension simply illustrate that the process of opening up space within a capitalist society for values beyond capital to flourish is difficult.

Dealer.com has experienced its own share of tension and dissonance as a result of its growing success. Not only has its growing success brought with it



greater numbers of clients and profits; it has also forced the company to expand into other buildings in the surrounding area. This, in particular, has raised questions about the balance within the Dealer community, a concern that the company is in the midst of resolving. While shadowing Frank, I experienced this issue firsthand:

*On our walk from Dealer's Lakeside campus to the "Mothership" on Howard Street, I asked Frank about the commute.*

*"It takes about 5 to 10 minutes to walk from here to Howard Street. In the spring, summer, and fall, it's really kinda nice. In the winter, though, it turns into a bit of a trek. It's also something that you have to factor into your schedule. You have to give yourself a time cushion if you have to run to a meeting over there. It requires a bit of coordination and organization, but that's something we can easily manage."*

*"What other sorts of effects has the expansion had?" I asked, wondering how it might have impacted on the relationships among colleagues and the community more broadly.*

*"Personally, it hasn't hurt my connection to those situated at the Howard Street campus. Aside from the commute and the time, it hasn't affected me too much. But I do spend lots of time in the Mothership anyway. I know some people on my team have felt a bit annoyed about our move to Lakeside. They've mentioned that they feel a bit disconnected, a bit isolated. Of course, much of the buzz is located at Howard Street, and all of the more substantial amenities are over there, from the café to the gym and tennis courts. The company has started an initiative to bring many of the same perks to Lakeside, and it's all definitely in the works. People are still moving, but everyone in the company is moving around anyway, so that hasn't been the issue. They've set up a*

*nice café on Lakeside, but it doesn't quite match the character of Dealer Dot Calm. People have also complained a bit about the distance, since they can't always walk over and ask someone a question in person but have to give them a call."*

As Dealer has matured, its growing size has exceeded the grip, the capacity, of the Mothership. Herein arise many of the growing pains that accompany commercial success. In fact, many of the stresses and strains identified by both George and Frank hark back to Marxist theory of alienation and estrangement. Just as CPA as a company grapples with estrangement from its new partner across the country, a distance both in terms of geography and character, so Dealer struggles with an internal alienation, an estrangement from within. Many Dealer employees who find themselves moved to Lakeside feel an element of disconnect, of alienation, from the rest of the company. Their link with those back on Howard Street is weaker. Personal interaction with other teams and departments is more difficult; the commute between buildings chews up time from their workday and, unless scheduled in advanced or done during an occasional lull in work, it is too far to be done spontaneously. Similarly, the distance from the perks and amenities at the Mothership gives rise to a sense of loss. Of course, these sentiments are mixed in with the many other feelings of Unity and Freedom. That is, the growing pains Dealer is currently undergoing speak to the dynamic process of balancing values of Freedom and Unity in a business engaged within a broader capitalist economy.

The ethnographic accounts at both Dealer and CPA illustrate that there are moments of imperfection, of conflict. Reimagining the values associated with "success" is neither a simple nor perfect process. Rather, it is muddled and difficult.

It requires work. Sometimes, they must compromise one value in the moment to sustain their vision overall. Again, there are growing pains that hurt and ache, but they can be overcome with time and perseverance. This is also to say that these challenges may be difficult in the moment, and they may require compromises today, whether it is doing more paperwork or working in a space away from the company's hub. But the long-term vision, the future goals and "successes," remain in sight, made possible through continued engagement and activity. Kyle sums up this sentiment quite nicely, emphasizing the power of positivity in a time of uncertainty:

*"When I first started at Dealer, my team was very small. There were only three of four people on board. My relationships with those around me have made it easier to transition through all of the changes. We share our own experiences and wisdoms with each other, setting a tone of collaboration and positivity within the team."*

*Wondering how this has translated to the merger with Dealertrack, I asked him about his overall prospects about the future.*

*Sitting back in his chair, hands behind his head, he replied, "I'm excited about the future. Change is always happening here, but it's generally in the right direction. I know during the merge with Dealertrack, the DDC founders made it clear that they wanted our company to remain exactly where it is, in Vermont. Our relationship with Dealertrack is, in fact, much more collaborative than traditional acquisitions. They view our company as a type of ideal, something they hope to mimic. They appreciate our company culture and hope to spread it throughout the rest of the enterprise. Our leaders made it very clear that the company's core values and culture were non-*

*negotiable. They had to stay. And now, the message we're getting from our leaders, from the founders, is very positive, so we can only be positive and hopeful too. The uncertainty of the future is exciting because of the positivity. Coming from a failed acquisition earlier in my career, this is a total 180."*

Just like CPA's merger with ProSites, Dealer's union with Dealertrack presented a new, major obstacle. As Kyle sheds light on, though, the very culture and values that characterize Dealer – and the company's resolute commitment to them – makes the company's uncertain future that much more exciting and possible. Point in case, Dealer is already influencing the values of its parent company: at one of the first company-wide video conferences between Dealertrack's CEO and the Dealer community, the chief executive officer decided to wear a hat to match his designer suit. That small gesture – the wearing of a hat – symbolizes the power of positivity and the possibility for change. Dealer may be entering an even bigger marketplace, working in a heavily corporate world. But it can continue to embody its own definition of success and retain its own identity. Naturally, there are bumps in the road, aches during growth. But, in the end, there is room for values beyond capital, beyond profit, to characterize professional life today. While engaging in an ever changing industry, while encountering new sets of obstacles and challenges each day, CPA Site Solutions and Dealer.com find themselves living within the dynamic realm of capitalist exchange, where they constantly assert and reassert, define and redefine, themselves through each new interaction and engagement, each new growing pain.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The stories of Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions are emblematic of the possibilities, the nuances, that exist in the market economies of global capitalism today. While, undeniably, the two companies actively participate in the capitalist marketplace – indeed, their tremendous growth in recent years suggests they have been “successful” – they have also reimagined the purpose of their businesses, the values that contribute to their own definitions of “success.” Their ability to refashion their spaces to align with cultural values beyond that of profit alone offers their employees balanced lifestyles that appease, even remedy, the stresses and pressures characteristic of pure capitalism.

Traditional Marxist philosophy considers capitalism a process of dehumanization, whereby workers lose their sense of connection and belonging to their work, to their colleagues, and even to themselves. In this way, capitalism pits capitalism against solidarity, as though a capitalist economic system wears away social relationships and cripples the way individuals think about the world and their place within it. The career histories shared by many employees working at Dealer and CPA speak to Marxist ideas of alienation and estrangement; certainly, Marx had forecasted many of the conditions continuing to plague individuals running in the “rat race” throughout big cities and financial capitals. In the hypercompetitive world of pure capitalism, objects – and not the humans that create them – acquire all value and meaning.

While Marx conceives of a growing distance between individuals and the objects they create, many sociocultural and economic anthropologists believe there is much more nuance to the experience of capitalism. Through his historical account of the development of capitalism, Max Weber provides the foundation for later anthropological theories about the ways economic systems are, in fact, products of social systems – and not vice versa. Exploring how spirituality initiated the work ethic characteristic of capitalism and yet eventually seceded from the economic landscape, Weber reveals the potential for fluidity in capitalism, the possibility for changing values and relationships. Virtuous hard work became a drive for material wealth and individual gain. The pursuit of one’s “calling” morphed into the spirit of capitalism, confining society inside the bars of the iron cage. While Weber’s commentary offers an explanation for the appearance of Marxist claims, it also demonstrates the malleability and sociability of economic systems.

Using Weber as a base, Karl Polanyi builds his theory that social organization dictates economic structure, an idea that functions cooperatively with Marcel Mauss’s understanding of “the gift.” For Polanyi and Mauss, the economy is never exclusively about the circulation of material resources; it is about the circulation of social values. Capitalism is not something inherent to humanity. Sociality is. The ethnographies shared by Polanyi and the philosophies imagined by Mauss assert the belief that capitalism is simply one form of economy that reflects a particular social system set in motion by a specific set of cultural values. It has and will never exist in a world devoid of human social relationships. Together, Weber, Polanyi, and Mauss construct a counterargument to Marx. Humanity and capitalism are not destined for

internal destruction; rather, economic activity will continue to evolve in conjunction with social changes. New “prophets” can replace current “profits,” a phenomenon that can be glimpsed through the contexts at Dealer and CPA.

Upon arriving in Burlington, professionals in the web tech industry find themselves entering a community in which there is the potential to find common ground, a capitalist compromise. For those seeking to escape the intensity of the “rat race,” Burlington becomes a place of refuge; others looking to advance their careers see the area as a place of opportunity. While the city promises a vibrant professional community, it also offers a chance for people to enjoy their lives beyond work, to pursue healthy, balanced lives with their families, where they feel both challenged and appreciated, independent and connected. The web tech companies in Burlington present an ethnographic middle ground between Mauss and Marx, wherein capitalism becomes a dynamic space that maintains humanity and solidarity while still meeting the demands of the bottom-line. There is still something meaningful about the relationships people have with their co-workers, with their families, and with themselves. Their efforts to balance Freedom and Unity in all of their forms – from their approach to lifestyle and family to the physical environments and workflow – are purposeful and redemptive, allowing individuals to rebalance not only their economic but also their social lives.

Of course, it is important to reassert that my project does not intend to conceive of Burlington as a utopian place – the exception. Rather, the ethnographic heart of this thesis comments on the potential for economic “reimagination,” for companies to redefine their purpose and goals. Economic activity is not necessarily

determined by profit alone; instead, as Dealer and CPA reveal, many companies have attached other values – ones linked to both Freedom and Unity – to their ideas of what it means to be successful in today’s capitalist society. In this way, these web tech companies problematize universal claims about the conditions and substance of capitalism today. As Aihwa Ong so neatly explains, ethnographies from all corners of the world “capture the at once global and distinctive dimensions of emerging assemblages that put the human at stake, but without the misplaced security of a universal logic or resolution” (Ong 2012: 33). Her description of anthropological claims as “situated, limited, and melancholic” correlates with those of my own study; rather than declare CPA and Dealer as utopian sites of an utterly new vision of economics today, my study comments on the messiness and uncertainty evident in the Burlington web tech industry. With their renowned and growing success, both companies face new challenges that threaten the stability of their scales. Sometimes, they tip out of balance. Rifts and tension emerge, and they must actively work towards equilibrium, finding new ways to assert and reassert the values that define their social environments.

Both Jessica Cattelino and Beth Buggenhagen pepper their ethnographic accounts with similar points of struggle and tension. While Cattelino’s observations in the Florida Seminole community and Buggenhagen’s reflections on the gift economy of Senegal differ between themselves and with my own ethnography of the Burlington, VT web tech industry, moments of overlap become that much more significant. Among other economic anthropological studies, ours shed light on the social nature of economic systems. We are never fully unmoored from our



relationship with others, our dependence upon them. Solidarity becomes one of the most important resources for humans. Of course, as Ong argues and as the distinctions among my ethnography and those of Cattelino and Buggenhagen suggest, the ways solidarity and social relationships impact and shape economic activity are highly contextual. They are immensely complex, which reemphasizes the importance not to generalize conclusions or claims.

Dealer.com and CPA Site Solutions both share historical consciousness and a guarded optimism towards the future, manifested in their willingness to engage with struggle and actively seek ways to overcome them without losing their identities. Efforts to enliven the Freedom and Unity paradox have become an unspoken response to the “rat race,” transforming the iron cage into a less isolated and desolate place. They have appropriated a reality for themselves that affirms values of both individuality and community, Freedom and Unity. Their ability to reshape the iron cage, to step outside of the rat race, to redefine and broaden their understanding of “success,” strengthens the theory that economic activity is a subset of social life. While the relationship between culture and economy is dynamic and messy, the power of social systems to change economic ones offers hope for the preservation of solidarity and connection in a tense time of competition and uncertainty. Indeed, the stories of the Burlington, VT web tech industry suggest the iron cage metaphor is perhaps a bit dated: iron implies total inflexibility. Instead, it would be useful to rethink the cage’s materiality. Perhaps each cultural context constructs its own version of a cage, and the one in Burlington has started to resemble a “bouncy house”: while still confining, the cage itself can bend and sway.

The inside can be fun and enjoyable, but there remains limitation. Too much jumping threatens the bouncy house's stability; it can deflate or pop. Thus, it requires a balancing act between rigidity and fluidity, work and play. And maybe, just maybe, there will come a time when someone finds a way out.

The peculiar dynamics between culture and economy present in the Burlington web tech industry have gained growing media attention in the past few years. While the city's commitment to sustainability and community have landed it on lists like *Business Insider's* "The 15 Hottest American Cities Of The Future" alongside cities such as Portland, Oregon and Austin, Texas, its emergence as a hub of web technology has also prompted the city to find its way onto lists including *Forbes's* "The 10 Most Innovative Tech Hubs in the U.S." and *Inc.com's* "4 Underrated Tech Hubs to Watch" (Business Insider 2012). Perhaps even more noteworthy, in October 2013, *The Atlantic* published an article titled, "Back on the Bright Side: Silicon Valley in Vermont," which explored the growth of the web tech industry in Burlington through the story of Dealer.com (Fallows 2013). Similarly optimistic stories have been published by local news sources, from the independent newspaper *Seven Days* to the regional public radio station *VPR* (Seife 2014). The iconography incited by *The Atlantic* – likening Burlington to a new Silicon Valley – and the confidence projected by *Seven Days* – "Vermont's tech economy...isn't Silicon Valley – yet" – construct an unbridled optimism that Burlington is a new web tech center, a growing hub of the industry. With this reality, it becomes increasingly important to appreciate the way cultural values shape the way Burlington's web tech economy functions. Unmoored from its cultural context, the tech center in

Burlington has the potential to drift away, to find a home elsewhere. For local and state governments eager to retain young professionals and attract new businesses in the industry, it is critical to appreciate the nuances and peculiarities that define the context of Burlington in order to develop policies and initiatives that capture the city's sociocultural spirit.

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