Episode Book

EPISODE #6046

Five Jobs, One Laptop: The Overemployed Playbook

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SYNOPSIS

Prosecutors say a 55-year-old Whitechapel man billed eight public-sector employers nearly £350,000 while holding five full-time jobs simultaneously — and was caught partly because his fake-sick make-up began separating on camera. But the fraud case is only the door into a much stranger phenomenon: a documented community of roughly 300,000 people secretly stacking two, three, and four remote jobs, complete with mouse jigglers, KVM switches, and meeting Tetris. We walk through the playbook, the notorious case of Soham Parekh (hired and fired by ten startups), and why remote work deleted the one thing that used to prove anyone was working at all: being seen.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a mental image I want everybody to hold onto for the next half hour. A man in east London, sitting in front of a laptop, applying make-up to his own face, in order to look ill.



Herman

While allegedly holding five full-time government jobs at the same time.



Corn

Daniel wrote in about this one. British civil servant, prosecutors say five full-time jobs at once, allegedly caught partly because the make-up started separating on camera during a Teams call. And what Daniel wants out of it isn't the fraud case. He wants the whole phenomenon of people secretly working two, three, four remote jobs at once, the ruses, the ways they get caught, and the uncomfortable question underneath it, which is what any of this says about how we measure whether anyone is actually working.



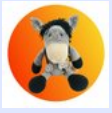
Herman

He's not asking us to cheer it on either.



Corn

No. He's asking us to find it funny, which it is.



Herman

That's the harder assignment, honestly. Getting the comedy out of it without either moralising or glamorising it.



Corn

You're up for it.



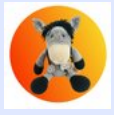
Herman

I'm up for it.



Corn

Then let's start with the case, because the case is the door into the whole thing.



Herman

Kashim Chowdhury, fifty-five, of Whitechapel. He denies nine counts of fraud at Southwark Crown Court. Trial opened on the thirteenth of this month, so this is live, and everything here is the prosecution's allegation. No verdict.



Corn

What do they say he was doing?



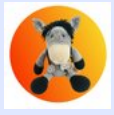
Herman

Prosecutors say almost three hundred and fifty thousand pounds from eight public-sector employers between February 2020 and September 2023. And by May 2023, they say he was being paid for five full-time jobs at once.



Corn

Five.



Herman

Contracted, at one point, for a hundred and eighty-three hours a week across those five.



Corn

There are a hundred and sixty-eight hours in a week.



Herman

There are.



Corn

So he sold the government an extra fifteen hours that don't exist.



Herman

That's the striking part of the allegation. And the employers named in court are not small operations. Tower Hamlets Council, Defra, East London NHS Trust, the Department of Health and Social Care, the UK Health Security Agency, the Department for Business and Trade, the Food Standards Agency, the Home Office.



Corn

Eight employers, and half of them are the same government in different hats.



Herman

That's what makes it work, in the alleged version. Nobody cross-checks. You're not applying to eight companies. You're applying to eight HR departments.



Corn

How did he explain wanting to be at home the whole time?



Herman

Prosecutors say he told employers he needed to work from home to care for his unwell mother. And that he lied about existing jobs when he applied for each new one.



Corn

So the application form has a question on it that would have ended the lot, and he just answered it wrong.



Herman

Repeatedly. The sick leave is the clever bit. He allegedly took leave for anxiety and depression, but gave the note to only some of his employers. So on any given day he's off sick at three jobs and working at the other two.



Corn

That's not a fraud so much as a scheduling system.



Herman

It's a rotation. He's rotating his own sick days around the portfolio.



Corn

And then May 2023.



Herman

A UKHSA manager sets up a Teams meeting to talk about his sick leave. And prosecutors say he joins it coughing, blowing his nose, face white, neck a completely different colour, and the make-up on his forehead beginning to separate on camera.



Corn

The neck is the tell. Nobody does the neck.



Herman

The prosecutor, Lucy Organ, said there could be no doubt he'd applied make-up for the meeting, and called it an almost laughable incident.



Corn

She's a prosecutor calling her own evidence laughable, and it's still the strongest thing she has.



Herman

There's more. He allegedly joined that UKHSA call from a Defra email account.



Corn

From a different job.



Herman

And when it was noticed, he said it might be an old address. Prosecutors say that was a lie.



Corn

A man with five jobs, caught by the join button remembering where he worked last.



Herman

And the last prosecution line, which is the sad one. They say the workload became too much to cope with, and his performance suffered.



Corn

That's the part that makes it a human story instead of a caper. Five paycheques, and the thing that breaks first is the work itself.



Herman

Which is why the rest of the episode is more interesting than the case.

L

Larry

[Advertisement begins] Tired of remembering which job you're at? Introducing J-O-B-S-P-L-U-S, the premium employment subscription service. For one low monthly fee, we'll assign you a rotating portfolio of up to nine concurrent remote positions, tiered across three plans. The Bronze tier delivers two jobs on alternating Mondays. Silver adds a third job you don't tell anybody about. And at the Gold tier, we coordinate your calendar for you, so your meetings never overlap, even when you're attending both of them. Cancel any time, in writing, by post, within a four-minute window on the third Tuesday of every leap year. J-O-B-S-P-L-U-S. Employment, as a service.



Corn

...So how does somebody actually run five jobs at once? Physically.



Herman

There's a whole community for this. It started with a website, overemployed dot com, founded in 2021 by a guy who goes by a pseudonym, Isaac. His line was that they aren't breaking any laws, they're just quietly disagreeing with lopsided employment contracts.



Herman

It grew to around three hundred thousand members across Discord and Reddit. And they have a playbook. It's documented, it's systematic, and it's the part I find absorbing, because it's operationally serious.



Corn

Give me the playbook.



Herman

First thing, you label your jobs. J1, J2, J3. That sounds trivial. It isn't. It's the moment you stop thinking of it as one career and start thinking of it as a portfolio with positions in it.



Corn

Naming something is how you commit to it.



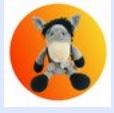
Herman

Second, you pick carefully. Meeting-light roles. Roles below your skill level, so the actual work takes you four hours a day and not eleven. And there's a version of this that's smarter than the rest of it: you pair a New York hours job with a California hours job. Three hours off means the overlap is tiny.



Corn

So you never have two stand-ups in the same window.



Herman

And then the scheduling. A separate calendar per job. The moment one job books a meeting, you block that slot in every other job's calendar. And the community's own phrase for what you end up doing is stacking meetings like a game of Tetris.



Corn

That's not a job. That's air traffic control with a payroll.



Herman

Then there's onboarding. To take a new job, you take vacation from the old one. You use time off from J1 to learn J3.



Corn

So the first employer is sponsoring your training for the second.



Herman

In a sense, yes. And then the physical layer. Which is where it stops being scheduling and starts being equipment.



Corn

Equipment.



Herman

Mouse jigglers. A little device that nudges your cursor so the status dot never goes yellow. And a KVM switch, so you run three, four, five laptops from one keyboard and one screen, and flick between them the way a DJ flicks between decks.



Corn

Which one's yours?



Herman

I've never needed one, Corn.



Corn

I'm just asking which one you'd buy.



Herman

There's also the hiding. Two moves. You freeze your record in Equifax's Work Number database, which employers join automatically through their payroll providers, so a background check on you comes back empty. And you hide your LinkedIn.



Corn

Of course you do. LinkedIn is a public list of where you say you work.



Herman

The community's golden rule is a single sentence. Don't talk about working two remote jobs. That's it. That's the whole security model. It's not technical. It's social. You don't tell anyone, and nobody finds out, because nobody is checking.



Corn

Which tells you what they're really afraid of.



Herman

Say it.



Corn

Not a mouse-jiggler detection tool. A colleague who remembers your face.



Herman

The startup world has its own version, and it's the funniest story on the list. July 2025. Suhail Doshi runs a company called Playground and he posts on X: public service announcement, there's a guy named Soham Parekh, in India, who works at three or four startups at the same time. Beware. And then the second sentence: I fired this guy in his first week.



Corn

He hired him and fired him in the same sentence.



Herman

Gergely Orosz, who writes about the industry, confirmed ten separate companies that had hired and fired Parekh. Ten.



Corn

Ten onboarding processes. Nobody noticed the pattern.



Herman

And the excuses he gave for missing work are the reason this became a story. A drone damaged his building. A flood. A power cut. His sister was visiting in New York. He felt sick.



Corn

The drone is the one where you have to respect the commitment.



Herman

At a founders' dinner, reportedly, when it came up, several guests said Is it Soham in unison.



Corn

The collective noun for a group of founders is a suspicion of Soham.



Herman

And Arkadiy Telegin, from a company called Leaping AI, asked: wait, are we dating the same guy?



Corn

That's the whole phenomenon in seven words.



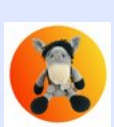
Herman

Parekh then admitted it openly. His line was that no one really likes to work a hundred and forty hours a week, and that he had to do it out of necessity, because his finances were dire. He's since landed at a studio called Darwin.



Corn

So the ending is a happy one by industry standards.



Herman

That's the thing. He didn't disappear. He got hired again.



Corn

What I want to know is why this works now and not ten years ago.



Herman

Presence. Remote work deleted it.



Corn

Deleted it and didn't replace it with anything.



Herman

Right. For most of employment history, the default proof that you were working was that somebody could see you. Not that you were productive. That you were there. And when you take the seeing away, you're left with a hole, and nobody has agreed on what fills it.



Corn

So we filled it with mouse jigglers.



Herman

And calendar blockers, and status dots. The entire surveillance apparatus of remote work exists to simulate the thing that remote work removed. Which is being observed.



Corn

Which is not the same as doing the work.



Herman

Not remotely the same. And the overemployed aren't hacking anything. They're standing in the hole.



Corn

So how do they get caught?



Herman

Almost never on output. That's the pattern, and it's consistent across cases. They get caught on presence. The camera, the Wi-Fi, the calendar, or a familiar face on a call.



Corn

Go through them.



Herman

Bryan Roque was working at IBM, Meta and Tinder at the same time. On track for over eight hundred and twenty thousand dollars a year across the three.



Corn

Eight hundred and twenty.



Herman

Tinder caught him because he connected his Tinder laptop to 's office Wi-Fi.



Corn

He brought the badge into the other building.



Herman

There's a man the Australian press called Tony. He was caught when a colleague from his other job happened to show up on a routine video call. His bosses were absolutely flabbergasted, which is the right word.



Corn

Nobody ever says flabbergasted except about this.



Herman

And there was an engineer a recruiter described who was taking remote calls from behind the counter of an Australia Post outlet.



Corn

He was working retail and two remote jobs at once. That's not overemployment, that's a shift pattern.



Herman

The detection infrastructure is where it gets interesting, and slightly ironic. The Cabinet Office runs something called the National Fraud Initiative. It cross-matches public-sector payroll data. That's what alerted Defra about Chowdhury.



Corn

Not a manager. A database.



Herman

There's a second UK case that shows the machine working. Sally Bodom was a business support officer at Barnet Council, and she was working full-time in Croydon Council's housing department at the same time. Barnet's own press release called it polygamous working.



Corn

They put that in a press release.



Herman

They did. The National Fraud Initiative flagged her in July 2024, after both councils separately noticed her availability was low. She pleaded guilty to two counts, got twelve months suspended, and had to pay ten thousand pounds in compensation.



Corn

Two councils, one person, and the trigger was that she didn't answer her email fast enough.



Herman

Which is the whole lesson. The failure mode is not bad work. It's that you can't be in two places in the same hour.



Corn

What else catches people?



Herman

LinkedIn activity. Tax-record checks. Background-screening firms. And in one case, a client who happened to be sitting in on the Zoom interview for the other job.



Corn

That's not detection. That's a coincidence with a scheduling system behind it.



Herman

And then there's the activity-monitoring side, which gets the headlines and seems to do the least. Wells Fargo fired more than a dozen wealth-management staff in May 2024 over what the filings describe as simulation of keyboard activity.



Corn

Mouse jigglers.



Herman

That's the media's assumption, and I want to flag it as just that, because the filings don't say how they were caught. It could have been anything. But everybody wrote mouse jiggler, because everybody wants that story.



Corn

Do we know it works? Any of the monitoring?



Herman

I don't know, Corn. I looked for someone who'd measured whether activity monitoring catches overemployment specifically, and I couldn't find it. There are anecdotes on forums. Someone says they got put on a performance plan after IT flagged a jiggler app. Someone else claims a four-job worker got caught because IT spotted a program called caffeine dot exe running. Those are unverified posts. Treat them as stories, not data.



Corn

Herman Poppleberry admitting he doesn't know something. Somebody note the date.



Herman

I have plenty of practice.



Corn

What about the sheer numbers? How many people are doing this?



Herman

It depends entirely on who you ask, and the range is embarrassing. A survey of about twelve hundred and fifty remote and hybrid workers in 2022 reported that seventy-nine percent had another job.



Corn

Seventy-nine.



Herman

That number got repeated everywhere. And critics pointed out that the question was written so loosely that it probably swept in anyone who ever sold something on Etsy. The same body of reporting gives figures between eleven and thirty-seven percent for holding two full-time jobs, depending on which write-up you read.



Corn

That's not a range. That's a shrug.



Herman

A government estimate put about four hundred and twelve thousand Americans in two full-time jobs, which is up a hundred and five thousand since 2019. And McKinsey estimated double-dippers at about five percent of a typical organisation's staff.



Corn

Five percent is one in twenty. In a company of four hundred people, that's twenty.



Herman

And that's the honest answer. Nobody knows, and the people who claim to know are selling something.



Corn

Here's the question I keep circling, Herman. If the work gets done, what's the fraud?



Herman

The community's position is exactly that. An engineer called George, quoted in one of the write-ups, put the whole defence in a sentence: the main reason people get caught is because they're slacking.



Corn

Meaning if you weren't slacking, you'd never get caught, so it isn't a crime, it's a capacity problem.



Herman

And there's a real distinction buried in that, which is that these people are doing the same job twice and getting paid twice. The work still happens.



Corn

So the breach isn't output. It's the contract.



Herman

It's the exclusivity clause. Most of these jobs have a term in them that says you won't work elsewhere. And what most of these workers are actually doing is breaching a contract, not stealing the work.



Corn

Well, flat-out fraud if you're a public servant taking sick leave at one job while billing a different department.



Herman

Which is the Chowdhury allegation exactly. The sick note is where it crosses over. You're not doing the job from a different desk. You're saying you can't work at all, and taking the money, while you work somewhere else.



Corn

There's a dark version of this, isn't there? Where it stops being cheeky.



Herman

There is, and it's worth sixty seconds because the whole conversation changes shape when you cross the line. North Korean IT-worker schemes run out of US laptop farms. A woman in Arizona, Christina Chapman, was sentenced in July 2025 to a hundred and two months for running one. Three hundred and nine US businesses, sixty-eight stolen identities, over seventeen million dollars in revenue.



Corn

Stolen identities. That's the line. That's not a person with a laptop and a KVM switch.



Herman

And in June 2025 the Justice Department searched twenty-nine suspected laptop farms across sixteen states, tied to workers placed at more than a hundred US companies. That is organised fraud with a nation-state behind it.



Corn

Different universe. Same vocabulary.



Herman

Same vocabulary, which is the problem, because people hear overemployed and think laptop farm, and they're not remotely the same thing.



Corn

What does all of this say about remote work itself?



Herman

It says we removed the thing we were actually measuring and never agreed on a replacement. So now we run two economies at once. One where employees are honest and managers measure vibes. And one where a small number of people noticed that nobody's measuring anything.



Corn

And the response has been to install more surveillance, which only the honest people comply with.



Herman

Exactly that. The jiggler is a device for defeating a metric that doesn't measure work. And the people who aren't defeating it are just being watched more.



Corn

So the whole arms race is between two things that were never the point.



Hilbert

It was a hundred and eighty-four, not a hundred and eighty-three.



Hilbert

The hours. The prosecution said a hundred and eighty-three. The court list said a hundred and eighty-four. It's a small thing, I just noticed it.



Herman

Hilbert, that's the kind of correction that gets you invited back.



Hilbert

I'm already here, Herman. I've been here. And I want to say something about this make-up business, because it's been bothering me for the whole segment. Amateur hour. Complete amateur hour.



Corn

The make-up specifically?



Hilbert

The make-up is the symptom. If you're at the point where you're painting your face to look ill, you've already lost. The professionals never get caught. And the reason they never get caught is one rule, and it's not technical. Never let your calendars touch. That's it. That's the entire trade.



Corn

Were you a professional?



Hilbert

I ran two and a half jobs for about a year and a half. Two and a half, because one of them was more of a hobby that paid me, so I don't count it fully, but it had a payroll and a pension scheme, so it counts. I had a wall planner. Colour-coded. Each job got a colour, and I kept the planner in a locked drawer, because the one thing you cannot do is leave it on the desk.



Corn

A locked drawer.



Hilbert

It's not a secret, it's just not public. There's a difference, Corn, and nobody under forty understands it.



Herman

What were the colours?



Hilbert

Red, green, blue, and then the hobby was yellow, and then a fifth colour for the days when two of them overlapped. I took a sick day from one of them to attend a mandatory training day at the other, and I want to be clear that that was the most productive day of my life.



Corn

You were sick at one job and in a training course at another.



Hilbert

I was in a training course about manual handling. Which I did not need. And I was being paid sick pay to be there. And I'll tell you what I learned in that training course. Nothing. But I learned it excellently.



Herman

How did it end?



Hilbert

It ended once. One time, in eighteen months. And it wasn't the calendars, it wasn't the planner. I sent an email from the wrong account.



Corn

To whom?



Hilbert

To my team at the second job. About a birthday cake.



Herman

That's it? A birthday cake?



Hilbert

Sandra's birthday. I was organising a collection. And I sent it from the first job's account, because I had two windows open and I clicked the wrong one. Nobody said anything. Nobody ever said anything. But I knew, and they knew, and we all agreed to never discuss it.



Corn

That's a better security model than the KVM switch.



Hilbert

And I'll tell you the other thing. I was never actually overemployed.



Corn

You had two and a half jobs.



Hilbert

I did, but one of them was a hobby that paid me, so in the strict sense, I was underemployed with a side interest. And I once attended two different Christmas parties on the same night.



Herman

Two Christmas parties.



Hilbert

Both on the twentieth of December. I told the first one I had a family emergency and left at half past eight, and then I went to the second. I told them the same thing. Family emergency. And I want to be clear, nobody questioned it, because nobody questions a family emergency. That's the whole point of a family emergency.



Corn

You used a family emergency to attend a Christmas party.



Hilbert

I used a family emergency twice in one night, at two different venues, and then I went home.



Herman

Do you still have the planner?



Hilbert

I do. It's in the drawer. I bring it out at dinner parties.



Corn

You bring a colour-coded schedule of your fraud to dinner parties.



Hilbert

I bring a planner to dinner parties. If people want to read it, that's their business.



Herman

So of the two of you, you're the one who got away with it.



Hilbert

Everyone gets away with it, Herman. That's not the interesting part. The interesting part is that it costs nothing to check. One phone call between two HR departments and it's over. Nobody made that call. For three years. And it wasn't a manager that ended it, it was a database.



Corn

That's the piece that follows you out of the room.



Herman

He's right, though. The Chowdhury case wasn't cracked by somebody noticing. It was cracked by two payroll systems being compared to each other.



Corn

Which is the least human form of detection available.



Herman

And the most reliable one. Because the one thing you can't fake is a national insurance number appearing in two payrolls at once.



Corn

So the answer to how they get caught is that we stopped asking people and started asking the data.



Herman

Which is exactly what a payroll database is for.



Corn

It's also the thing that never asked whether the work got done.



Herman

And there's the wire. The system can tell you that a person is on two payrolls. It can't tell you whether they did anything all week.



Corn

Which is the same problem remote work started with.



Herman

The system we built can detect the duplicate. It can't detect the work.



Corn

If you take one thing from this, take the fact that every single one of these cases broke on presence. The Wi-Fi network, the video call, the payroll record, the face somebody recognised. Not one of them broke on output, because output was never being measured in the first place.



Herman

And that's the bit that should worry anybody managing a remote team. The thing you're checking for is not the thing you want.



Corn

The question is whether the work gets done. The measurement is whether the person showed up. Those have never been the same thing, and remote work just made it impossible to pretend otherwise.



Herman

Which is why the arms race is only going to get stranger. More jigglers, more keyboard simulators, more software that tracks your mouse. And the people who are actually doing the work will simply be watched more closely, and the people who aren't will simply get better at it.



Corn

And somewhere, a wall planner stays in a locked drawer.



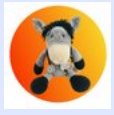
Herman

Somewhere it does.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, who produces this show, and who has a planner.



Herman

For more along these lines, there's episode sixteen, On Deepfakes, SynthID, And AI Watermarking; episode thirty-five, The Privacy Gap; and episode ninety-one, The Story Behind the Show. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

If you enjoyed it, leave us a review, and you can find everything at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Corn

We'll be back soon.