

# Blown Off Course

Templer, Robert

[ProQuest document link](#)

---

## ABSTRACT

"Because it's the rule." Ominous words in Singapore, where rules are not there to be broken. My crime had been to venture out with a laptop to work in a café. I needed to escape some drilling in my apartment building and I like working in a place with good coffee and a low level of hubbub. After happily typing away for an hour, I was spotted by a waitress who insisted I stop. When I asked why, I got a flustered litany of reasons, ending with the above statement, wielded with the finality of a parental "because I told you so."

## FULL TEXT

# Blown Off Course

By Robert Templer

Robert Templer is a freelance writer based in Singapore



"Because it's the rule." Ominous words in Singapore, where rules are not there to be broken. My crime had been to venture out with a laptop to work in a café. I needed to escape some drilling in my apartment building and I like working in a place with good coffee and a low level of hubbub. After happily typing away for an hour, I was spotted by a waitress who insisted I stop. When I asked why, I got a flustered litany of reasons, ending with the above statement, wielded with the finality of a parental "because I told you so."

I left the café and tried another. This time I didn't even have time to boot up before I was faced with the firm hand of some ever-vigilant waitresses. When I resisted eviction, they told me that it was fine for me to work there in theory, but if they allowed me to do it, others could follow. Normally I'm happy to be given my due as a global trendsetter but

*"The resistance in Singapore makes me wonder whether the people have the same commitment to keeping up with technological change as the government does,"*

somehow I didn't see Singaporeans swarming from their plush towers to join me. Casting an eye around the empty café, I suggested that drawing in a bigger crowd might not be a bad idea. People using laptops would buy coffee from the company, which would make more money. My appeal to naked greed meant nothing. They couldn't allow a precedent to be set.

So I moved on, the Ancient Mariner with a laptop, rebuffed by café after café. One establishment covered its sockets with masking tape after I tried to use them; in another the manager told me, with a completely straight face, that plugging in a computer might cause a short circuit and burn down the building. In a hotel lobby I was told that security might have to be called. (I wasn't trying to steal the lamp. I was trying to use the power socket). I finally found a perfect combination of quiet, caffeine and a power socket in one of Singapore's public libraries.

It is not just Singapore that seems so anxious about people working outside the confines of an office. My crack team of researchers has reported problems in Starbucks in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. But while Starbucks' staff are busy evicting computer users in Asia, the company is installing wireless local area networks in its 2,000 branches in the United States to allow people to surf the Net. Many branches have larger tables that you can book for meetings and don't chase out those who turn up to work there everyday. Cafés have become important locations of business in the United States. They are places where ideas are brewed up alongside the coffee and where fortuitous encounters have led to new businesses being born.

They are also vital for people who work at home. Working from home seems a great idea until you encounter the isolation and the dismal blurring of all boundaries between work and the rest of your life. Distractions are incessant. You soon discover that a deftly employed vacuum cleaner can do more damage to your thought processes than a lobotomy. Most home workers find they need to get out, and laptops and mobile phones leave you free to wander.

In Singapore, Starbucks has no plans to install power sockets, never mind wireless access to the Net. Some chains of cafés are going in the other direction. Michael de Jong, general manager of The Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf chain, says his branches were aiming for a more relaxed ambiance with sofas and comfy chairs, but would consider installing wireless technology if there was demand. He did tell me, however, that his company has no rules against using computers or power sockets and that he would instruct his branch managers not to evict computer users in future. (Thus I wield the mighty power of the fourth estate for the benefit of all mankind.)

The resistance in Singapore makes me wonder whether the people have the same commitment to keeping up with technological change as the government does. Some tense times are ahead. Mobile Internet links are going to break down barriers between workspace and places of leisure in ways that will make people have to reconsider where it's appropriate to work or not. But until someone comes up with a battery that doesn't fade out five minutes after you start working, he who controls the power socket holds all the cards. ■

April 26, 2001

Far Eastern Economic Review 39

© Review Publishing Company Limited, Hong Kong, 2001. A wholly owned subsidiary of Dow Jones.

## DETAILS

<b>Publication title:</b>	Far Eastern Economic Review; Hong Kong
<b>Volume:</b>	164
<b>Issue:</b>	16
<b>Pages:</b>	39
<b>Number of pages:</b>	1
<b>Publication year:</b>	2001
<b>Publication date:</b>	Apr 26, 2001
<b>Publisher:</b>	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Hong Kong
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Hong Kong
<b>Publication subject:</b>	Business And Economics--Economic Situation And Conditions, Political Science--International Relations
<b>Journal section:</b>	Innovation : I-Sight
<b>ISSN:</b>	0014-7591
<b>e-ISSN:</b>	1563-9339
<b>Publication title history:</b>	Far Eastern Economic Review; Hong Kong
<b>Source type:</b>	Magazine
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	Article
<b>Document feature:</b>	Photographs
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	2886881098
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/magazines/blown-off-course/docview/2886881098/se-2?accountid=11311">http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/magazines/blown-off-course/docview/2886881098/se-2?accountid=11311</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	© Review Publishing Company Limited, Hong Kong, 2001. A wholly owned subsidiary of Dow Jones.
<b>Last updated:</b>	2023-11-09

**Database:**

The Far Eastern Economic Review Archive,Periodicals Index Online

## LINKS

[Linking Service](#)

---

Database copyright © 2024 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)