

The Job Behind the Photograph

Every career has a brochure version. This is what the brochure leaves out.

6 min read

Before you read

- **mechatronics** — the overlap of mechanics, electronics and software in machines
- **apprenticeship** — paid on-the-job training combined with formal study
- **diagnostics** — the work of finding the cause of a fault
- **vocational** — relating to training for a specific trade or occupation
- **prestige** — the respect a role is given, which may not match its difficulty
- **attrition** — the steady loss of people from a job or a course over time



A mechatronics apprentice checks the overnight fault log above the line, Stuttgart.

¹ The recruitment photograph shows a young woman in a spotless white coat, smiling beside a robotic arm. The caption calls her an engineer of the future. It is not untrue. It is simply the part of the job that photographs well.

² Lena Brauer is twenty, and in the second year of a three-and-a-half-year mechatronics apprenticeship at a components plant outside Stuttgart. She does own the white coat. She wears it perhaps four days a month, when visitors come through. The rest of the time she wears steel-capped boots and a jacket that smells permanently of cutting fluid.

³ Her shift begins at 05:40. The first hour is almost entirely reading. Overnight, the line logs every fault it encountered, and the log does not explain itself: it reports symptoms, not causes. A sensor that failed fourteen times in six hours might be a broken sensor, or a loose bracket forty centimetres away that lets the whole assembly shiver. Telling those two apart, quickly, is most of what the job actually is.

⁴ "People think the skill is fixing things," she says. "The skill is deciding what is wrong. Anyone can replace a part once you tell them which part."

⁵ This gap — between the public image of a career and its daily content — is not unique to engineering. Teaching is imagined as explaining and is largely assessment and behaviour management. Medicine is imagined as diagnosis and is substantially paperwork. Law is imagined as argument and is overwhelmingly reading. In each case the photogenic ten per cent of the work has been mistaken for the whole.

⁶ The German vocational system is unusually honest about this, which is why it is worth examining. Apprentices such as Brauer split their week: three days in the plant, two in a Berufsschule, a vocational school where the theory is taught alongside the practice rather than years before it. The arrangement means a trainee discovers what the work involves in the first month rather than after a three-year degree.

⁷ That early collision with reality has an obvious cost. Attrition in the first year is real, and some of those who leave would have completed a classroom course quite happily. But the cost of leaving in month four is small. The cost of discovering the same thing at twenty-four, with a qualification and a debt, is considerably larger.

⁸ There is a second thing the brochure omits, and Brauer raises it without prompting. The line she maintains produces components at a rate that makes every stoppage expensive. When something fails, forty people stand still and wait for a decision she has to make in minutes, on incomplete information, in front of an audience.

⁹ "Nobody tells you about that part," she says. "They tell you about the technology. The technology is the easy half."

¹⁰ It would be convenient to end there, with the brochure exposed as a deception. That conclusion is too comfortable. The brochure exists because sixteen-year-olds choosing between options do not respond to accurate descriptions of ambiguity and pressure; they respond to images of competence. A perfectly honest recruitment campaign would recruit almost nobody, and the line would stop for want of anyone to maintain it.

¹¹ The more useful conclusion is narrower. Career descriptions are written by people who do not do the job — marketing departments, careers advisers, parents recalling an industry as it was two decades ago. The descriptions are not usually lies. They are summaries, and summaries keep whatever is easiest to say.

¹² Which suggests a practical test for anyone choosing a direction. Do not ask what a job is. Ask what the first hour of a Tuesday looks like, and ask someone who was doing it last Tuesday. The answer is rarely photogenic, and it is the only part that is reliable.

Part A Multiple choice

Circle the letter next to the best answer.

1. According to paragraph 3, the main difficulty in reading the overnight fault log is that
 - A the log is written in technical language apprentices are not taught
 - B the log records symptoms rather than causes
 - C the log is too long to read in a single shift
 - D the sensors that generate the log are unreliable
2. The examples of teaching, medicine and law in paragraph 5 are used to
 - A argue that engineering is harder than other professions
 - B show that the gap between image and reality is a general pattern
 - C criticise the training offered in those three professions
 - D explain why vocational training is more popular in Germany
3. In paragraph 7, the writer's attitude to first-year attrition is best described as
 - A alarmed — it represents a serious failure of the system
 - B indifferent — it has no bearing on the argument
 - C accepting — it is a real cost, but a cheaper one than the alternative
 - D approving — the system is designed to remove weaker candidates
4. The phrase "That conclusion is too comfortable" (paragraph 10) signals that the writer is about to
 - A restate the argument more forcefully
 - B introduce evidence from a second apprentice
 - C complicate the argument by conceding a point to the other side
 - D abandon the argument as unsupported

Part B Written response

Answer in two or three sentences. Refer to the passage.

5. Explain what Brauer means when she says the skill is "deciding what is wrong" rather than fixing things. Why does the writer place this quotation where he does?
6. Paragraph 8 describes a pressure that is not technical. In your own words, what is it, and why does the writer say the brochure omits it?
7. The writer argues that the German system is "unusually honest". Identify the specific feature he credits for that honesty, and explain how it produces the effect.

8. Reread paragraph 11. The writer distinguishes between a lie and a summary. Explain the distinction and why it matters to his overall argument.

9. The passage ends with a test the reader can apply. Explain how that final paragraph follows from the argument that came before it.

Part C**Think deeper**

There is no single right answer here. Take a position and support it with evidence.

10. The writer concedes that a perfectly honest recruitment campaign "would recruit almost nobody". Does that concession weaken his argument or strengthen it? Argue one position.

11. Is it defensible for an organisation to present an unrepresentative image of a job in order to attract people into it? Set out the strongest case against your own view before giving your answer.

12. The passage claims descriptions of careers are written by people who do not do them. Test this against a career you know something about. Does the claim hold?

13. Suppose schools replaced careers talks with a requirement that every student shadow a worker for one ordinary Tuesday. Predict two consequences, one intended and one not, and justify each.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — the log reports symptoms, not causes | 2. B — it generalises the pattern | 3. C — a real cost, cheaper than the alternative | 4. C — a concession that complicates the argument

Part B

5. Diagnosis is the scarce skill; replacement is routine once the diagnosis is made. The quotation is placed immediately after the writer's own explanation of the fault log, so the worker's words confirm the point rather than introduce it. Credit any answer that notices the quotation is used as evidence for a claim already made.

6. The pressure of making a high-cost decision quickly, on incomplete information, while others wait. Accept: it is omitted because it is about judgement and exposure rather than technology, and is far harder to photograph or advertise.

7. The split week — three days in the plant, two in vocational school — means theory and practice run together, so trainees meet the real content of the job within weeks rather than after years of study.

8. A lie intends to mislead; a summary simply omits. The distinction matters because it lets the writer criticise career descriptions without accusing anyone of dishonesty, which keeps his argument harder to dismiss.

9. If the problem is that summaries are written by non-practitioners, the remedy is to ask a practitioner about an ordinary, unsummarised moment. Strong answers note that "the first hour of a Tuesday" is deliberately unglamorous, which is the point.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the conclusion.

10. Strong answers engage with the concession itself rather than ignoring it. Either direction is creditable: it strengthens the argument by showing the writer has anticipated the obvious objection, or weakens it by conceding that the practice he criticises may be necessary.

11. The requirement to state the opposing case first is the skill being assessed. Mark whether the opposing case is stated in its strongest form, not whether the student's conclusion matches your own.

12. Looking for a specific, named example tested against the claim. A general agreement with no example is a weak answer, however well written.

13. Requires two consequences and a reason for each, with one explicitly unintended. Reward plausibility of mechanism — why the consequence would follow — over cleverness of the consequence itself.

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