

THE RECRUITER'S BOOKSHELF: *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles* by Steven Pressfield

Article by Raphael Franze, Esq.

In this issue of The Recruiter's Bookshelf, we are featuring the Steven Pressfield book *The War of Art* (not to be confused with the Chinese military treatise *The Art of War*, although likely named with the intention of doing so). *The War of Art* is a much different book than we've reviewed in this space in that it reads more like a pep talk or manifesto on creativity than a more academic book on the topic. That's not to say that it's not insightful all the same, as Pressfield brings forth all his experience as a writer of non-fiction, historical fiction, and screenplays. Most famously, Pressfield has authored the novel and screenplay *The Legend of Bagger Vance* loosely based on the Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gita* (a text *The War of Art* heavily draws from, as well).

Before going into greater detail about the book, I'll say that this past calendar year was not my most productive – by certain measures, in fact, it was one of my least. Granted, it was a down year for most of the legal recruiting industry but with my area of specialization (corporate associate recruiting) hit harder than most. Upon reflection of the last twelve months, though, and despite what I rationalized was an honest effort on my part, it's now clear to me that the lack of productivity was largely self-inflicted. As that realization dawned on me, I revisited *The War of Art* (which I first read during one of my best years to help keep my momentum up) in an effort to better understand the slump in which I now found myself.

Resistance

The central theme of *The War of Art* is the concept of Resistance, defined as the negative mental force opposing creativity and preventing us from achieving our goals. Pressfield is most intimately familiar with Resistance as a working writer but addresses it generally from the perspective of all artists. It's not lost on him, though, that anyone with an entrepreneurial bent is creating all the same and is susceptible to Resistance. As recruiters, we're creating with every prospective placement and, as such, what's popularly referred to by writers as "Writer's Block" (where the author can't seem to get the right words down on the page) can similarly manifest in recruiters in what can be called "Recruiter's Block" (where a recruiter can at best get only a negligible amount of traction from their efforts).

The book is divided into three distinct sections that address defining Resistance, combating Resistance, and operating on a higher realm beyond Resistance.

The section on defining Resistance serves mainly as a checklist that both helps to describe Resistance and to identify its many manifestations in our lives. While it's no surprise to read that Resistance is universal and is experienced by us all, Pressfield is adamant in distinguishing that it's in no way a peripheral opponent of ours but an

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internal one – it's self-generated and self-perpetuated and fueled solely by our own fear of it. However, while Resistance only looks to obstruct movement towards our higher selves, we therefore can use it as a compass and navigate by it. As recruiters, we see this manifest on a daily basis as we decide whether to redirect our focus for any number of reasons or stick with a well-developed and purposeful plan we brought into the day. Personally, the desire to work on this article in the middle of the workday recently was my own struggle with Resistance whenever my phone began feeling heavy (a battle of which I fought more gallantly over the course of developing this piece and embracing its subject matter).

The manifestations of Resistance that Pressfield highlights in this section are many and, for a recruiter, can easily be derived from the delayed gratification inherent in our work. After all, procrastinating for a day on starting a difficult but worthwhile search doesn't seem like a big deal if the search might not bear fruit for several weeks (let alone a payoff for several months). While one instance of procrastination may prove harmless, persistent procrastination is another matter entirely and the "immediate gratification" habits embraced during the workday in its wake (such as random social media consumption, personal calls, etc.) are themselves their own forms of Resistance.

Victimhood can be another form of Resistance that recruiters may easily be susceptible to as any bad breaks well into a recruiting process can bring them to their knees and can throw them off their game for an extended period of time if they're not careful. Rationalization is cited by Pressfield as a particularly pernicious form of Resistance, calling it "Resistance's spin doctor" presenting us with a series of plausible, rational justifications for not doing our work that may in fact be true or legitimate – all done while leaving out the fact that plenty of people overcome them to achieve their goals.

Combating resistance

The second section - on Combating resistance - distinguishes between the attitudes and behaviors of the professional and those of the amateur.

While Pressfield acknowledges that anyone who accepts compensation for their work is a professional, he states that aspiring artists and entrepreneurs defeated by resistance share one trait: they all think like amateurs and have not yet “turned pro.” Here, Pressfield provides ten principles of Turning Pro that address an individual’s degree of effort and mode of thinking. As a recruiter who engages with many others in his industry, I’m adamant that every single one I’ve encountered has turned pro as any sustainable success in our line of work requires it.

In the face of Resistance, though, it would appear that getting acquainted (perhaps reacquainted) with these principles goes a long way to quash the Resistance one may be experiencing. Are we committing to our work all day, every day, and for the long haul, no matter what? Do we over-identify with our career? Are we maintaining a sense of humor about the work? Any number of factors, such as family life, illness, the work itself, or even recent success can throw us off our game and leave us increasingly susceptible to Resistance. Nonetheless, getting back on track and beating Resistance on any given day is solely an act of will that requires nothing more than one’s commitment.

Beyond Resistance

In the third and final section of *The War of Art*, Pressfield takes the reader on an increasingly spiritual ride by addressing creativity in a higher realm beyond Resistance. While my earlier readings of the book just glazed over this section, reading it more recently from a humbled and instructional perspective opened me up to a seemingly more enlightened approach to my work. Centered around the mantra “We have a right to our labor but not to the fruits of our labor” (from the *Bhagavad Gita* in Krishna’s counseling of Arjuna), Pressfield delves into Jungian psychology, Greek mythology, ancient literature, and various schools of philosophy in highlighting the importance of discovering ourselves in such a way that enables one to nobly surrender to their work without attaching themselves to it

or the results. Working in such a manner, Pressfield contends, would open one up to the positive influence of unforeseen forces – to attract and abide the advice of muses that may ultimately curry favor with the Gods, if you will.

Though Pressfield’s spiritual take on creativity might not land with everybody, I believe that a recruiter’s work is steeped in mystery as we attempt to create in the presence of countless factors (the majority of which we’re not fully clued in on or even know to exist). Acknowledging the mystery and working more humbly and diligently to attempt to unravel it for its own sake – as opposed to freezing in an ego-driven state of “placement paralysis” after having already calculated the placement fee – seems like a more optimal and productive place from which to operate and may very well curry the favor of “The Recruiting Gods” (or, alternatively, better align one’s efforts with those of the collective consciousness as related to those efforts).

Quirky and irreverent, while also highly philosophical and spiritually driven (at least to those ready to accept it as such), *The War of Art* is a very good read to help quickly address those challenges in one’s work that may in fact be self-imposed. When explored more deeply, it has the potential to inspire greater creative (not to mention personal and professional) exploration.



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