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# THE **SECRET** ARMY

LEADERSHIP, MARKETING  
AND THE POWER OF  
PEOPLE

Gina Balarin

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Balarin is a passionate, enthusiastic, corporate storyteller. She is the author of dozens of B2B case studies, hundreds of blog posts and speaks regularly on panel discussions and at marketing conferences. She counts herself very lucky to have done a TEDx talk and chalks it up to having been on stage in various guises over the years doing everything from being a Magician's Assistant, to performing lead roles in ballet and drama productions, to representing companies as a Marketing Director.



She has a Masters Degree in Education in the subject of Management Communication, is a Chartered Marketer and Member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, and has a BA (Hons) in Linguistics and English Language and a BA in Drama and Linguistics.

She's the author of this book and an unpublished romantic fiction novel, as well as many poems that no-one except her gets to read.

At the time of this book's publication she lived in the green hills of rural Oxfordshire, England. These days – who knows?

[www.linkedin.com/in/ginabalarin/](http://www.linkedin.com/in/ginabalarin/)

## Chapter 5: Your Power (The Secret of Happiness)

*How can everyone in your business make themselves and the company better? It's all about being itchy... In this chapter, we talk about the concept of an itch and how to harness the power of being itchy. We discuss flow, what managers do, what great managers should do, and how putting the concept of flow into practice can help both individuals and businesses. We cover autonomy, mastery and purpose in more detail, introduce the concept of '20% time', talk about why happiness is everyone's own responsibility, and explain why we must stop defining ourselves using present participles.*

What would you do if no-one paid you to do it? What's your compulsion? That thing that makes you passionate, that thing you would feel uncomfortable about – even itchy about – if you couldn't do it?

The 'itch' is that thing we can live without, if we have to, but if we do live without doing it we find that a piece of us is somehow lost. Something's missing. We are somehow diminished, as a result, of not having it in our lives.

I'm not talking about addiction here, like how a lot of people can't function without a cup of coffee first thing in the morning, or a cigarette (and, in my case, a cup of tea). I'm talking about the activity, or activities, that keep(s) us sane.

For me, there are two itches in my life: writing and dancing.

I can go a few months without dancing, without moving in time to the ebb and flow of the music and feeling the rhythm that takes over my body when I am perfectly in harmony. My muscles control the postures, my arms stretch and sway in time, my knees bend, my hips move from side to side, or glide, rotate, tilt or simply hold my body in space.

When I'm engaged in my 'itchy' activity, time stops. If I were in a darkened room, minutes or hours could pass and I would not know.

When I'm dancing, I'm in a state of what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls 'flow', or optimal experience.<sup>1</sup> This is how he describes it: 'When a person invests all her psychic energy into an interaction... she in effect becomes part of a system of action greater than what the individual self had been before.' The way he describes it later in the book is that '[t]he flow experience, like everything else, is not "good" in an absolute sense. It is good only in that it has the potential to make life more rich, intense and meaningful; it is good because it increases the strength and complexity of the self.'

Flow happens in situations when people are challenged to perform at their best and are able to strive to achieve that best with no distractions. They are so focused on the task that nothing interrupts that 'perfect moment' until it's over, until they come back to reality with a bump and, hopefully, a feeling of utter exhilaration.

### WHAT IF WE COULD DO THE THINGS THAT INSPIRE US?

I don't dance for a living. I don't even do it every week. But what if I could? What if I could do the thing I most love in the world every day of my life? Would I still love it if, in twenty or thirty years' time, I was still doing it? Would I still love it if I had to do it for a living? If my income and my family's well-being depended my ability to earn money from me indulging in my passion?

The sad fact is that the need to earn money from a hobby, even a passion, can often diminish the joy in that passion. Partly because, when we *have to* do something, we can often lose the will to do it. It becomes a task, a chore. That's partly why I don't dance for a living.

But what if we could indulge our passions in a way that made us challenged, yet enthused? And what if we could turn our lives into a search for the optimal flow experience – not just in our private lives, but also at work?

How can individuals and businesses 'harness the itch'?

This is a challenge for individuals and businesses alike – to identify how we can do two things:

1. find out how to 'flow' in our work lives – to find that optimal state of performance;
2. find out what our 'purpose' is and be given the autonomy to continuously strive towards that purpose, so that we become more than people who just get things done, but, instead, do things because we believe in what we're doing and love doing it.

This is the true challenge of anyone in command of an army: to motivate his/her troops to achieve victory. It's the same challenge for the leader of any company, or the leader of any team within a company.

There's a huge amount of responsibility on managers' shoulders.

So, what is the actual role of a manager? According to one of the classic management books that every first-year management student is required to study analyse and regurgitate – Hellriegel & Slocum's textbook, *Management*<sup>ii</sup> – '[a] manager is a person who allocates human and material resources and directs the operations of a department of an entire organisation.' What managers really do is a combination of these seven factors:<sup>iii</sup>

- manage individual performance,
- instruct subordinates,
- plan and allocate resources,
- coordinate groups,
- manage group/department performance,
- monitor the business environment,
- represent their team.

At least, that's what they did in 1989. Arguably, the fundamentals of management haven't changed much over time, but what has changed is the sheer volume of literature available about what differentiates a merely 'good' manager, from a 'great' manager.

If great companies:

- know why they are in business in the first place (this isn't *just* about earning money)<sup>iv</sup>
- hire the right people (and aim to keep them on board),
- refine the *path* to greatness with the brutal facts of reality, and
- keep their people focused and motivated, even when times are tough,

then their managers have to learn, embrace, and execute a whole new set of skills.

A *Forbes* article by Victor Lipman says that these are the '5 Things the Best Managers Do and Don't Do':<sup>v</sup>

- keep the big picture in mind,
- be consistent in their behaviour,
- treat their employees' time as if it's as important as their own,
- be unafraid to question their own management, and
- earn the trust of those they manage.

Which leads us to the lesson of this chapter:

**LESSON 4: YOUR GENERALS NEED TO HAVE PEOPLE'S HEARTS IN MIND.**

When I was working for a non-profit organisation, I spent a lot of time – 30-50 minutes a day, possibly more – speaking with my manager about non-work-related things: his family, his ambitions, my plans, and what we were doing over the weekend. During those times, I never felt that he was in a rush, or impatient to get on with the next chore. On the contrary, I felt that it was important bonding time, time that allowed us to continue to work together effectively. And we did. Together we achieved extraordinary things – we managed to cut the costs of some products by up to 75 per cent, we built and improved databases and websites (back in the days when this was still a relatively new and exciting thing to achieve), we nurtured relationships with our contractors, and used the feedback that our contractors received from our customers to make further improvements. We did good work.

In other profit-focused businesses, these nearly hour-long daily conversations may be seen as a complete waste of time. However, they were anything but that! The time we spent processing our lives gave us several things:

1. Time to reflect – which often, but not always, inspired us to do things in our work lives in slightly different or better ways.
2. A feeling of solidarity, and a sense that I had his back and he had mine,
3. The opportunity to say ‘well done’ to each other, and express our concerns or frustrations about things going on in both our work and personal lives.

I'll never forget the impression this manager made on me. In fact, he was such an inspiration that I worked with him twice. Arguably, I must have been an inspiration to him too, because the first time I worked with him, I was actually just a temporary worker for a few months. I hardly expected him to remember me when I applied for a job with the same organisation several years later. It turns out, I discovered once I actually *had* the job, that the moment he saw my CV again, he decided he had to have me on board.

He's not the only manager I've worked with who encouraged the importance of bonding and sharing time. A line manager who regularly scheduled social events for our team (inside and outside of office hours) would do the same. When the time came to have our regular 1:1 meetings, she took care to make sure I knew that the time we spent together wasn't just for reporting on workloads and raising issues: it was time for us to spend together to talk about anything and everything we needed to discuss. These discussions were often personal, and led to helpful coaching sessions, but they also allowed us to talk about issues in the business that we might resolve by putting our heads together. They gave us the freedom to speak confidentially about problems and possibilities, people and personalities, ideas and initiatives.

She inspired me to do the same for my direct reports, and I found that the time I spent with my employees was beneficial for me, too, both at the time and, upon reflection, in later life as well.

## WORKPLACE BONDING AND HAPPINESS

I am a firm believer in the importance of bonding at work, whether in 1:1 meetings or in the kitchen (see Chapter 14 for more about bonding in the kitchen). This ‘non-work work time’ has a role to play far beyond that of taking a break or making sure we don't get dehydrated. The social implications of those simple exchanges can actually have far-reaching consequences.

Despite the fact that we are now healthier and grow to be older, despite the fact that even the least affluent among us are surrounded by material luxuries undreamed of even a few decades ago... and regardless of all the stupendous scientific knowledge we can summon at will, people often end up feeling that their lives have been wasted, that instead of being filled with happiness their years were spent in anxiety and boredom.

– Mihaly  
*Csikszentmihalyi*

It's almost impossible to predict the powerful potential outcomes of sharing a cup of coffee, and a piece of your life, with a co-worker during those 'non-work work times', because they can be surprisingly long-term and far-reaching. For me, it has resulted in new work, continued friendships, numerous ideas and workplace improvements – to name just a few benefits. It also has the potential to make us happier, generally. Sharing frustrations over a cup of tea has frequently given me the break, and the perspective, I needed to carry on with my work with a spring in my step. I'm willing to bet it's done the same for people with whom I've shared a moment of enthusiasm or a listening ear.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi spent twenty-five years studying the science of human happiness and, in the end, wrote a book called *Flow: the classic work on how to achieve happiness*.<sup>vi</sup> He wasn't talking about taking coffee breaks in this extract from his book, but he could have been...

What I 'discovered' was that happiness is not something that just happens.

It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them.

Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.

Whether we're choosing to change our perspective over a cup of java and a chat, or in some more lasting and esoteric way, it all comes down to finding those moments of delight, every day.

Drinking coffee is not likely to help us get into that brilliant zone of flow – but it offers us a momentary insight into how to find happiness every day at work in small ways.

The other thing having 'bonding time' with my line manager or direct reports has done is identify opportunities to take on tasks that really *do* make us excited. When we are given the opportunity and encouragement, these tasks have the potential to 'scratch our itches' and put us into the moment of flow.

To return to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi<sup>vii</sup>, his research revealed a surprising commonality about what people experienced when they were truly happy – in that moment of flow:

1. The experience usually occurs when we confront tasks we have a chance of completing.
2. We must be **able to concentrate** on what we are doing.
3. The concentration is usually possible because the **task undertaken has clear goals**.
4. The task provides immediate feedback.
5. One acts with a **deep but effortless** involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life.
6. Enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a **sense of control** over their actions.
7. **Concern for the self disappears**, yet paradoxically, the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over.
8. The sense of **duration of time** is altered.

When people are involved in a task or activity they love, they enter this state of flow. In our private lives we often get to enjoy these moments of flow – when we're with friends and time seems to have disappeared, for example, or when we get to the end of a weekend and don't know where the time went – these are most likely to have been times of flow. We also experience this sense of flow when we're engaged in an activity that makes us come alive – the itch referred to earlier.

It is often incredibly difficult for many people to identify what their itch is. It's even harder to give ourselves permission to do that thing we're passionate about (which we'll cover next). But the real magic happens when businesses are able to identify what people are passionate about and help them work towards that passion within the business. It helps people, and it helps the bottom line.

This is where your company's generals need to know what's in their troops' hearts, give them a reason to want to work towards that, and help them achieve what makes them passionate. Because no-one should have to go through life feeling 'itchy' all the time.

Here's one way to help our employees find more meaning in an average day.

## AUTONOMY, MASTERY AND PURPOSE

As mentioned before, Daniel H. Pink is the author of the best-selling book, *Drive, the surprising truth about what motivates us*.<sup>viii</sup> Pink's book is hailed as transformational, but great companies know that using the principles of autonomy, mastery and purpose embodied in his work is actually a matter of necessity.

**Autonomy** is the ability to have control over the tasks we do. Having **mastery** over an area of interest is about becoming better at something that matters (learning to be a master of your art). **Purpose** is arguably the biggest missing ingredient in modern companies. Humans inherently know that life is about (or, arguably, should be) more than just plodding through from day to day. We're looking for something that gets us up in the morning, and makes us go to bed at night with a sense of satisfaction. Companies who don't have a strong reason to exist are not helping their employees unless their employees can help themselves.

## MY FIRST FULL-TIME JOB: SETTING UP AN ORGANISATION

I was fortunate enough, in my very first full-time job, to have all three of these elements. But I didn't know it at the time.

Setting up an institute may sound like a daunting task. Perhaps, in some ways, it was, but it didn't seem like it to me. I was tasked with turning a conceptual idea into a functioning organisation. When I started, we had funding and a building – that was all. Even the building wasn't available to move into immediately, as I discovered when I started the job and was housed in a tin-roofed annex across the campus – not a pleasant experience when the daily summer temperature regularly soared to 42 degrees centigrade!

I knew what I had to do, though: sort out furniture, equipment and even window blinds; get a finance system organised; set up their marketing initiatives; and support the business by running their courses and making sure everything happened on time, in a comfortable location.

I was given the autonomy to make my own decisions about small, but interesting things: what kinds of chairs to purchase; what colour scheme to use; which printer type to buy, and so-on. I was allowed to master the skill of managing our finances. And I had a purpose: to create an organisation where students would want to come and learn, where they felt comfortable doing so, and where they had all the resources available at their disposal that they would need to learn effectively.

I wasn't left on my own to make the really hard decisions, nor was I abandoned to learn how to do organisation-specific tasks like figure out their ledger codes and accounting practices. Additionally, there was a clear sense of what needed to be done, and I had the skills and resources to do it.

It was all done in time, under budget, and then I got bored. They had given me autonomy, mastery and purpose to set up the organisation, so I sought the same elements in the rest of my work. Once I had their marketing up and running, they let me train people, and then they

let me do my Master's degree part-time while I was running the organisation. Whenever I ran out of tasks to 'master', I sought more autonomy – and they gave it to me.

In retrospect, the autonomy, mastery and purpose I was given at this organisation set up the high expectations I've had of jobs ever since. In a way, it spoiled me – because it made me think that I *would* gain this kind of autonomy, mastery and purpose in all my jobs – and it made me believe that I *should*.

Over the years, I have learned that I'm not alone in having these high expectations – many of today's employees have them, particularly millennials and Gen-X employees. We expect more from our companies, possibly because many of us are taught, from an early age, that we can achieve great things and that we *should* do so. However, great companies know how to help us find *more* – more meaning in our work, more purpose, more control, and so-on.

But there are great examples of how companies are helping individuals find autonomy, mastery and purpose in the real world. I return to Daniel Pink's book to elaborate.

### *Autonomy*

One of Pink's ideas is the concept of '**20% time**'. The idea is simple: let your employees spend one day a week (20 per cent of their time) on any problem they want. It worked for 3M – in fact, that's where the post-it note came from. It worked for Google (we got Gmail, Google News, Google Sky and Google Translate from it), and the chances are that it might work for you. It's a strange and scary concept, but it's all about **finding the flow by doing something that truly motivates and inspires you**. The results will be beneficial for both the individuals and the business.

For businesses, the lesson is this: if 20 per cent seems unrealistic, it's possible to have smaller doses – say one afternoon a week – but it doesn't hurt to test it out for a few weeks and see if it helps. A word of warning, though: choose a time when individuals are most likely to be at their creative peak – or let them choose the time. Or, if giving employees time off to pursue interesting goals isn't a realistic possibility for your company, allow them to find better ways of working within their current roles. Doing this worked brilliantly for Paul O'Neill, the CEO of Alcoa (the Aluminum Company of America). We'll go into this story in a bit more detail in Chapter 10.

### *Mastery*

Pink suggests that, instead of being motivated by extrinsic rewards, having a desire to 'do better' is what really drives success. He calls it 'Type I behaviour'. Simply, it means that if we live and work in a way that allows us to focus on producing meaningful results, it leads to 'stronger performance, greater health, and higher overall well-being'.<sup>ix</sup>

So how do we find the opportunity to constantly improve at our jobs, to find 'mastery' over our tasks? The answer lies in something called 'goldilocks' tasks. These are tasks that hit the sweet spot –they are 'neither too easy, nor too hard'.<sup>x</sup> When used in addition to regular, less inspiring tasks, goldilocks tasks can help inspire flow, create a sense of pride, and provide a challenge that will help us get, and remain, inspired.

For businesses, here's the lesson: finding goldilocks tasks can be simpler than we think. If we give our employees the permission and autonomy to find tasks within their role at which they want to become a master, they will often choose goldilocks tasks themselves. Alternatively, it's possible to turn normal tasks into goldilocks tasks by varying the deadlines. I had one challenging employee who did far better when he was able to select his own deadlines. Ironically, when he chose his own deadlines, they were often sooner than they would have been if I had chosen them. But he needed that pressure in order to turn boring tasks into goldilocks ones.

### *Purpose*



This might be the hardest of the three to turn into reality in most organisations because many employees' purpose is largely determined by the company for which they work, particularly if they are seen as a small cog in a big machine. However, even if employees can't always find, or don't see, that the organisation exists to serve a deeper meaning or purpose, they can **try and find purpose** in their team, or in their work.

For me, it was easy to find purpose when I was working in that non-profit organisation – our job was, literally, to improve people's lives. It was, arguably, harder to find purpose when working for organisations that didn't have a stated goal of wanting to improve the world. Along the way, though, I learned an important lesson: 'making a difference' in someone's life doesn't have to mean that you're helping them change the world. Sometimes it's enough to know that you, or your company, or your product or service, is helping change individuals' lives in small ways, every day.

## HAPPINESS IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

As we go through this book and discuss the key elements of finding, supporting and leading your Secret Army to success, there is a risk that some will think it's entirely up to the army's leaders and generals to drive success.

It's not.

Happiness is everyone's responsibility. No-one can make their employees happy, and certainly not all the time. Companies, leaders and managers can create the conditions for employees to become happy – but it's up to the employees themselves to find the opportunities for happiness, and seize them.

If we're lucky, we might be able to work with others who demonstrate these *8 Signs an Employee Is Exceptional (Which Never Appear on Performance Evaluations)*<sup>xi</sup>

1. They think well beyond job descriptions.
2. They're quirky...
3. And they know when to rein in their individuality.
4. They praise other people in public...
5. And they disagree in private.
6. They ask questions when others won't.
7. They like to prove other people wrong.
8. They're constantly exploring.

These are signs of self-motivated people who are striving for something more. It's something many of us often aim to do – but some just don't know *how*, or *don't have the confidence*, to do these things.

But here's a newsflash.

No-one is going to give us 'permission' to take control of our lives. They're just not.

It's all very well to build a life plan - if we actually know what we want in the first place - but that does not help one iota if we're going to spend our whole lives waiting for 'the right time' or 'the right place' to get started. It's like sitting at a bus stop, waiting for a bus that will never arrive, or on a bench waiting for a friend who you've forgotten to make an appointment with.

So how do we get started?

We've all heard inspirational quotes like 'Winners never quit, quitters never win' etc. etc. They're true, of course, but what if we're not naturally one of the world's winners? Or, if we have a winning strategy, idea, or embryonic passion inside, but are **TOO AFRAID TO GET STARTED**.

Here's the good news: we are not alone.

The mass of men lead  
lives of quiet desperation.

– Henry David Thoreau

The population of people who spend their life do'*ing*' something, and never getting it done, is innumerable! Think about it – I'm willing to bet you could name at least half a dozen people who are living their life in the present continuous tense, in the moment of '*ing*'.

'I'm *writing* a book.'

'I'm *working* on my thesis.'

'I'm *finding* myself.'

None of these are bad things on their own. In fact, they're great – as long as they are a means to an end. But there is a risk – and it's not just a small one – that people who spend too long *talking* about *being* or *doing* never actually get it done! Instead, they find themselves living in a state of perpetual incompleteness. Their identity actually becomes associated with never finishing the thing itself.

I have some experience with waiting for permission to get something done

For years I was writing a romantic fiction novel. Note the present participle: *writing*.

But it was only once I *stopped being afraid* of finishing a novel that might have turned out to be fantastic, or terrible, that I actually got it done. I was waiting for someone to give me permission to finish it – for permission to deliver a piece of work that would not be perfect. I waited a long, long time.

Then something changed: I committed to a deadline, for myself. I gave myself permission to finish writing it – no matter how good or bad it ended up being.

That is one of the few reasons I have written a novel (in addition to the non-fiction book you're reading now) and I am no longer *writing* one. I may not have published it yet, but at least I'm not living in a perpetual state of setting myself a goal that I may never deliver on, and disappointing myself in the process. It's done. I can move on with life.

## DON'T DEFINE YOURSELF IN THE CONTINUOUS PRESENT

Unfortunately, there are many novelists – and doubtless, many other people with varied and interesting goals – who define themselves in the continuous present. They are writers precisely because they *are writing* a novel: always *writing*, never '**finished writing**', never '**have written**'.

There is a huge risk that if we spend so much of our lives being too afraid to finish something, to commit to getting the job done – no matter how good or bad that job might be – we end up in a perpetual never-never land. Never finished, never quite confident enough to get to an end product.

Well, the thing is, no-one is ever going to give us permission to finish our thing, whatever it is. That's entirely up to us. We need to give ourselves permission.

The same applies at work. Do you have a great idea? I'm sorry to be the bearer of hard-to-hear news, but, as a wise colleague of mine, Melissa Romo, was told at the beginning of her career, 'It's not a thing until it's a thing.' When saying these words her mentor meant, as far as I can gather, 'Go ahead, have the ideas, but please, please, don't stop there!'

I can picture her mentor saying something like this: 'Don't stop with the idea. I'm not going to tell you that it's okay to create an idea, or apply that to improve your business. That's not for me to say. It's for you to produce. It's your responsibility to take that idea and apply it.'

Give *yourself* permission to do something you're afraid of.

So, here's something to try today: give yourself permission to do something you're afraid of, reluctant to attempt, or reluctant to finish. Don't wait until it's perfect. Just get it done. And then

put it 'out there' in whatever format it takes. Maybe no-one will like it or appreciate it, but at least it will be done. And then you can stop seeing yourself in the present continuous.

Here's the formula – insert appropriate words:

Stop **being** a **Y** (insert noun here) because you're **Y-ing** (insert present participle), be a **Y** (noun) because you have **Y-ed** (past participle). For example, stop being a writer because you're writing. Be a writer because you have written. Stop being a student because you're studying, be a student because you've studied. Stop being a leader because you're *trying to* lead. Be a leader because you *have* led.

And then be proud of the fact that you've been brave enough to turn your vision into reality.

No one else is going to give us permission. It's up to us to give ourselves permission to get it done.

## WHAT REALLY MAKES A SECRET ARMY POWERFUL?

To conclude this section of our book, let me summarise it this way: money makes the world go round, but people make it worth living in.

So far, we've covered lessons about the value of our employees, our customers and our managers. But, ultimately, any individual's success comes down to their ability and willingness to do something passionately, diligently, with focus or for a purpose.

The secret of the Secret Army lies in combining all the forces and resources available at its disposal and turn them towards a single goal: the defeat of another army in a meaningful war.

What's your war? How important is it to win the war? And how do you get people to march those dreary weeks alongside you in your quest? That's what the next section, 'Are you leading forwards or sideways?', is all about.

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### Key Takeaways

- The success or failure of an army lies in its ability to meet its objectives. It seems ironic to believe that happiness is critical to success but, if your army's functionality depends on its ability to work well, then happiness is a major element. Yet, happiness is everyone's responsibility. Companies, leaders and managers can create the conditions for employees to be happy – but it's up to employees themselves to find the opportunities for happiness and seize them.
  - No-one is going to give us 'permission' to take control of our lives. It's all very well to build a life plan, but that doesn't help one iota if we're going to spend our whole lives waiting for 'the right time' or 'the right place' to get started.
  - Stop being a Y (insert noun here) because you're Y-ing (insert present participle), be a Y (noun) because you have Y-ed (past participle).
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I hope you enjoyed this extract.

To read the rest of the book, contact me directly:

email [gina.balarin@verballistics.co.uk](mailto:gina.balarin@verballistics.co.uk)

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