Memoirs of a Self-Loathing IT Professional

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The Beginning

I was young, idealistic and eager to make my mark in the world of technology. I graduated from the University of Calgary with a computer science degree, a 4.0 GPA, and an unbridled sense of self-importance that any employer would appreciate. Many of my classmates started looking for work months before the end of school but I was smarter than that. *I should have no problem getting a job*, I thought. There were lots of energy companies seeking new grads so I didn't feel a sense of urgency. Besides, working in oil and gas IT wasn't something I wanted to do. It was not *sexy*. I would get a job with one of the big name innovators. So instead I spent my time doing what I loved: writing code on the bleeding edge. I did that and played copious amounts of video games. I was very good at coding and had a whole swarm of little games and utilities under my belt before I graduated. I even had an entourage of sorts that kept my blinders well set. I was notorious. I stayed up all night, drank a lot of Coke, and ate a lot of pizza.

Calgary is an oil and gas town. There is lots of work for IT people willing to do uninteresting in-house software development but I had no interest in that. I had hoped to get on with Apple – I was the quintessential fan boy - and I was devastated when I got the rejection letter telling me that I didn't have enough experience. Microsoft gave me a phone interview, looking for "smart" people, and then flew me down for a series of interviews. Though Microsoft was the enemy, I was very impressed with how they treated me. I remember one of the first things the recruiter told me was, "We usually hire PhD students but we really liked your portfolio." Then I got to visit several of the senior developers to see if they wanted me on their team. I knew my first interview wasn't going well when the lead of their operating systems

group asked me to write an algorithm, that I did, but he had never seen a solution like what I came up with before so he spent most of our time running a whole variety of test data through the solution to prove it didn't work. My interview time was up, all his tests passed without breaking my algorithm, and his parting response to me was, "I know this is wrong but I just can't prove it yet."

So slightly disillusioned I started to look for work closer to home. I sent resumes to all of the major oil and gas companies in town, knowing this wasn't the bleeding edge tech I wanted to do, but how could they not hire someone super-smart like me? Friends I had written letters of referral for had gotten jobs based on my recommendations. I should be able to sell myself no problem. The PFO letters started to roll in but I was undaunted; lack of money to buy video games and gear is a powerful motivator. However I started to have questions about what was wrong with me. I consulted my geek friends who just told me the obvious, "You waited too long and most companies have already stocked up on their new hires." Finally I got a callback for an interview with Banana Energy Corporation.

The interview went really well. I answered every technical question the senior developer asked me. I also answered every psych question the group manager posed. I was obviously very smart and not a serial killer. I added just the right amount of humility.   Previous bosses when I worked at university had commented in reference checks that I was arrogant because I *knew* how good I was.   Banana made me a decent offer but it wasn't quite what I expected. "Come on as a contractor for six months and if we like your work we might move you into a full-time position," group manager Anne Hanser told me over the phone. "I have just the project for you. Our lead developer for our investor relations group just quit mid-project and we need you to put that puck in the net. Given your experience, we'll even start you at an intermediate pay grade."

Now I was working for Banana. My first day of work was great. I met with Anne who gave me the orientation and exalted, "We are here to make our clients happy but do whatever it takes to make the team successful." I met my new project manager; a short, balding, pointed man named Ted Sharp. Our offices were in Bankers Hall downtown Calgary that formerly housed the Elysian offices of Canadian Pacific Railway. Everything was white alabaster, plaster, or marble. It was like I was walking through an ivory tower. When Ted showed me to my office

he made a point of telling me not to pin up anything on my walls because if I were to damage the walls, or the moldings, or *anything* cosmetic that it was all custom work and repairs would cost thousands of dollars. Maybe this was his way of saying *"Don't get too comfortable."* At least I had a window.

Armed with an overwhelming fear of damaging my environment I set out in search of supplies. My office had no whiteboard so I needed some outlet for creative scribbling. I quickly discovered that unlike the workplace of my father there was nothing like an office supply room, or a secretary for our group to whom I could go and beg for pads and pencils. Fortunately a new colleague told me I could just *call the help desk, request supplies, and they would show up on my desk in a few days*. However in a pinch, I should *just nix them from other people's offices*.

My boss and his boss were very busy, so I introduced myself to all of the software developers on my floor. Everybody was friendly. Like most computer types they had a passion for technology. I immediately felt at home. And later Ted introduced me to the client. The client was a lovely lady named Janet who patiently explained her group's requirements for a simple tool that let them maintain a list of investors to which they could automatically send documents like annual reports and track who got what. This was a very important piece of software for her and she was happy that somebody was back on the job to get it finished in a timely fashion.

I diligently took notes and then we went over what had been built to date. "No problem, this will be easy," I assured Janet. Ted and I went back to my office. He briefed me on all the protocols and procedures that I would require to do my work. He gave me a list of names of people to talk to for the various procedural checks and measures. There was a process to be followed when dealing with the client. Meetings between me and the client were to be arranged by Ted. Once I had built something on my machine, I was to fill in paperwork to have my software installed in a test environment. Once in the test environment I could contact the client to show her my progress. If the client was okay with my progress, I would get her to sign a form that allowed me to promote my software into the production environment. That form would be reviewed by leadership for impact before passing through a final *stage gate* of *change control*.

So I reviewed all the best practices, templates, and forms that I needed to work with. It seemed a bit cumbersome because when I wrote programs for myself I did it on my personal computer and didn't need a team of people to support me. In this environment I had limited access to the test environment. I had no access to the production environment. In that environment I had to package up my work and send it off to another group to install because, as it was explained to me, *developers are not trusted in production.* It was called *segregation of duties* and was a requirement to prevent developers from intentionally, or unintentionally, messing up the business machinery.

I did the best I could. I followed all the procedures to the letter. Within the week I managed to get the product up and running. My internal tests passed. I sent Ted a status report email saying *I was done and ready to meet the client*. I went through the application with her and she performed the user acceptance tests. Janet was very happy with the quick turnaround and signed off on the project. Subsequently I did all the paperwork to get the software into production, entered it into inventory, and generated a script that our help desk could use to support it. It passed through change control without issue.

About the same time that the product went live in production Ted came into my office for a status update. "So how is it going," Ted asked smiling. I thought Janet put in a good word. He wasn't often happy when I saw him.

"It's going great," I responded, "I'm finished and ready to move onto the next thing."

Ted's smile disappeared. "What do you mean you're finished?" He sat down across from me. His eyelid twitched. He was sitting on the edge of the chair.

"Uh, we released to production this morning," I said nervously thinking that perhaps I had done something wrong. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"What were you thinking?" Ted yelled. "The project plan has this thing going on for another three months!"

"But I followed all the procedures," I stated. "Janet was happy with the product so she signed off on it. I completed all the paperwork…"

"Never do that again," he interrupted. "I told Janet this was a six month project. We budgeted this as a **six – month – project**. You should have talked to me." Ted strongly emphasized the duration as if I had trouble grasping the magnitude of it.

I was confused. *I sent you status e-mails – didn't you read them?* I thought. "We finished early and Janet is happy. Isn't that a good thing?" I asked.

"No! Now we have to give money back! Or explain why we're so wrong in our budget!" Ted said as his face turned red. "You could have worked on something else."

I had never been in trouble for finishing something quickly before, let alone telling someone I'd finished something they'd asked me to do. Unfortunately I wasn't smart enough to let it go. "But it would not have taken that long. What was I supposed to do, just sit on it for three months?"

Ted got up. He was grinding his teeth. "Yes, that's exactly what you should have done, and you should have told me about it before you went to Janet. Now I have to go to Anne and explain." He abruptly left.

Somewhat dazed I went down the hall to talk to some of my new colleagues. Jeff, the old guy, said, "You made Ted look bad. He's not used to motivated people. Slow down, take your time, you're in the corporate world now." The scruffy guy Dean laughed and told me, "Nobody likes a hero." That was my first corporate lesson: looking good makes someone else look bad. And this set the stage for my subsequent encounters with Ted Sharp.