

# Memoirs of a Self-Loathing IT Professional

By Bernie Wieser

© 2014

## The Mexican

It had been a few weeks since my wrist slapping for finishing a project early. Anne assigned me to another project that was “challenged.” When I spoke to her about Ted’s issue with me she found it amusing and she told me not to sweat it. It became clear that I was on Ted’s radar. I tried to be at work at 8:30 AM but it was proving to be difficult. I took the train as there was a station a few blocks from my house. It seemed the earlier I left the longer it took me to get to work. But I wasn’t feeling stressed about it because I was usually at my desk at 8:35 AM. The odd thing was that I would see Ted walking by my office about the time I was taking off my coat. His office was at the other end of the hall and I was not on his usual path.

When I was being interviewed for Banana I asked Anne about the hours. She told me that the core hours were 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM but it didn’t matter much as long as the work got done. I thought this was a reasonable response. Then the biweekly status meeting came where Ted had all the developers in the room who were working on his projects. His big agenda item for the day was “working core hours.”

“I work from 6:30 in the morning to 6:30 at night,” Ted told us matter-of-factly. “This lets me get work done around all the meetings I have during the day. I don’t expect any of you work the same hours. But I do expect you to be in promptly at 8:30 and stay until 4:30.”

Dean (who looked like he had worn the same T-shirt for the last two weeks) said, “Most of us here never talk to the business clients or to the public. So why exactly do we have to be here during office hours?”

“Because it’s professional,” Ted said with a disapproving tone. “Because some of you *do* talk with the business client and you need to be here when they are here. They might call and it looks bad if we are not here.” Ted gave Dean a look up and down. “And as I’ve told you before our dress code is business casual, Dean.”

“I’ll wear a tie,” Dean replied with a grin on his face.

“Don’t be smart,” Ted replied. “Jeans and t-shirts are not appropriate attire.”

Carlos Mendez came to Ted’s assistance. “Yes,” he said (with a slight Spanish accent), “we understand and will do better, right guys?” There was mostly silence in the room as Carlos glanced around for validation. Carlos was an immigrant and he always tried very hard to make the bosses happy - even though it often came off as brown nosing to the rest of us.

“Thanks Carlos. Now before we move on to the status updates I just want to remind everybody that your status reports are due at the end of the week and I want you to tell me what you’ve done this week and what you plan to do next week. I need these by noon on Friday so I can summarize them and send them to Anne. If you can use the format that I sent you it would save me time reformatting. Dean, this means you.”

He paused and looked at me with scrutiny. “Also, make sure you book appointments with me before releasing anything to production or have any material discussions with clients so I don’t have any unexpected headaches.”

The next day I arrived at 8:36 AM. It was spooky because though the hallway was empty when I went into my office, Ted came in before I had the opportunity to sit down. “Mark,” he asked, “is everything going alright?”

I wasn’t quite sure what he meant. “Yes, I guess. I think so. I’m up to speed on the new contract management system and about to start planning the upgrade.”

“That’s not quite it,” he said flatly as he sat down. “I’ve noticed that you been coming in consistently late. I just want to make sure that everything is okay because Banana has certain expectations around staff keeping core hours.”

*You have got to be kidding me*, I thought. I wanted to say, *I’m consistently here at 8:35 AM and I consistently leave after 5:00 PM*. But I chickened out and said, “Yes Ted, I know the core hours and I try to keep them.”

“Good,” he replied. “You know if you leave a little earlier you can have some wiggle room before 8:30.”

“Thanks Ted, I’ll keep that in mind,” I said as I thought *don’t you have something better to do?*

So I set my alarm clock to ring 30 minutes earlier so I could be at work 5 minutes earlier. It was uncanny. If I got up an hour earlier it only, on average, saw me get to work 15 minutes earlier. My experimentation proved valuable because as our group got busier towards the start of the drilling season Ted started booking meetings with me at 8:00 AM. I suspected he did this just to piss me off.

One of the things I enjoyed about those days was walking down to the corner office to visit Jeff, Carlos, Todd, and Dean. Usually those offices were reserved for senior leadership but our floor assignment was temporary. Anne requisitioned that the one corner office in our area become a shared space for four developers. This situation existed before my arrival and fortunately none of the developers held any ill will towards me forgetting my own office. I guess two windows are better than one. When I asked Jeff about it he said that *Anne just wants to keep everyone on the same floor*. Todd who was the quietest of the bunch stated, “If any one person got *this* office, even Anne, someone would lodge a complaint with human resources.”

On this occasion it was a Friday, just before noon, and everyone was working on their status reports. It was always a last minute exercise and a chore with minimal information content and from what I could see little actual value. I had finished mine so I thought it would

be good to have a stretch and visit the others while they did theirs: everyone of course but Dean who didn't believe in them.

"You guys done yet?" I said leaning against the door jamb with a cheeky grin on my face.

"Just close," Carlos said without looking up.

"Keener," said Jeff.

Dean, who was typing furiously, responded with an emphatic *no way*.

"No concerns about the wrath of Ted?" I asked.

"No way man, that guy's a jerk," Dean said with a half-smile.

"You know he can tell Anne not to renew your contract," Carlos said with his accent.

"Not gonna happen," Dean replied. "Anne *likes* my work." Dean drew out the word *like* a little too long and licked his lips but I wasn't going to ask.

"Why don't you do it?" Carlos said as he finished his update and clicked send, putting his hands in the air as if he'd scored a goal and then folding his arms behind his head and stretching back in his chair.

"Amigo I don't do it because I don't get it," Dean started. "Why do we have group status meetings on Monday, one-on-one meetings during the week, and have to write it all up on Friday? It's bureaucratic bullshit. Anne doesn't read them anyway."

Carlos shook his head. "Because they pay you to do it," he said.

"They pay me to code bro. And they don't pay me enough to wear a fricken suit. You know what that's for." They guys in the room laughed. Obviously there was an inside joke somewhere I was not privy to.

"What do they pay you?" I asked out of curiosity.

"Never talk about your rates," Todd said softly.

“I get about \$55 an hour and I work about 40 a week,” Dean said.

“What?” Carlos asked with a frown on his face.

“My pimp gets me \$60,” Jeff said. *Pimp* was a term many IT contractors used to describe their placement agencies. The pimp got you in the door as they were a preferred IT vendor and then took a cut off your hourly rate during your contract. On more than one occasion I heard developers compare this to being *out on the street corner*.

“What?!” Carlos said vigorously.

“Yeah, when I started, they offered me \$55 too,” I said. “I thought it was pretty competitive.” I looked at Todd. “What about you?”

Todd raised an eyebrow like Spock. “I won’t disclose this information exactly but it suffices to say it is competitive.” I noticed when Todd spoke he picked his words carefully.

“Fair enough,” I said. Then I noticed that Carlos looked very concerned. “What’s up Carlos?”

Carlos was staring at Jeff. “I’ve been here five years! You get paid \$20 more than me? I’ve been here longer than you!”

“Ouch,” Dean said. “You are getting raped.”

“You get \$15 more than me. *Esto es tan injusto!*” Carlos exclaimed.

“Haven’t you asked for a raise?” I asked.

“No, my pimp was to take care of that for me.”

“How many contract renewals have you done?” Jeff asked.

“Every six months,” Carlos said shaking his head. “They told me I was doing a great job.”

“Dude you needed to like ask for 2.5 percent ten times over,” Dean laughed.

“Nobody told me I needed to ask,” Carlos said disgusted. “If I we’re in Mexico I would lose my job if I asked. How can I make less than the new guy?” He nodded towards me.

“Pimps don’t do anything for you man. They work for the client. I’d say you need to ask Anne for a big raise!” Dean scoffed.

Carlos was fuming. I heard him mutter under his breath, *¿por qué tuve que salir de México?*

Todd quietly said, “You only get a raise when you change employers.”

A couple days later I ran into Carlos in the hall. He was wearing a jacket and tie. “Why so snazzy?” I asked.

“Snazzy?” Carlos replied. “What does that mean?”

“You know, you’re looking dressed up,” I said.

“Ah, yes,” he said and paused a moment before saying, “I’m having lunch with my mother.”

“Cool,” I said. That was my standard response when I didn’t have much to say. “I heard a rumor you talked to Anne about a raise?”

“Yes she said maybe next contract because I signed knowing the terms and she can’t change it,” he said with a shrug.

“Did you talk about rates?” I asked.

“I asked for \$20 an hour more. She told me that HR policy is 2.5 percent every six months. That is a raise of one dollar an hour. I asked why everyone else is making 150 percent more than me. She said it’s not my business. But she said on the next contract she would *go to bat* with HR for \$5.”

“That is an insult,” I said in disbelief.

“Yes. I also asked her to make me an employee. She said she can’t increase her head count.”

That was another quirk of working in IT. Three quarters of the IT workforce was called *contingent*. Most everybody you met doing real work was a contractor. That included developers, help desk support, infrastructure support, database administrators, network engineers, business analysts and project managers. The employees consisted of group leads, senior managers, and typically anyone that was not project based with a few direct reports.

“I’m sorry Carlos,” I said.

“Me too,” he said as he headed off to his desk.

Within two weeks Carlos quit and got a job at another upstream energy company. I talked with Jeff about it and he wasn’t surprised. He also mentioned that Anne had called the three of them into her office and gave them a dressing down for discussing rates. It was *private and confidential* information. Carlos was working on writing a few applications and maintaining a few more. They were to be split amongst the rest of us because there was no budget to hire a replacement. I didn’t quite understand how they were able to pay Carlos if they couldn’t replace him.

Then on another visit to the corner office I was shocked to see Dean wearing a suit. “Nice threads!” I exclaimed.

“He has an interview,” Todd mentioned. The suit joke now made sense to me.

“No, no, my wife is a recruiter and she told me I need to dress for success,” Dean responded.

“Aren’t you the rebel?” I asked. “Won’t this cramp your style?”

“Nah,” Dean said, “with Ted buggering off there might be other changes and opportunities here.”

“Whoa, wait, what? He quit?” I asked surprised. “When did this happen?”

“Anne told me ten minutes ago,” he replied. “And he didn’t quit. He was given notice.”

“Why?” I asked puzzled.

“Anne said something about our group being over budget and her bosses telling her to slim down. It was either Ted or her,” he said with a smile.

“So she is going to take over all the PM stuff?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “That will be fun.”

“Holy shit,” I said. I remember Anne telling me that her background was accounting. She got her position back when IT was a new profession and companies couldn’t find qualified bodies to occupy seats. It always surprised me how many people were in IT that didn’t have an IT background or a passion for technology.

“Ted is going to tell us about it Friday,” Jeff mentioned.

Friday came and the meeting was very bizarre. For most of the meeting Ted dressed us down for not keeping core hours, not reporting the right content in the right format, and slipping his schedules. He never discussed his meeting with Anne, nor did he tell us that he was leaving. I remember seeing his temples throbbing. *Maybe he is blaming us for his demise*, I thought. But Dean summed it up later by saying, “What a jerk. His last day and he chews us out. No wonder he didn’t get a lunch.” This period provided a valuable lesson in performance management: Riding people’s asses doesn’t make them more productive. Punishing people for being productive sure as hell doesn’t help either. In the end it doesn’t matter because those that think they’re indispensable are often the first to go. I had a burning desire to discuss process improvement with senior leadership.