

Memoirs of a Self-Loathing IT Professional

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In the two years since I started at Banana Energy Corporation I had witnessed six reorganizations. You might expect a company to reorganize because of an acquisition, divestiture, or some necessary operational improvement, but this was not the case at Banana. From what I could tell when a leader changed his (or her) position in the company, or when a new position was created to reward a long standing staff member, the personal portfolios were rejigged to balance the responsibilities. Some business groups got passed around like hot potatoes; it seemed no leader wanted them so sometimes they went to *the new VP*. I heard jokes around the water cooler about how certain portfolios within the company were a form of administrative punishment and signaled a foot out the door.

One bizarre thing was that when a business group changed leadership so did the IT group that supported them. On the business side the staff in the group simply got a new leader; the system and its processes stayed the same. But on the IT side *all* the people changed in the chain-of-command because IT was aligned to business leaders on the org chart. You would think that with all the effort spent to learn a system and support it, it would be important enough to retain the system experts. The experts should stay with the systems they were expert in to provide consistent, quality service. This did *not* happen.

Infrequently IT would reorganize itself to try better aligning with the business and its functions. This is what happened when Anne's group absorbed gas marketing IT and how I

originally met Alan Chang, head of the fledgling Project Management Office. Unfortunately organizational changes within the business *and* within IT meant that IT suffered more frequently and deeply from *lacking* change management than the rest of the business.

Mike Dixon, who was working with me on the Land Management System (LMS) project, supported Banana's production accounting group. He had proved to be a solid developer and achieved dude status within our small troop. Todd, Jeff and I had come to appreciate his skills – even if sometimes he was hard to pin down. He was *always* busy but we never really understood what he did. The LMS project, having been built and now undergoing field testing, was almost out of its warranty phase. Anne had asked me to wind the project down. The dudes were going to be reassigned to other projects and I would support it as part of my usual portfolio. (That was the fun of being a *jack-of-all* trades IT professional.)

It was then that I got a flustered phone call from Mike. “Hey Mark, you’re not going to believe this,” he started.

I had my nose in code and was fumbling with the phone. “What’s up?” I replied.

“They are not renewing me,” Mike said in disbelief. “I’m gone at the end of the week. Can you put in a good word with Anne for me?”

“Sure,” I said. “But Anne was told no new hires, so I can’t promise anything.” Losing Mike from the project at this point wouldn’t be a huge hit, but I liked the guy and was very eager to see what I could do to help.

“Thanks man, I appreciate it. You know – it is too funny – no one around here has any clue what I do, and there is no flipping way they can just pass it off to someone else,” Mike said.

I was one of those people who didn’t really know what he did, and saw my opportunity to discover why he was always so busy. “Hey if Anne asks, maybe you can tell me what all you do because I’m not sure myself?”

“I keep production accounting running,” he said. “The whole thing is jerry-rigged. We have three different production accounting systems that do not play nicely together. Things change a lot so stuff breaks all the time. I manually run and maintain all the scripts that move all

the data into our reporting system. And the reporting system is so whacked I manually run all the extracts for things like emission reporting or monthly submission to the petroleum registry.”

“Wow,” I said. “That does sound like a lot of critical stuff.”

“My boss never had any budget to fix any of the infrastructure so he just kept giving me work. Now he’s been reorganized out of a job. IT leadership looked at my job description and figured I don’t actually do anything – so they are letting me go. Can you believe that? I keep the numbers rolling, but yet I don’t do anything.” Mike was clearly exasperated.

Wow, I thought, *the entire non-financial accounting system being run by one guy in IT.* Being process oriented I asked, “So Mike, how much of what you do is actually documented?”

“Nothing,” he responded quickly. “My boss told me I was here to *make things go*, not write documentation. And given I was the only guy working on it, I honest-to-god didn’t have the time to write documentation, or maintain it, and it would have been tough as it was always in flux.”

“Okay dude,” I stated, “I’ll book some time with Anne and see if she can do something for you, or at least ask her to escalate the danger in losing you.”

I got off the phone and started walking down the hallway toward Anne’s office. On the way I passed several offices with windows that still didn’t have occupants, including my former office. When I passed Jeff’s office he was on the phone but urgently waved his arms for me to come in. He was visibly shaken and appeared to be in a cold sweat.

“Yeah, he’s here now,” Jeff said to the person on the other end of the phone. He looked up at the roof while listening to the connected party. “Yes, I’ll tell him.” He hurriedly hung up the phone.

“Tell me what?” I asked concerned.

“I was talking to Todd, who sits across from Anne,” Jeff said. “Todd was just about to head home last night when he saw security and the lady from human resources come to Anne’s office. Anne was there; she usually works late. They closed the door, and when it opened, Anne had a box of her personal stuff and security escorted her off the premises.”

I was shocked. Anne was very popular with her business clients and had been with Banana for a long time. “What the hell?” I asked confused.

“I don’t know, I have a call in to my friend Sue in HR to see if she knows anything,” Jeff replied, shaking his head. “*But* Todd said HR was back this morning packing up all her files. That is unusual – it usually takes them weeks to clear out an office.”

“Ouch,” I said. “I just had a call from Mike and he’s done at the end of the week; his boss got sacked too.”

“No way! I think the Titanic just hit an ice berg,” Jeff exclaimed.

“Yep,” I started, “I finally learned what Mike does too and it’s not *trivs*.” (*Trivs* was slang we used for trivial. It sounded less pretentious.)

“Tell me later. I’m going to call my wife – just in case,” Jeff said as he picked up the phone.

I frowned, got up, scratched my head, and headed back to my office. Something told me today was going to be a long day.

I kept myself distracted by answering tickets in my support queue until an email message arrived from Alan Chang addressed to everyone in Anne’s group. It was flagged as *high priority* and was somewhat ambiguous. *Gentlemen, please join me tomorrow morning at 8:30AM in conference room 1601 to discuss recent organizational and resource changes.* Shortly after the email arrived, Jeff and Todd showed up in my office.

“Boy do we have news,” Jeff said as he closed the door. “Sue said Anne was terminated with cause for creative accounting. She thinks, but she’s not 100% sure, that Alan complained to IT leadership about being unable to accurately track project costs.”

“I thought they all did that; robbing Peter to pay Paul. Don’t all the managers do that?” I asked surprised. “I knew Anne did that, but if she didn’t, we wouldn’t be paid. It’s a shell game.” *Can you steal from yourself?* I thought.

“It’s not *Enronomics*,” Todd said. “It’s just bad budgeting.”

“Well there is more. The competitive intelligence team was super pissed off about their failed project, and they have the ear of upper management,” Jeff said. “They probably let slip to the brass how annoyed they were with the SNUPEA project fail.”

“I wonder if Kenneth knows?” I asked. In the back of my mind I thought Kenneth got away *scot-free* with how he handled that project after it left me. It irritated and puzzled me how we could get a project to the finish line and just stand there long enough for our window of opportunity (and success) to close.

“Well one good thing,” Todd started, “Kenneth is totally freaking out. I heard him panicking from down the hall while talking to someone on the phone.”

“Probably his mother,” Jeff said. We all chuckled. We had rumoured before that Kenneth didn’t have a social life.

The next morning we gathered in conference room 1601. Alan was there before everyone arrived. He was dressed in a grey suit and had a PowerPoint agenda up on the projector screen. The lights were only slightly dimmed but we could read the agenda: 1) staff changes, 2) organizational changes, and 3) office moves. The slide show was well branded with the new logo and slogans of the Project Management Office: *Repeatable. Managed. Educational.*

“I’m sure you’ve heard by now that Anne Hanser is no longer with us,” he said. He turned to look at the screen, but the system had switched out of PowerPoint to install some patches to other software.

“What the,” Alan said with surprise. “That’s why I came here early – so this wouldn’t happen.”

“It’s okay,” Jeff responded. “We’ve complained to the desktop guys for years and they say it doesn’t happen.”

“Doesn’t or shouldn’t?” I asked with a wink and a smirk.

“Doesn’t – we know it shouldn’t,” Jeff said and winked back.

“Well how do I stop it?” Alan asked. He seemed not to have encountered this meeting glitch before, which was strange because it inevitably happened in almost every meeting (though at random times.)

“Go to the software update thingy, that spinning arrow on the bottom right hand of the screen, right-click and select *work offline*,” Jeff said.

We waited a moment for Alan to get back to where he was in his slide show. I noticed Kenneth was squirming in his chair.

“Okay, so Anne, she’s gone,” Alan started. “A few other middle managers have also been reassigned or have found new challenges.”

“Like unemployment,” I heard Todd say under his breath. I noticed Todd was sitting as far from Kenneth as possible.

“But don’t worry,” Alan continued, “there is work for everyone in this room. You are valued contributors to Banana’s IT organization.”

I felt like I was being buttered-up. Alan brought up a slide of a list of middle managers and who reported to whom. I noticed everyone in Anne’s group was now reporting to someone

named Robert Bird who was tagged as group lead for internal development. Alan then brought up a picture of a new organizational chart.

“Chuck and his leadership team have decided to eliminate the corporate support groups. And we in the PMO, in conjunction with Human Resources, are moving to a *matrixed organizational model* for the staff hierarchy. We’re following ITIL guidance on segregation of roles, so all of you – except Steve – are now *Contingent Software Developers*. Steve is moving to the *Service Transition* group.”

I didn’t know Steve too well and he looked confused.

“So what about our clients?” Jeff asked.

“What the heck is *service transition*?” Steve asked simultaneously.

What the hell is a matrixed organization, I thought.

“You don’t have clients anymore,” Alan responded. “We have a new role of *relationship managers* that will be our face to the client. The relationship managers will be reaching out to all of your clients in the next two weeks and introducing themselves. And we also have new support roles for application and data *agents* that will steward systems or data. You guys no longer support the clients.”

“A lot of my systems are high maintenance and require a generalist, like myself, to keep running,” I stated. “How does this help the client?”

“We don’t work that way anymore,” Alan replied. “You have a role, and you work the role.”

Todd raised his hand, but before Alan could ask him a question Steve interjected, “What is service transition?”

Alan paused a moment as if searching for the words but Todd answered for him. “You install software, Steve.”

Steve's eyes opened wide and he grimaced. I thought I heard him quietly say to himself, "That's all I do now?"

Todd shook his head. "So are we going to do any transitional planning or documentation for these *agents*?"

"Nope," Alan replied. "The agents will take care of all of that. You guys just need to answer their questions when they ask you."

Todd shook his head again.

"Finally," Alan concluded, "the days of the private office are gone. Research has shown that open environments are much more productive. You'll all be moving to the new offices in the Scotia building. If anyone has any questions you can come and find me afterwards."

Todd threw his head back and let out a big sigh. Kenneth fidgeted, but was unusually quiet. Steve put his head in his hands upon the conference table. The meeting had an exceptionally awkward ending.

A few of us stuck around after Alan left. I asked Todd, *what is a matrixed organization?* And he replied, *it means you have multiple bosses*. One of the guys asked, *why call us contingents?* And Jeff replied, *it means you're temporary*. We all knew that *open office* meant *cubicle* and a loss of privacy – we had feared cube-land for some time. I felt I had a lot of fact-finding to do in order to figure out what possible, rational justification there was for these changes. It definitely was not the *make the client happy* mantra of the recently departed Anne. And on my train trip home, I wondered about the cost of the office moves. We had just moved earlier in the year, and now we were moving again; that summed up to more than a few paychecks. At least Mike Dixon wouldn't need to worry about it, and I made a mental note to call him and tell him - in some sense - we were all in the same boat.