

# Memoirs of a Self-Loathing IT Professional

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## Cubeland

My first day in cubeland was lacking in eventfulness; but the walk past new people's cubicles was noteworthy. The fellow on the end, named Laszlo, had his browser open to *Guns and Knives Quarterly*. He also had a small banner on his cube wall that said *don't bring a gun to a knife fight*. I was fortunate enough to be back-to-back with my old workmate Jeff. Todd had found himself on the other side of my cube with his back to the wall. I was happy that Todd and Jeff were with me, but so was loud-talking Kenneth. Kenneth was sitting on the other side from Jeff, which was probably a good thing not being within throwing distance of Todd.

My desktop computer and monitor had followed me to my new cubicle. My gear was older and I had been hoping to ask Anne to replace it (before she got fired.) Every other station on my row seemed provisioned with two, new flat screen monitors so I was a bit envious on the walk through to my cube. All you could hear was the clickity-clack of people typing, and the often loud phone conversations of the support staff. There were no formal introductions after the move but people were friendly enough. I introduced myself to the guys on either side of me, and the lady at the end beside the window. I'm sure everyone was on their best behaviour – being so exposed to public scrutiny, prying eyes, and thirsty ears. Normalcy proved *not* to be the case in the days following our arrival. Only four of us from Anne's team made it to floor 34. The other four members were on floor 33; floors 31 through 36 were exact carbon copies of the same floor plan so it was easy to get off on the wrong floor from the elevator.

I was just getting use to not having a window at Banker's Hall. Now I needed to get use to not having walls. The contrast between the seventies plaster work and the grey moveable dividers was huge; it was like marble to plastic. I half expected to see Les Nessman-esque tape on the floor where walls should have been. We had a continuous line of windows to the west, only broken by corner offices of IT brass. In the mornings the blinds were closed and we worked by fluorescent light and flickering monitors. The cube farm was either too dark and dingy or too bright for one person or another, so the blinds stayed closed for the most part.

The cubicle space occupied about half of the floor, with meeting rooms, printer room, mail room, and elevators on the very inside, and individual walled offices along the north, east, and south sides of the building. Staff had offices with windows (and sunlight). There were a few empty offices. Contractors occupied the cubicles. My cubicle was in the middle aisle and middle row. There were three aisles and five rows. There was a pathway between the aisles and on the other side along the inner wall were another three rows of cubes. The developers, business analysts, and project managers sat on the window side; we called it *the bright side*. The support and "service transition" folks sat on the inside along a wall; known as *the dark side*.

I overheard one of the contract project managers complain that she had been with the company longer than any of the staff that had a window office, and her projects were all the big, enterprise class, multi-million dollar kind. Her name was Tina and she had been in IT for as long as she could remember; given her age, she admitted that could be a very short time. Tina was a motherly sort that many folks went to for advice. She taught me the contractor's mantra: *it just doesn't matter; I get paid by the hour*.

Our first meeting was with Robert Bird and Dave Patack, who introduced themselves as the "quarterbacks" for our team. Robert was manager for internal development and Dave was manager for support and transition. (Transition is a fancy name that means planning installs, installing, and testing installed software.) They gave us much the same speech that Alan Chang from the PMO did before our move. *You do not work the way you used to. Play the position you've been assigned. Support the agents*. The reasons for these changes were immensely important to Banana's IT leadership. It was an extension of the industrial revolution. If all the

parts were standardized and interchangeable, old and broken parts were more easily sourced and replaced. However, we were also members of a cohesive team: *One team – one dream*.

Dave Patack was there to tell us who we were transitioning our support work to, but also to draw the line about where our duties as developers ended. We were no longer to submit any paperwork to production change control, author user documentation, or generate support scripts for the help desk. All this would be done by the agents that, in his words, were the “gatekeepers” of the systems. On this new team, we were to “take the ball to the finish line and do a pass to the agents.” We were no longer stewards of our systems, nor were we to interface with clients directly. The agent taking over my duties was named Elizabeth (Lizzy) Barty.

Robert and Dave seemed pretty positive about the new arrangement though Todd, Jeff, and I were solemnly quiet. Kenneth spoke, making us cringe, about how great it was that we could focus on software development. He was very happy he no longer needed to talk directly with the business clients; they just slowed him down. I, for one, wasn’t sure how I felt about being compared to a standardized part. It made me feel like I was expendable and a commodity. Our prior complaints to Alan Chang about failings in the bench model apparently went nowhere.

Dave arranged a meeting between me and Lizzy that afternoon. On the way to her office I noticed that most of the agents were employees of Banana Energy Corporation (so they had window offices). I was to give Lizzy an orientation of what I did so that she could take up the reigns and drive the work. Lizzy was an interesting character; she didn’t look like she belonged in IT. Not to say that there is a look to IT people, but she gave off more of an artist vibe and wore unique, non-designer clothes. Her office was exceptionally neat and had a feng shui-ness about it.

The Land Management System was still getting a few frequent updates so I focused on describing my plan for those. Lizzy said *yes, uh-huh, no problem* a few times, and I took it for granted that she was completely familiar with all the Banana procedures required to get a software release from the test environment into production. Before leaving her office, she

assured me that she would take care of things and not bother me too much. She, after all, was an IT person.

On the way back to my desk I passed Laszlo who had a web page open to *Knife Depot* and a banner of *Burmese Dark Op Knives*. The things looked nasty and I couldn't help myself.

"That's a nice knife Mr. Burton," I said, trying to do my best imitation of Lo Pan from the movie *Big Trouble in Little China*.

"Yeah, isn't it wicked? It's army issue, made from a composite of chromium, cobalt, tungsten, and vanadium," Laszlo replied, not taking his eyes off the screen. "Stays sharp through heavy use."

"You have a lot of knife fights?" I joked.

Laszlo looked at me with a big smile. "No, I just like knives. You never know when you'll need one."

I smiled back and continued to my desk. He seemed too friendly, and looked too normal, to be a psychopath.

When I sat down I couldn't help but overhear the conversation happening in the cubicle next to me. Earlier that day I had introduced myself to my neighbour Matt Carney who was presently on the phone. Matt was in his thirties and pretty well dressed. He was wearing stylish horn-rimmed glasses, giving him an aura of retro-cool.

"I don't care what you do," Matt said loudly to the person on the phone.

There was a pause.

"No, you've threatened this before, and if you're going to do it, you might as well do it," he said.

There was a longer pause.

“Listen, I’m going to pick up the girls after school and head to a motel, so if you’re going to kill yourself, don’t worry about picking up the girls and making dinner,” Matt said in a stern tone.

I couldn’t help myself. I was sitting there listening to Matt’s conversation with my fingers poised at the keyboard unable to type.

“For god’s sake Mary, stop telling me you’re going to do it and just do it. I’m at work. I can’t deal with this crap when I’m at work,” Matt said sounding exasperated.

I could hear the woman on the phone yelling but I couldn’t make out what she was saying. She was still yelling when I heard Matt put the phone down on his desk, and I reclined just a little bit to see that he did not hang up but had gone back to work.

I leaned forward and tried to focus on my task at hand. I had an update to get out and I needed Lizzy to put in the change paperwork, which was really just entering information into a web form that until recently I had been able to do myself. So I typed in a message explaining in detail what I needed her to do and why.

I also received a meeting request from Mr. Bird. He wanted to discuss a new opportunity with me where I would be technical lead for a new development project. He mentioned that our client in Land was very happy with my performance. In my response, I mentioned that I would love to do so, and if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, could I have two monitors like everyone else? He replied, “Absolutely, our standard policy is that all developers have two monitors – it says so in our playbook,” and, “I don’t know why you weren’t provisioned this way to start.” All I needed to do was send a message to Dave Patack requesting an additional monitor.

The next day I received a response back from Lizzy asking me, if it would not be too much trouble, to enter all the update information I needed into the change control application and just save it as draft as opposed to submitting it. I had not yet had my access to this application removed, and though I was slightly annoyed at having to rekey all the information I emailed her

the day before, I did as she asked. She mentioned she was very busy with other things and I would be helping her out while she got up to speed on all her new applications.

I didn't think much of it until a week later I had to put out another update. I sent Lizzy the instructions, and next day Lizzy sent me the same response that she sent me the first time. "I am too busy to do this, so can you fill in the form and let me know when it is done so I can submit." Trying to be a team player I did as she asked, but in my response to her I said, "I hope this doesn't become a habit." She didn't reply.

I met with Robert Bird about the new project in the central meeting room which was filled with unopened boxes of new monitors, making it look slightly disorganized. At the start I asked if I could call him Bob and he replied, "I don't float in water – so no." I didn't think I offended him but it was an unusual reply. Robert then went on to describe the new project; an application that took information from our enterprise content management system and tied it to location data so users could see what critical documents were relevant to them in their location. The cool thing would be to extract location information from the documents themselves. It wasn't a big project, but it would keep me busy for a few weeks after which Robert promised me a real, multi-person, year-long project where I would be technical lead; he just needed funding approval from the client and selection of an IT business analyst and IT project manager. This left me with misguided feelings of optimism and hope.

A few more critical fixes were required to the Land System so I needed to perform yet another production update. I notified Lizzy, again with detailed instructions, and received the response, "I'm not sure what some of this stuff means. Plug the form and let me know when you are done." This time I was really annoyed as it took me about an hour to type in the instructions, and then another 30 minutes to go back and enter it into the change control system's form. I shot back, "This is stupid. If I am going to be doing all the work I was doing before, I should be allowed to click the submit button on the form and not have to wait a day. How is process better?"

I did not get a response from Lizzy, but about thirty minutes later I got a note from my new boss telling me to help Lizzy out because she was *really* busy. I complied.

It had been a few weeks and I still had not received my second monitor from Dave Patack, nor did I get acknowledgement I sent a request. I called him, but he did not answer the phone. I wandered by his office and he was there so I stuck my head in.

“Hi Dave, have a moment?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said as he looked up from his computer and folded his arms.

“I put in a request for a second monitor,” I started to say but Dave interrupted me.

“Yeah, about that, we don’t have a budget for upgrades and if we do it for you, we have to do it for everyone,” he stated.

“Uh, everyone around me has two monitors,” I responded somewhat baffled. “And there is a whole swarm of them in the meeting room.”

“Sorry, I can’t help you,” Dave said matter-of-factly.

“Okay,” I said as I started to leave, stretching out the “*eh*” sound of “*okay*”; it filled in the potential awkward silence.

“Oh, Mark,” Dave said, “Lizzy came to talk to me a few times about some issues you’re having with her. You need to let go of the old life and let her do her job.”

“Right,” I said hiding my swelling rage.

When I got back to my desk I immediately wrote a message to Robert Bird. “Hello Robert, I didn’t get a second monitor, and when I talked to Dave about it, he just said it wasn’t in the budget.” I typed, and deleted, and re-typed, then re-deleted a rant on what had been happening with Lizzy – that seemed to go much further than I had suspected seeing she talked to

her boss about it. In the end I did not mention Lizzy at all. Robert quickly got back to me, “Mark this is total bullshit. Let me take care of it – it’s standard, required configuration for developers. You can’t play the game with the wrong equipment.” Within an hour of that message I got a note from Dave Patack saying, “Hi Mark, I found a spare monitor for you from surplus inventory.” I wrote him back, cc-ing Robert, thanking him for his effort. In the back of my mind I heard a little voice say *what a petty jerk*.

My mental state was shaky after the first few weeks of cubeland. I was starting to feel like I was living in a bad 80’s sitcom. I asked myself, *have I descended into employment hell? Is it like this everywhere? What’s with the football metaphors and freakish Hail Mary passes?* I found myself playing more video games at night to distract myself from the increasing strangeness at work; a feigned attempt at applying a coping skill to maintain sanity. I also sought Jeff’s counsel who simply said, “It’s like this wherever you go.” It was hard to look on the bright side (even though I worked on the “bright side”, the blinds were closed). However, it was only the beginning.