

The IT Career Builder's Toolkit

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THE ENTRY-LEVEL DILEMMA

One of the most frustrating elements of breaking into a career in technology is that initial job. This chapter identifies the quandary facing the entry-level professional.

This chapter analyzes the “need experience to get experience” dilemma that those who are new to the field often encounter. More importantly, however, this chapter discusses methods you can use to break past this barrier.

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BREAKING INTO IT

For many technology graduates, the past few years have been frustrating ones, because they have tried desperately to enter a seemingly shrinking job market. They had bought into the “get a certification—get a job” promise fostered by the marketing of many training programs. These graduates had been excited that their school had placement services to assist them in entering the growing and lucrative field of information technology (IT).

Unfortunately, although some technology graduates might have found their dream job as promised, many discovered a different reality.

Having followed the promised path, these eager students have discovered that many colleges have also struggled with placement. Although the schools have programs to help with résumés, and they work diligently to link graduates with employers, the fact remains that a tighter job market and a more skeptical employer pool have made job placement a nearly impossible task.

Adding to a tighter market is the fact that more experienced technology professionals have been forced to take a cut in pay and position. This has increased the competition for entry-level positions. Sometimes new graduates are competing with senior-level technologists for the same job.

Part of the fault of unsuccessful job placement lies squarely on the shoulders of the job seeker. Unrealistic expectations have many believing that a certification or degree qualifies them for positions that require hands-on knowledge.

I know of individuals who received their MCSE certification after attending several months of class. They passed the test, did some lab work, and got into the job market. Many of them expected to be hired as network engineers with salaries of \$60,000 to \$80,000. Their logic was that they were, as the certification implied, “certified engineers.” As they perused want ads, lesser jobs, such as those of help desk or IT clerical support, were undesirable to them.

This attitude contributed to the current wave of “certification cynicism” that many employers have adopted. Employers hired the “certified engineers” only to discover that many could not complete the most basic and mundane tasks effectively.

A correction has taken place in the corporate world. Companies are no longer willing to provide pay and opportunity to an unproven commodity—the entry-level technology professional. Many new technologists are unwilling to give up the idealistic dream of instantaneous job satisfaction and a high salary. Unfortunately, this is also leading some to listen to the doomsayers moaning about the lack of opportunity in IT. Talent that would do well in the IT industry is leaving to find opportunity elsewhere.

If you are in that group—ready to leave your hopes of IT success and find greener pastures—wait!

I understand that you are frustrated and disenchanting, but I ask that you seriously consider the corrective behavior described in the section that follows. In it, I believe you will find a rekindled hope that comes with understanding the reality of the situation.

Correcting Perception

The first battle in overcoming frustration in not finding the “job you deserve” is to correct the perception of the new technologist. As discussed earlier, IT will remain a great career choice. However, it is no different from many other good careers. You must make a degree of sacrifice to reach the heights of professional success.

A perspective that places emphasis on long-term career goals and month-to-month personal growth is critical. You must understand where you want to be in the coming months and years. You must also set about creating the short-term plans to achieve that longer-term success.

I’m not necessarily advocating a start-at-the-bottom mentality. I don’t perceive that each person’s path, even with similar goals, will be the same. I advocate more of a start-where-you-can mentality.

If a company is willing to hire you as a full-fledged network engineer based entirely on your schooling, more power to you. However, beware of overselling yourself without first developing the aptitude that is required. Taking a job where the expectations greatly exceed your production capacity can be just as professionally damaging as it is to take a job that never makes use of, or stretches, the talents you have. In fact, I would say the former is more damaging.

It is more difficult—both mentally and from a perception standpoint—to move down the corporate ladder. It does not look good on a résumé, and more importantly, it can damage your confidence.

IT is an industry that provides ample opportunity to learn new and challenging skills. However, substantial failure early in a career can create a professional timidity that stops you from taking the necessary chances to take on the challenges that come your way.

The perception that you need when breaking into IT is one that seeks opportunity over position. If you have been trained as a network engineer but you find an opportunity to take a position in a clerical capacity, consider what opportunities that job might offer.

Some of the factors to consider in whether to take this slight shift in employment are as follows:

- Does the company have an effective training program?
- Is it possible to find mentors in the field you want to enter?
- Is the company growing?
- Does the opportunity exist to greatly expand your professional network of contacts?

Remember: You can safely make this consideration because the job itself is not your career. You have the freedom and ability to move within the company or to a new company when needed.

The most important factor is that you are moving toward a career goal. You might not get the title or job you want right out of school. If you can master those skills at your current position, while simultaneously building your network of contacts that lead to your dream position, you should be satisfied. You must build your career piece by piece. It won't happen all at once.

IT Happens Outside of IT

One of the most important ideas that I coach is the concept of breaking into IT by staying away from IT. Scratch your head for a moment and get past the nagging thought that what I just said makes no sense. Now move on. I'll explain.

Many who are struggling to enter the IT field view their first major career step as getting a job in an IT department. This myopic view has been advanced to a degree by the growth of the industry over the past few years. The advent of the chief information officer (CIO) as a corporate executive is a new concept.

In the past, IT largely fell under the watchful eye of the chief financial officer (CFO). Technology managers existed, but not technology senior executives. A somewhat rogue and decentralized culture formerly existed in the IT world.

The pressing need to ensure that technology closely aligns itself with corporate objectives drives the requirement for a strategic executive. This tighter level of executive management promotes the idea that all technology jobs necessarily fall under the purview of the CIO.

In a traditional IT organization, you might see a senior-level executive (CIO, director of technology, VP of technology), managers over working groups (application development, networking, user support), and their staff. Furthermore, you might be under the impression that you must find a way into this structure to start your IT career.

That idea is far from the truth.

For many who are currently at the top of their IT careers, their path was much different. In fact, a majority of senior technologists who I know started out working in a user department, not in the IT or data processing units. Several reasons can explain this:

- Working in an IT department typically provides a higher degree of specialization.
- IT often creates a myopic view of the business world.
- You can develop numerous valuable relationships outside of technology.

Working in an IT department typically provides a higher degree of specialization. In most cases, you fall under a specific classification, as in *help desk*, *network support*, *application development*, *systems analyst*, and so on. Rarely do the job classifications cross. When a task hits a particular level, it is passed on to the appropriate group.

However, when you are a technologist in a user department, you are expected to handle virtually everything. The idea of different roles disappears. You are the in-house technology professional. Whether that places you in the capacity of installing hardware and software, supporting and training users, or writing code, you are expected to take on the tasks.

User departments make no distinction between a help desk/PC technician and an application developer. Both are known as the “computer guy.” User departments’ lack of distinction in this area makes working for them both exciting and dangerous. You are given charge over all of the technology, whether hardware or software related.

IT often creates a myopic view of the business world. It is a well-documented complaint of senior management that their IT departments do a poor job of understanding or speaking in business terms.

A joint study conducted by KPMG and ComputerWorld asked CEOs and senior management about how they felt their IT dollars were spent. To a large degree, the CEOs felt that IT did not deliver solutions that were well aligned with actual business objectives.

Many went even further, stating that they distrusted their IT departments, feeling that in many cases, their convoluted language was being used to hide ineffective projects, create confusion, and pad budgets.

Note

This perspective by CEOs is something that I have shared for years. In 1996, I started giving a presentation titled “Why Technologists Must Learn to Speak Business.” (You can find an article of the same name at <http://www.cbtoolkit.com>.) In the article, I admonished technologists to begin speaking to management and businesses in business terms and removing techno jargon from their language entirely.

One advantage to breaking into IT by becoming a departmental technologist is that you are forced to speak in terms that the general department speaks. You learn the business from the business unit—the people managing and performing the work. Your work is directly applied to production of the product or service of the company.

This was the path I took, and it has served me well. Many of my clients in my technology consulting practice rely on me for assistance in operations, marketing, and other nontechnology-related ventures. One commented once that he did not view me as a technology professional but as a business consultant and mentor who had extremely strong technical knowledge. I associate that skill with the experience I obtained as a business analyst in a nontechnology department.

You can develop numerous valuable relationships outside of technology. These relationships can easily become the core of your professional contacts network. Many will provide you with opportunities at other companies when they leave or through their extended contacts.

I developed many relationships during my years as a business analyst. Some of those relationships became or referred me to contracts when I became a consultant. These people knew the types of solutions I offered and knew of my professionalism. They were happy to refer me to associates or to recommend me to their employers.

Politically, and from the perspective of production, you often gain much more visibility in a nontechnology department. Your solutions are more apparent to the users, and your name

becomes synonymous with what you produce. This, of course, can be a double-edged sword. If you do not produce, this will be apparent, too.

Working in a department other than IT offers more interaction with users. This increases the opportunity to develop your interpersonal skills. Over the life of your career, this interaction and the development of the associated skills can pay tremendous dividends.

Given the choice between obscurity and the risk associated with being in the forefront of solutions, I'll choose the latter.

A technologist/programmer who builds an application within the IT department typically is viewed as one of many producers in that venue. However, the same developer who is working to create an application in a user department, while working with and within that department, gains a sort of “hero mystique.”

The “hero” stands out because he is providing a valuable service that no one else in the department can. In addition, a departmental technologist is often exposed to technology and projects that would never enter his area in the traditional IT department structure.

Exposure to new technology and nontraditional IT projects is a key reason not to overlook opportunities that place you outside of IT. Remember that each job is a progression toward your long-term goal. However, the perks and opportunities offered outside of the technology department can have long-lasting effects on your career. They can provide you with a greatly accelerated path of professional development.

Other Avenues into IT

As with most career moves, every turn has options. Part of the challenge facing many professionals is the idea that a wrong decision will have lasting repercussions on their career. I want to alleviate this fear.

Seldom will any single career move make or break you. As indicated in Part I of this book, “An Introduction to Career Building,” the idea of a career is based on long-term objectives and planning. Plans can change, and even long-term objectives can be altered without negatively impacting your career.

The fear of changing those objectives and plans is exactly what causes many individuals to effectively freeze in their tracks. They fail to make effective moves, afraid that taking that new position might be the “wrong” move. But a job is always just that: a job.

Typically, if you weigh your decision using the factors of compensation, opportunity, insurance, training, commute, travel, and so on, it is unlikely that you will move to a position that is dramatically worse than your current situation. Even if it turns out that you do not enjoy the work, you can simply begin looking for the next opportunity. In most cases, there is a redeeming lesson or skill to take from every situation. That is the way careers and life work out.

I am not advocating leaving your current job just to try something new. If your current position affords you adequate compensation, a learning environment, access to mentors and peers who are actively advancing in their own careers, and any number of other intangible benefits, I advocate trying to advance within the organization.

If you are a person who is trying to break into IT, advancing within your own organization requires you to make contacts in your company's IT department.

Ask for What You Want

I must give you another piece of advice: Ask for what you want. This is one of the most underutilized ways to help advance your career. For some reason, we feel hesitant to make our desires known.

However, if you are hoping to get into IT at your company, your chances improve considerably if the manager of that department knows this. I know that sounds obvious. But I meet person after person who fails to introduce himself to his company's IT managers and explain his desired career goals.

Part of this reason might be a feeling of inferiority when considering the seasoned professionals who work there. However, personal promotion is a key factor in how rapidly you rise in your career. In marketing vernacular, personal promotion is referred to as *reach and frequency*. Simply put, get your name, accomplishments, and good attitude in front of as many people as possible.

Ask for Advice

The owner of a small marketing company once told me the most noticed/desirable words for people to hear are "you" and "free." One strokes our pride, and the other strikes a pragmatic financial chord.

Don't be afraid to ask for what *you* want, but just as important is the ability to ask for advice. When you approach an IT manager, ask him what you might do to break into the field. More specifically, ask him how you can break into his department.

Let the IT manager know up front that you are asking for his advice. More importantly, take it. If this person provides you with a profile of what he would like to see in an employee, do what you can to model that profile. Asking advice pays dividends in a few ways:

- **It serves notice that you are serious about your career**—You want to know from the top how to succeed in this endeavor. From this perspective, it paints good public relations. As a business owner, I was always impressed when someone would approach me for advice on my line of work. I considered it a compliment and considered the individual wise for seeking it.
- **You'll probably receive some good advice**—Don't overlook this. If you are asking advice just to paint a good picture, but your attitude is one of disdain for the actual advice received, it will show up somewhere else. Most people in management have actually produced to get where they are. Their advice is valuable and should be heeded.

Don't make the mistake of assuming that the managerial tasks are simpler than the hands-on technology work. I'm here to tell you that the opposite is true. You should aspire to learn from *effective* managers, even if you believe your technical skills far surpass theirs.

Conclusion

Breaking into the IT field can, at times, seem to be a daunting task. However, if you look past the obvious door through the IT department and see, instead, opportunities elsewhere, your chances are greatly enhanced. Don't be afraid both to ask for advice and let your desires be known. These two ideas alone will serve you well.

Actions & Ideas

1. Analyze your ideas about breaking into IT. Do you have the perception that all IT careers take place in the IT department? Can you see areas where technology expertise would be helpful in nontechnical roles—perhaps even a job you have held?
2. Introduce yourself to an IT professional of some influence—whether at your current company, your local church or religious organization, or other sphere of influence. Let this person know your career motives and ask for advice.
3. Create a short-term plan of technology projects that you can perform outside of an IT department to advance your skills.
4. Look for ads for IT-related jobs (or jobs that require IT related skills) in non-IT departments. Compare job descriptions, prerequisites, and expectations.