

The Interview, Part 5: Don't Sew the Seeds of Your Departure

I had planned to discuss job offers in this week's newsletter, but some recent experience caused me to postpone dealing with that phase of the interview process. This week, we will explore a major reason why senior IT executives are fired. Before reading this, imagine that you are a finalist for a very attractive position. An offer may be imminent. Hopefully, this article will help you in your discernment process.

It was early in 1982. I had just left the large recruiting firm where I had begun my career and spent my first six years. They had been good ones. Although I had entered my profession during a recession at the very end of 1975, I had worked my way through it and had enjoyed six steadily improving years, with only some minor dips in 1979 and 1980. My first firm was a general agency that served the financial, sales, manufacturing, technical and IT career fields. For most of those years, I was its only IT specialist and was the envy of my fellow associates, because many of our clients would continue to hire IT professionals during downward business cycles. These same companies would either simultaneously enact hiring freezes for all but IT people, or would be laying off in every department except for IT. It seemed that layoffs for IT folks were few and far between. All that changed in 1982.

In my opinion, two watershed events occurred that year. First, we had a fairly deep economic recession; at least such was the case where I am in the Northeast. This time, IT people were just as likely to be "pink slipped" as were their fellow workers in the other departments, and since then, they no longer have enjoyed a virtual safety net. Second, IBM launched its first PC that was suitable for business use. I recall reading in a business journal that United Technologies Corporation, which is based and has a major presence here in Connecticut, had then made a huge investment by purchasing an IBM PC for all management employees throughout each of its business units. Although the Apple computer had been around for a few years and had more user-friendly interfaces, it took "Big Blue" to bring the PC into the workspace. What does this have to do with your career decisions? Plenty.

The advent of desktop and now portable computers brought computing out of the machine room and into everyone's face. These are my opinions only and are based upon purely personal observation, but enough related events have occurred to get my attention. Prior to the advent of the IBM PC in the business environment, beliefs and events such as these were common:

- Top management and business users in general typically did not understand computing. If they were unhappy with the services they received from their "Data Processing" department, they had very little evidence to rely upon, other than that the Order Processing System was not meeting its launch deadline again, due to previously unanticipated technical problems. To make matters worse, only a few

people in the company could explain the problems, but they couldn't do so in business English.

- Management often tried to resolve computing problems by giving the DP Director more money.
- In those days of green bar paper, punch cards, and coding pads, the pace seemed to be not as intense nor were issues as complicated as they are now. If the Accounts Receivable Aging Report was an hour late, people took it more in stride. Even with the aid of computers, major business activities such as month and year-end closings as well as inventories, took considerable time to execute.
- The top IT person was better able to retain their job. I can think of some executives who reached 20 years' tenure or more in their positions. I'm not sure what this says about them or their companies. Imagine starting a new job now and still having it in 2022? To some that would be a dream, to others, a nightmare.

The events of 1982 have caused the following fallout:

- The advent of the IBM PC in the business suite de-mystified computing for non-computing executives. The vast majority have not become experts, though many would like to think they are, but they know enough either to be a threat or at least to know when some IT professional is trying to pull the wool over their eyes.
- Of equal importance, desktop and portable computing have led to an urgency, and a desire for immediate results on the part of IT customers and business executives. After all, if it's small, it must be simple and quick. Right? The downside of this is that problems take on a more personal and frustrating dimension. I have referred to this as "The Age of In-Your-Face Computing". The computer is now in the user's face and when a system fails in any way, they're in yours. I can relate countless stories where business executives literally had tantrums because their printer had timed out, their machine had frozen and killed off an open Word document without saving it, a server crash occurred, or the network went down. I am certain that more than a few of you have felt the stinging humiliation from such an event.
- The chivalry and polite patience that existed before 1982 is long gone. Since then, it seems that when an IT chief tells top management that a major system implementation will be delayed or some other problem has developed, they are simply fired. This seems to happen about every eighteen to thirty-six months on average.
- The words "compatible" and "upgradeable" should be removed from the English language. They have been sorely abused in the computing world.

So here we are. You are about to receive a very attractive job offer. What do you do to determine whether you want it?

- Ask the hiring executive to explain the departure(s) of previous incumbents. If each of them was fired for poor performance, try to learn as many of the details as

you are able. Did the people fail to perform or did top management have unrealistic expectations?

- Ask top management to list the specific, business-critical, deadline-driven, actionable and measurable accomplishments that you must achieve in order for you to be successful at your job. More detail is better.
- Be certain in your own mind that you can accomplish these tasks. You should allow for some stretch of your abilities to deal with new areas. You must also factor in some of your time to deal with unpleasant and urgent surprises.
- Avoid accepting any offer until you can do this diligence. I have seen many IT executives who have been terminated from their previous two or three jobs. Mergers and top management changes with their political fallout are inevitable. On the other hand, I have seen some very capable IT executives who in a few cases, have survived such turbulence simply because they knew what they had to do and how to do it well. Excellence and competence can transcend politics on occasion.
- Consider the potential damage to your career if you fail to do this detective work. You may be frustrated now by extended unemployment, but a decision made in haste could beach you again in the next six to twelve months. Do you want to face this same agony again so soon?

So you have accepted the job. What do you do now?

- Don't make promises you can't keep. Consider as many angles as possible before promising to deliver. Your job is to bring order from chaos and streamline business processes. Have a clear understanding of all the issues.
- Learn how to sell expectations to your customers in their language. This can be very valuable when your people have to solve their technology problems.
- Be sure that you are expert in the business issues of your new company or that you can achieve this status in short order.
- Make your customer feel that you and your department will do your utmost to solve their problems. Nothing will damage your reputation faster than a lack of urgency or attention to detail. As a newly hired executive, you are taking control of previously unknown employees. Let them know from the outset that you expect them to provide the best and most rapid possible service to all customers at all times. Deal with them firmly and swiftly when they don't. Everyone else will get the message.
- I have said in previous newsletters that trust is the key concept in hiring. Many executives begin to fail when they allow this bond of trust to be broken.

You are walking in with a clean slate. No one has any bad memories about you. Do your best to keep it that way.

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