

Taming the Technology Tidal Wave

Practical Career Advice for
IT Professionals

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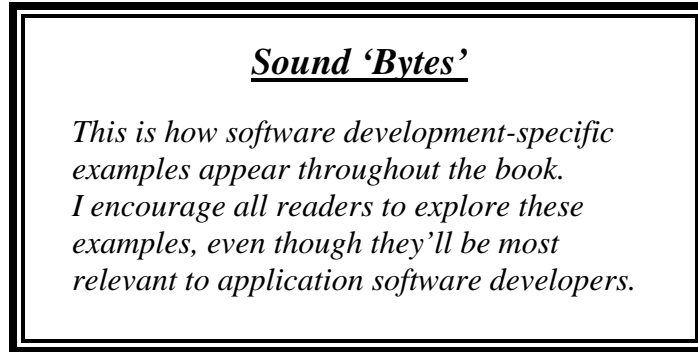
A NOTE TO MY READERS

A*re you an IT professional?* That is, does your career success, if not your very career *survival*, depend on maintaining leading-edge skills in a particular information technology discipline? If so, and you've been at it for more than just a year or two, you already know all too well how difficult – not to mention *stressful* – this can be.

As a practicing software engineer since 1978, I've faced the challenge of keeping my skills sharpened for over 25 years. I've had to reinvent myself time and time again, as the technology 'rug' was pulled out from under me. In the process, I've learned a tremendous amount about surviving in a fast-paced IT career.

My goal in writing this book is to share my lessons learned with other IT professionals, in the hope that it will make your career journey smoother. My particular area of expertise is application software design and development, and so I feature software-specific examples, where appropriate, in

set off boxes with the heading *Sound 'Bytes'*, as shown below.



I'd love to hear your suggestions on how this book can be improved in future editions. Please see the **Audience Participation Wanted!** section at the end of the book for more details. I also invite you to visit my website:

<http://techtidalwave.com>

for information about the entire Technology Tidal Wave series of books and seminars.

I hope you enjoy my book!

Best regards,

Jacquie

HELP! I'M DROWNING!!!



Are unread trade journals piling up on your desk? Are buzzwords buzzing like annoying, unintelligible gnats around your head? Are you getting invitations to seminars on important new technologies that you suspect you should be learning about, but that you've *never even heard of before*? Are you, to put it bluntly, **UTTERLY OVERWHELMED???**

If so, you're not alone! If you're a 'techie' like me – someone whose professional livelihood depends on being proficient with some aspect of information technology – then you probably spend a great deal of time feeling overwhelmed. In fact,

virtually *everyone* whose career depends on staying ‘technology savvy’ is feeling overwhelmed these days, and for good reason: technological advances are happening so fast and furiously that it’s seemingly *impossible* to keep up with them! Between the late 1970s, when I got my start as a software engineer, and today, I’ve seen the rate of technology change go from a trickle, to a squirt gun, to a garden hose, to a fire hose, and ultimately to a **TIDAL WAVE!!!**

I reminisce about the good old days – early in my career as a software engineer – when I enjoyed the luxury of spending several years applying a new technology in order to really master it. Now, it seems that I barely have time to learn even the *basics* about a new technology ‘X’ before an even *newer* technology ‘Y’ comes along to render ‘X’ *obsolete!*

Sound ‘Bytes’

In the mid 90s, I was struggling to master a technology for creating graphical user interfaces (GUIs) for software applications called X Windows/Motif.

(continued)

I had been tasked with maintaining someone else's Motif-based application. Since I had no prior experience or training in Motif whatsoever, I spent as much time as possible over the next year involved in Motif self-study, primarily through reading books and occasionally getting advice from my more experienced peers.

*I was **delighted** when my manager agreed to send me to formal Motif training a year and a half after I had begun to work with it in ad-hoc fashion. Finally, I was going to learn how to do Motif the **right** way!*

On the first day of training, our instructor began by making the observation that 'Motif [was] a dying technology', and asked students to raise their hands if their organizations were still undertaking new development with Motif. I was amazed that, of the 16 students in the classroom, 12 raised their hands.

*Needless to say, I was terribly dismayed that a technology that I had struggled for almost two years to master as of that point was **yesterday's news!***

It's hard enough to *stay* caught up, even when we make doing so a priority in our career; but, to further complicate matters, many of us are in the unfortunate position of having already *fallen far behind* in our chosen fields, despite our best intentions. This can happen in a variety of ways:

- Perhaps we've been entrenched in a long-term project of several years' duration. The technologies chosen for the project may have been leading edge at the time that the project was launched, but are no longer so. While we're focused wholly on the project and the technologies that it involves –honing our skills in those technologies while disregarding others – our expertise, in essence, gets frozen in time.
- Perhaps we work for an organization that, as a whole, is falling behind the technology curve. Organizations invest in technology in a variety of ways: by purchasing tools and establishing infrastructure; by training personnel; by instituting standards and adopting methodologies. Such investments are costly, and once made, can't be casually cast aside.

We may not even *know* this is happening, because the colleagues that we interact with on a daily basis are all caught in the same trap – all

are blinded to the fact that the world is marching on and leaving our organization behind.

- Perhaps we took a few years off from our career to start a family. We consciously and carefully placed our technical skills on a shelf, fully intending to simply pick them back up, lightly dust them off, and put them back to good use a few years down the road. Unfortunately, when we were finally ready to do so, we discovered that they'd rusted almost beyond use, like neglected garden tools left out in the rain.
- Perhaps we were in the unfortunate position of having been downsized, and in order to make ends meet, took a non-technical position for what we hoped would be only a temporary period, but which may have stretched out a year or two (or even longer).
- Perhaps we were promoted into a management position, and despite our solemn vow to remain technically 'hands on', found that our new responsibilities left no time for technical pursuits.

No matter which of these circumstances has occurred, the outcome is the same: we lose our technical edge and, with it, our confidence. We start to dig ourselves into a little hole, like a hermit crab: wanting to be left alone, and hoping desperately that the skills we have today will carry us through the remainder of our career. This might work for someone who is within a few years of retirement, but for the vast majority of us, it spells **C-A-R-E-E-R S-U-I-C-I-D-E**.

Then, there's the hazard of **burn-out**. Even if you've been disciplined about staying current, you may feel that you've become a slave to, instead of an admirer of, technology. Rather than **thriving** on learning the latest technology developments, you **resent** having to do so. Your technical career, once a joy, has become a burden.

What are we to do???

- We certainly can't stop the ever-accelerating pace with which technology is advancing.
- It's not humanly possible to try to learn every new 'technology du jour' in our chosen area of specialization; nor should we even try, because many are merely passing fads.

- Neither can we afford to ignore the problem, hoping that it'll go away, because it simply **won't**.

What we **can** do is to learn strategies for how to **cope** with this onslaught of new technologies, so that no matter how rapidly technological change occurs, we're able to save ourselves from drowning by:

- **Identifying which emerging technologies are worth paying attention to** and, just as important, the appropriate time to dive into each one;
- **Utilizing creative, inexpensive ways to master these technologies;**
- **Leveraging the skills that we already possess** to help us move into roles where we'll gain on-the-job exposure to these technologies;
- **Recognizing – and avoiding – pitfalls** that could otherwise lead us off track in our career;
- Above all, staying calm – and having **fun** – while we're at it!

Such strategies, once mastered, should last us a lifetime, because while technology may be constantly changing, the ways we should approach learning these technologies do *not* change. And that is precisely what this book is all about: presenting strategies for staying current that have worked for me throughout my 25+ year career, and for countless other technical professionals that I've advised over the years in my roles as manager, colleague, teacher, and friend.

A TALE OF TWO TECHIES

This is the story of two technical professionals, Maureen and Terri. Friends in college, both Maureen and Terri majored in computer science, and both started out their careers as software engineers with CoolTech Corporation when they graduated in 1996. As we'll soon see, however, Maureen and Terri took decidedly different paths in their respective IT careers.

MAUREEN'S STORY

Maureen loved to be involved in hands-on software development, but was both delighted and flattered when she was offered a promotion into management early in her career. Encouraged by family and friends, she accepted the promotion without blinking an eye.

As the Manager of Technical Support for CoolTech Corporation, Maureen spends most of her time in meetings.

- With her management, discussing revenue projections and budgets for her department;
- With her employees, inquiring about the status of their current assignments or conducting performance reviews and coaching sessions;
- With her clients, talking about billing matters or their level of satisfaction with a recently completed project that her team has delivered.

When Maureen isn't in meetings, she's hunched over her keyboard; but, she's not doing fun, 'techie' sorts of things. Instead, when she's at her computer, she's typically crafting a monthly status report, or a proposal for technical services for a new client, or a performance review for one of the dozen or so techies who work for her.

The inbox on her desk is overflowing, as is her email inbox. As she quickly spins through her mail, she tosses one technical seminar/conference invitation after another into the trash. While she wishes she could afford the time to stay in touch with the technology that she was so passionate about just a few years back, there simply isn't time.

Maureen's last attempt to stay technically hands on was with the Colossus project that her team was responsible for a few years back.

- As the project's manager, she had naively tried to assign herself a key technical role on the project so as to give herself an opportunity (make that an *excuse!*) to stay current with technology.
- Unfortunately, her technical assignment kept falling to the bottom of her to-do list as compared with the more pressing management issues that she was constantly being bombarded with.
- She ultimately wound up admitting defeat, handing her technical assignment off to someone else on her project team with deep regrets.

Maureen envies the techies who work for her ... and wonders how she ever got so far away from being a techie herself.

TERRI'S STORY

Terri is a lead Java application software architect for CoolTech. Early in her career, Terri politely declined a similar offer to Maureen's for a fast-track management position because she wanted to stay full engaged in doing technical work.

Unlike Maureen, Terri's typical day is spent doing something that she *loves* to do: designing and programming application software solutions for their many clients. The only meetings that Terri typically attends are technology oriented:

- With her clients, to discuss their requirements for the software that she is building for them, or to demonstrate how an in-progress application is coming along; or
- With her colleagues, to collaborate on design approaches, or to share lessons learned about the latest tools and technologies.

Terri is adept at staying up-to-date regarding new developments in her chosen technology specialty – object oriented programming – and is looked upon by her colleagues as someone to turn to for guidance. Her managers also respect and seek

her advice on which emerging technologies CoolTech Corporation should be investing their financial and human resources in.

Terri takes advantage of a wide variety of continuing education channels – some formal, some informal – to stay abreast of developments in her field. And, because her managers value her contributions as a technology advisor to clients and colleagues alike, they support her in pursuing such training. Training budgets are often tight, and so her managers can't always afford to send her to formal vendor courses that might cost thousands of dollars. Fortunately, Terri has many creative ideas for how to become savvy in a new technology that don't require major investments of money.

Terri's role not only affords her the opportunity to stay current in her field of technology, it ***requires*** her to stay current – a responsibility that she gladly assumes!

My Story (Subtitle: There's Hope for You, Too!)

The truth of the matter is that both Maureen (the manager) and Terri (the techie) in the stories above are descriptions of *me* at two different points in my career ... but, contrary to what you might assume, Maureen is the 'before' version of me, and Terri is the '*after*' version!

- 'Maureen' is a perfect description of my role as a technical services manager for a major computer manufacturer in the mid to late 80s. I was hands off as far as technology was concerned for almost 10 years, and thus fell behind by *several* generations of technology.

Sound 'Bytes'

*During the early to mid 80s, while I was buried under managerial paperwork, computer technology blasted off! The following technologies all got launched in a big way during my hands-off period as a manager: relational databases; graphical user interfaces; personal computers; even email! Needless to say, I had a **lot** to get caught up on!*

- ‘Terri’ represents me today, as lead Java architect and object technology mentor for a major Government client, and author of a best-selling object technology/Java book.

As you might imagine, it took me many years of dedicated focus and a lot of hard work to reinvent myself as a technical professional. I was truly a worst case scenario, though: I had neglected my technical skills for so many years that I was like a massively overweight couch potato trying to become a healthy athlete once again! Through my efforts, I learned a tremendous amount about:

- What it takes to stay on top technically;
- The hazards to doing so, and their warning signs;
- What sorts of ‘mid course corrections’ to make before it is too late; and,
- Worst case, what to do to recover if you’ve taken a wrong turn in your career.

I’ve distilled these hard-won lessons into 30 techie career tips, and the remainder of this book is devoted to sharing these with you.