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FOREWORD BY ROCKFORD LHOTKA



THE NOMADIC DEVELOPER



Surviving and Thriving in the
World of Technology Consulting

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FOREWORD

THIS IS THE type of book I wish I'd had in 1995. That was the year I left a comfortable, though frustrating, IT role and started work for a consulting company with no idea what I was getting into. Looking back on it, I made the right decision, but there were days when I really wondered what I'd done!

I became a consultant in the seventh year of my career. By that time, I'd worked as a programmer for a small ISV, and I'd worked in IT for a biomedical manufacturing company. But I was really quite naïve. I had no idea about all the different types of consulting companies. And having worked for only two companies, I had relatively little experience with different corporate cultures, various management styles, or what the real possibilities were within the computer industry.

In some ways, times were different then. The Internet as we know it would start to come into being two to three years later, and I still believed in quaint concepts like “if you do a great job, your employer will take care of you.” So I didn't directly subscribe to trade magazines or other sources of industry information, and my employer carefully ensured that such magazines weren't lying around for the IT staff to read. I now know the reason was to minimize the chance of the staff (including me) seeing the salary survey issues and the articles about how the industry was changing and opportunities were rising.



But in many ways, times aren't all that different. In my current role, I get to interact with many developers from around the world.

I left the biomedical manufacturing company because I'd worked my way into a leadership role. I was the manager of application development, and that meant I did a lot of managing and virtually no development. The lesson I learned from this role, above all others, is that I love development a lot more than I love managing people. So I looked for another job and considered several options.

I interviewed at a couple of other traditional companies, looking for IT programmer roles. It became pretty clear to me that I'd end up doing much the same thing I was already doing, just for some other type of company. Or I'd take a pay cut to go back to being a developer (instead of a manager of developers), and I had a hard time getting excited about that! Of course, doing the same thing under a different roof seemed kind of silly, so I couldn't get too excited about any of these possibilities.

Based on those experiences, I branched out and talked to a "recruiter" from a consulting company. Today I know that it is a body shop and that the "recruiter" was actually one of the salespeople. He was one of those people who come across as being oily, to the point that you want to wash your hand after shaking his. Trying to get a straight answer out of the guy was a serious challenge.

My wife and I had a new baby, so stability and benefits were quite important to us. As I pried information out of this guy, I found that the company's business model offered no security and nearly no benefits. Really, it offered the same kind of arrangement as any clerical or manufacturing temp agency, but for IT professionals. The guy was motivated by getting people hired and sold as efficiently as possible. I don't think he really had much concern for me and my worries, and he wanted me to just say "yes" and get billing so he could make his commission.

I'm not saying that the body shop approach is a universally bad business model, but it isn't a good fit for someone new to consulting, someone who has a new baby and really needs a level of guaranteed income, health insurance, and other benefits. To this day, I'm glad I passed on that opportunity.

I also talked to recruiters for a couple other consulting firms. Both offered full-time employment, benefits, and what seemed like stability. One of them came across as warm and welcoming, the other cold and perhaps overly professional. You can probably guess which one I chose.

My point thus far is that the content of this book would have been invaluable to me. By spelling out the types of consulting organizations out there, the way their business models work, and how they interact with consultants and clients, the book would have saved me from learning all this the hard way.

Now back to my story. Before I even started working for my new employer, a warm and welcoming salesperson bought me breakfast and introduced me to my first gig: a development project using technologies I vaguely knew at a client that was more than 90 miles from my home.

Remember, I hadn't even started. No meeting with HR, no training, no orientation, just a sales guy telling me I was going to spend three to five hours a day in my car. I really started to wonder whether I'd made a horribly bad decision in leaving my previous job!

The gig turned out to involve building a VB 3.0 application to run on OS/2, using a DB2 database. I spent most of my time learning that the IBM "red book" documentation was nowhere near as nice or complete as the DEC VAX "Orange Wall" or Microsoft's new MSDN idea. Just trying to get these technologies to interact at all was a far bigger challenge than any of the actual development work. But it was interesting, and I learned a lot (about the value of decent documentation, if nothing else).

Fortunately, that gig lasted only about three months. Between working nine- and ten-hour days and driving four hours on a typical day, I was starting to see that this type of work would have a high cost on my family life. My next gig was just a 20-minute drive each way, which was the shortest commute I've ever had as a consultant.

I worked at several other clients over the next few years, each one offering something interesting and new. Sometimes it was interesting technology; other times the work was interesting because of the business itself. I worked in many industries, including medical, financial, manufacturing, and agricultural.



This is the kind of breadth that's virtually impossible to achieve outside consulting. The ability to see so many industries, so many management styles, so many corporate cultures—that's invaluable.

Years ago, when I was working in IT, my boss said he thought it was nearly impossible for IT leaders to be really good unless they had spent some time in consulting. I think he was probably right.

I've consulted for companies where I would never be an employee, due to their corrosive culture or management styles. I've consulted for companies I would absolutely work for because they are well run, respectful of their employees, and all-around very impressive organizations.

This, to me, is the primary upside of being a consultant. It is a nomadic lifestyle and is not for someone who likes consistency, predictability, or stability. Nor is it good for anyone who can't handle long hours, long commutes, and sometimes unpleasant clients.

But being a consultant is a great life for people who want varied experiences, especially around business, industry, and culture. And it is a way to stay highly technical and still make a reasonable income doing what you love.

—Rocky Lhotka
Eden Prairie, Minnesota
February 2009

PREFACE

Sorry, I beg to differ—Information Technology does matter!

—My response to Nicholas G. Carr’s seminal Harvard Business Review article, “IT Doesn’t Matter”

Technology work—making companies, governments, and other organizations leverage information to work more effectively and reach more markets—is one of the most exciting places in which to scratch out a living. In one day, a really good practicing doctor might deliver a couple dozen babies. A technology practitioner, on the other hand, might write an algorithm that matches advertisements to searches that leads to billions of dollars of profits (and with these profits, jobs for tens of thousands of people) for not only the company that employed the developer who wrote the algorithm, but thousands of other companies that are smart enough to leverage the service of the company that employs the developer who wrote the algorithm. Although certainly not an accomplishment on the scale of delivering life, creating that much economic value and productivity—enough to feed an entire small nation—is certainly a significant contribution to society!

To put it another way, there is nothing more powerful or potentially game changing (and sometimes, more *disruptive*) than information technology in the hands of smart, innovative, and disciplined people. There are examples we are



familiar with as consumers—everything from email to calendars to tools to manage budgets like MS Money and Quicken. They are just the tip of the iceberg, though; most large companies use some sort of technology to do everything from understanding their customers, trading securities, balancing the books, performing medical diagnoses, underwriting insurance, controlling spacecraft, controlling your car, designing energy-efficient power grids, and doing dozens upon dozens of other things that companies—not to mention, society at large—literally depend on every single day.

In other words, technology touches, in some way, shape, or form, almost every decision, every action, and every strategy a modern enterprise might undertake. A good friend of mine, technology strategy consultant Michael Hugos, has an expression: “Technology, by automating the routine, allows knowledge workers to concentrate on the exceptional conditions, leading to a more responsive, more capable enterprise.” From that standpoint, it is hard to see any company on the face of the earth that could not be made better and more efficient through the use of technology. The only limiting factor becomes the limits of creativity (finding solutions), the limits of our expertise, and the limits of our discipline (developing solutions).

Of course, with respect to Mr. Carr and his assertion regarding information technology in the May 2003 issue of *Harvard Business Review*, he is almost right: Information technology devoid of people doesn’t matter. What does matter is innovative *application* of information technology by people, which is the entire point of the business of technology consulting.



Creativity, Expertise, and Discipline

The three elements that really need to be mixed to create useful technology solutions are, ironically enough, hardly about technology at all. Technology is just a mechanism by which these three primary elements—creativity, expertise, and discipline, which exist in *people*—can be transformed into business results.



Of course, these three elements are really the keys to being successful anywhere. The issue really is that, in the context of a company, being good at all three is hard because they apply to all things. A car company can typically have creativity and expertise as it relates to building cars because that is where the company's investment and passion are. The same is true for most other areas of expertise, including technology. The reason we have technology consulting companies is so that we can create a community of technology professionals dedicated to using their creativity, expertise, and discipline to produce great technology solutions for clients. Having such a community of professionals, where success of the community is not dependent on success of something they don't directly control (as it would be in a car company because a car company sells cars, not technology), is the chief reason why technology consulting companies exist.



What This Book Is About

This book is about technology consulting companies and how a technology professional might be successful working for one. It is the collected wisdom drawn from not just my own mistakes (which are legion), but mistakes of others who have been kind enough to share their experiences in this book as well (their insights appear as shaded sidebars embedded in the text). Of course, you can't have a careers book without a happy ending, so we talk about and celebrate successes alongside our failures. But as everyone knows after a few years, failure is frequently a much better teacher than success!

Consider this book something of a career guide that maps out how most firms work, covers the kinds of employers to avoid, and provides some sample career paths beyond the career paths you would normally think about in a technology company. I have aimed to provide a good mixture of advice and realism, mixed with a bit of inspiration and unconventional advice, so you don't confuse this book with something that might be written by one of those folks you watch during 3 a.m. infomercials when you have job-worry insomnia and someone is telling you "Rah, rah, power of positive thinking."



Why I Wrote This Book

Technology consulting is a business that globally employs well over three million people. To put it in perspective, more than 1 in every 2,000 humans alive today work in technology consulting. If all the world's technology consultants lived in one city, it would have a population roughly on par with the city where I live and work, Chicago, Illinois. I would add that such a mystical city would be a great place indeed—if you could get past all the pizza and Mountain Dew consumed there. (Hey, let's admit it, some stereotypes are true!)

To put it another way, although definitive numbers are hard to find, the quantity of technology consultants and technology service professionals is comparable with that of many major professions such as accounting or law. However, although there are many books on how to run a law practice, how to advance in a law practice, not to mention television dramas and movies about the practice of law, and so forth, there are not many books on how a technology services practice is run.

The evidence of this, of course, is that because there is such a dearth of information, many people come into this business unprepared. To the budding technologist who finds himself or herself in the technology consulting business by accident, not understanding how a firm works can lead him or her to not only being taken advantage of, but to making scary career-limiting moves. For example, a firm might say, "We think consultants should rotate to new clients every nine months." A consultant who is unaware of the real pitfalls of the business might request to be moved off a less-than-perfect client nine months into a project during a recession. This might lead to the request being granted but also leads to a layoff a few weeks later, when that person is sitting on the bench.

I know this because I, as a consultant, have made that mistake and many others. And I have friends and colleagues who have done the same.

Of course, the other main reason I wrote this book was, to be blunt, that as this book goes to press in 2009, there is a certain urgency and need for relevant career advice. Although economics is called “the dismal science” for a reason—one of which is the difficulty in predicting what will happen even with the best information—it’s important to have a conversation about the skills necessary to survive a downturn in the economy.



Who This Book Is For

This book is designed for

- Currently practicing technology consultants
- Students entering the field of technology who are considering consulting as an option
- People who work in technology for a “brick-and-mortar” (that is, nontechnology) company, who are considering switching to technology
- Spouses of people in technology consulting, so they know what is driving their spouse nuts
- Managers or owners of technology consulting firms who want to improve their companies
- People with idle curiosity on the topic

Note that I am a software developer by trade, and some of the advice will seem suited toward that particular sector of the technology consulting business. That said, most of the advice can be translated easily to other areas of technology consulting, whether it is interaction design, infrastructure consulting, database consulting, product implementation, or the dozens of areas adjacent to software development consulting—the area where I live and breathe on a day-to-day basis as a practicing consultant myself.



How to Read This Book

You can be thankful that this book is not like a novel, a la *Lord of the Rings*, where you will have no clue about what is going on if you don't read Chapter 6. You can read most of the chapters in this book independently.

Chapter 1, "Why Consulting?," provides you with a deeper understanding of why this industry exists and why you might consider working as a consultant. It is oriented toward those who might be considering technology consulting: people who have recently entered consulting and suddenly are having some sort of identity crisis or who otherwise want to understand the ontology of "why do I exist?" (in the occupational sense, not the "I think; therefore I am" sense).

Chapter 2, "The Seven Deadly Firms," helps you understand some of the traps, pitfalls, and other problems you might encounter when looking at some of the more unscrupulous players in the technology consulting marketplace. The chapter defines a set of consulting "anti-patterns"; that is, common types of firms that, frankly, you should either avoid entirely or at least join with an understanding of exactly what you are getting yourself into. It is important to understand that although this chapter demonstrates a good number of these anti-patterns, the percentage of consulting firms that represent one or more of these patterns is less than 10 percent—a significant number to be sure, but not so high that it would bring the entire business model into question.

Chapter 3, "How Technology Consulting Firms Work," gets to much more practical matters, explaining the details on how consulting firms work. Although independent consultants, consultants at small consulting firms, and consultants at large consulting firms may have slightly different nuances on these concepts, the general principles of utilization, backlog, revenue, and margin tend to hold, regardless of size. The purpose of this chapter is to explain these mechanics so that everyone who wants to know can understand how these concepts work.

Chapter 4, "Getting In: Ten Unstated Traits That Technology Consulting Firms Look For," helps you understand what kinds of people consulting firms



look for and, thus, how to break into this business. The chapter is all about practical tips for how to not only break into technology, but to specifically break into consulting. If you are looking for interview tips, this is probably the chapter to turn to.

Chapter 5, “What You Need to Ask Before You Join a Technology Consulting Firm,” is also about preparation for consulting, but with a different twist: It specifically prepares you to ask the questions you need to ask before you join. Yes, you are in charge of your own destiny! You need to prepare not only for interviews but, because this is a two-way street, actually working there! You need to always interview your employer, and the goal of Chapter 5 is to help in that endeavor.

Chapter 6, “Surviving,” is a timely piece for those who will work in consulting through a recession, which ironically, at the time of publication (2009), happens to be right now. The point of consulting is not just to survive, but to thrive. However, getting to that thriving part depends on surviving, and therefore, Chapter 6 presents a set of principles that helps you accomplish survival, even during challenging economic times.

Chapter 7, “Thriving,” is about specific strategies for advancing your career. It puts forth a foundation for understanding what separates mere survival (“I managed to get food for *this* winter”) from thriving (“I built a machine that makes me never have to worry about food again”). The goal of this chapter is to put forth the mindset of most of the consultants who achieve high levels of success.

Chapter 8, “Your Career Path,” describes the specific career paths that many consultants tend to take. Nobody starts out as an independent, CEO, or guru, but there are paths that various people have taken; and who knows, maybe the trails they blazed will work for you, too. (Yes, we know Bill Gates and perhaps a few others were exceptions here, but chances are they won’t read this book!)

Chapter 9, “Avoiding Career-Limiting Moves,” defines various career-limiting moves that, I hope, you will avoid after reading this chapter, whether you choose to work in consulting or any other field. This chapter describes a mix of well-known issues (such as “don’t date coworkers”) with more technology-oriented advice (such as “no gold-plating”).



After spending nine chapters talking about the mostly good points of consulting as a career, I owed you one that tries to talk you out of it. That is the point of Chapter 10, “Is Consulting Right for You?” It explains why you might want to *not* consider consulting as a career. I am the first to admit that this lifestyle isn’t for everyone, and this chapter explains various reasons why you would *not* want to be a technology consultant.

Chapter 11, “An Anthology of Sage Advice,” is an anthology of essays from experienced technology consultants who work in a variety of settings, in companies with a staff of one to a staff of several thousand. If you get bored reading my material, I encourage you to turn to the stories in Chapter 11, which easily provide as much wisdom on any single page as I could ever provide.

Last, I provide two appendixes: Appendix A, “Consultopia: The Ideal Consulting Firm,” is a work in the broader tradition of utopian writing—my own vision of the perfect consulting company. Note that this essay explains my own views on matters related to consulting and economics, so you should take it for what it is worth: the opinions of a humble technologist about matters that are probably beyond his normal area of expertise. That said, I think what I have accomplished in the appendix is thought-provoking as one of many possible goals we could try to reach as an industry. If you have goals in your own career that stretch beyond simply making money, I encourage you to take a careful look at some of the ideas in this appendix.

Appendix B, “A Consulting Lexicon,” is more about fun—a somewhat snarky guide to jargon you might hear as a consultant. Again note that, like a lot of things in this book, it is informed by my own experiences and prejudice (much like most writing is, for the record). It is inspired by the work of Eric S. Raymond and his work with the Jargon file, a work I read during my own formative years as a software professional. For years as a consultant, I dreamed about writing such a thing specific to consulting—a feat that Appendix B represents. I hope I have accomplished even a tiny fraction of what Mr. Raymond did.



Authenticity

If anything, I have worked to write a book that provides good advice to consultants. As you read this book from start-to-finish, I fully expect you might find yourself with at least mixed feelings about consulting.

That, of course, is by design. I am a big fan of critical thinking. As a consultant, I want my colleagues to understand what they are getting into, what they should expect, and what they should not expect. I want you to know the good, the bad, and the ugly. This book gives you all three. Make no mistake; this is a great way to make a living. But it is no picnic, either. Frankly, neither is any other occupation. Ask an editor, teacher, firefighter, nurse, or CEO on Wall Street (okay, scratch the last one)—no job is really a pure path of bliss and happiness.

In other words, in the spirit of transparency (a big value of mine) when you read this book, expect to have mixed feelings from time to time. Some chapters spend more time talking you out of consulting than talking you into it. Indeed, my goal is to help you *learn* about consulting so that you can make good decisions about it. I happen to believe that, after the evidence is in, there is a good case for being a consultant, but ultimately, I would tell anyone that the decision to consult or not is a decision you need to make on your own, based on your own circumstances, goals, and aspirations.

Whether or not consulting is the path you choose, I hope you enjoy this book.



SURVIVING

Keep your sanity and avoid living in fear when tough economic times inevitably occur.

Like clockwork, the economy will go through boom and bust cycles. Many people fondly remember the dot-com bubble—and not so fondly remember the dot-com bust that followed it. In Silicon Valley, you even see bumper stickers such as, “Pray for Another Bubble.” Hope is well and good, but it isn’t the best career strategy if you want to have some semblance of sanity when the news media is pounding fear into your head via dreary economic prognostication headlines day in and day out.

This chapter provides specific strategies for keeping your position as a technology consultant, even when times are bad. Although there are no guarantees in life—you could perfectly apply all these techniques and still be laid off—it does not hurt to do everything you can to maximize your chances of getting through the downturn with your job and career intact.



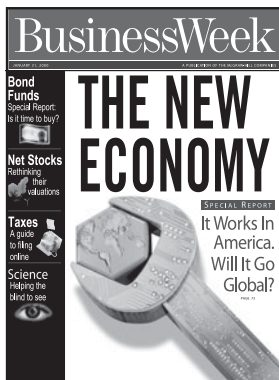
Reality Check: Avoid Fear and Greed

There will be times in your career—particularly as a highly coveted technology professional—when you feel invincible. When times are good, recruiters



are calling you every week, and it feels as though the wind is at your back. It is easy to assume the good times will last forever. For a time, in the late 1990s and the first three months of 2000, such thoughts were helped by numerous magazines telling us that there was a new economy, centered on the Internet, created by software developers. This “new economy” would be impervious to the economic cycle, and the world had changed forever.

In 2000, we went from a wild sense of enthusiasm in the first three months of the year, until the dot-com bubble crashed, at which point the enthusiasm quickly turned into a sense of doom (see Figure 6-1).



January 2000



February 2000



April 2000



May 2000

Figure 6-1 From boom to bust in six months.

If you let your sense of how the world was doing be controlled by the cover stories in the business press, you went from a sense of wild enthusiasm—a world where software people would be hailed as masters of the universe—to a sense of total doom—where it would be hard for competent software developers to find work flipping burgers. For most people, the story all seems very overblown, in both directions, thinking about it in hindsight. The world of technology did not become a utopia during the boom, nor did the sun stop coming up in the morning during the bust.

We humans have a tendency to romanticize the good times in the past and demonize the bad times that, as we read from the business press, will occur in the future. The sober reality is that the truth is neither: The good times are probably not as good as we remember, and the bad times will almost certainly not be as bad as we fear.

Surviving in the technology consulting business requires making good career decisions. If you assume that every upcoming bump in the road is going to be the ruin of the company you work for, you will likely put yourself in a worse position by possibly jumping ship and leaving perfectly good consulting companies for jobs that might appear to be stable but really are no more secure, and often substantially less secure, than jobs in consulting. Making good career decisions depends on not overreacting to the news and getting jittery when headlines are making it seem as if the world is in imminent danger of ending. It means not succumbing to the fear and greed that recruiters and others will try to use to take advantage of you.

Survival Strategy #1: Avoid making decisions from a place of fear or greed. You really do have nothing to fear but fear itself.

The consequences of fear, in particular, go beyond leaving a company too early. When software developers are operating from a place of fear, they cease to communicate bad news to the project manager, thinking that being the bearer of bad news will lead to being removed from an engagement. This leads to project managers, who might be operating from fear themselves, not communicating bad news to the project sponsor. This leads to the sponsor miscommunicating to his or her board, or worse, to his or her customers. This, of course, leads to something worth fearing: a client potentially failing because of



fear. It should not be a surprise that fear—and the poor decision making that results from fear—kills more technology consulting companies than recessions do.

In this respect, surviving means using your head, not your heart, to evaluate your current and future prospects. When times are good, it means moderating your prospects and being realistic with yourself. And when times are bad, it means working hard and doing things to increase your marketability, but still continuing to think of both the short-term and long-term implications of your actions.



People Who Create Profit Don't Get Fired

It can be said with certainty that if you are a billing consultant on a long-term project, you will probably keep your job ... as long as you keep billing. Now, this doesn't mean the converse is true: You are probably going to be fired as soon as you hit the bench. However, it certainly means that recessions are not the best time to start complaining about the lack of a nice window with a view at your client's facility.

In fact, your company can go bankrupt, but if you are still on a billing contract, you will almost certainly have a job with a firm that acquires the "assets," that is, billing engagements, of the bankrupt company. During the dot-com crash, many technology consulting companies that were servicing venture-funded companies either got sold in fire sales or filed Chapter 11, "An Anthology of Sage Advice." Groups within those companies that constituted billing teams of consultants were traded like baseball cards between various private equity groups until a more permanent buyer, usually a larger firm, bought up the billing consultants. Although this is certainly not a terribly fun scenario for the participants, if nothing else, it provided secure employment as long as the billing continued.

Survival Strategy #2: Consultants who create profit don't get fired. Do everything you can to be the go-to person that your client depends on. Getting extended at a client during a recession is never a bad thing.

That all said, such a scenario is really the worst case. Many consultancies go flat during recessions, and some get acquired. But most good ones manage to stick it out and use the recession as a mechanism to “clean house”—that is, allow some attrition from lower performers and upgrade the talent level of the company. Your chances of survival have more to do with the perception you help create; you therefore should do everything you can to be so valuable to your client that you can stay there throughout the recession. Although such conditions are not entirely under your control—clients can go bankrupt, or orders can come from the CEO to get rid of all consultants—doing everything you can to be “sticky” helps create confidence in management that regardless of what client you are working with, you will likely continue to bill and have high utilization. Being a highly utilized consultant, even during the majority of a recession, is a great way to increase the likelihood that you will survive a recession without layoffs whatsoever.

So what are some specific ways to be sticky? Although these approaches might not seem fair, being sticky is more than just doing good technical work. Stickiness has the following dimensions:

- **Trust:** Have the trust of your client. Of all the factors, this is probably the most significant.
- **Identification:** Culturally identify with your client. If you seem like “one of them,” the client is more likely to not see you as an outsider and therefore dispensable.
- **Skills:** Have specific skills the client needs. This is about continuing to build skills *relevant to your client*, not hoarding and protecting knowledge to protect your job. Doing the former puts you ahead of over half the people who work in technology and therefore increases your sense of value.
- **Low Maintenance:** Don’t be “a problem.” Although there are as many valid reasons to complain about things that are not perfect, unless a situation is serious, the less you are seen as high maintenance, the less likely some people will see losing you as a



consultant as a way to reduce their own work (the “don’t be a pain in the rear” rule).

It is no accident that these are also good things to do simultaneously in reference to the firm you work for. When times are tough, being the person who doesn’t act from a place of fear, but rather moves forward, builds skills, anticipates needs, and delivers value is a sure path to survive any economic downturn.



Rainmakers Are Always Welcome

Over your years as a technical consultant, if you are doing a good job, you will develop relationships with clients. While being a salesperson is not technically in your job description, it is quite the understatement that it never hurts when consultants can start to help bring potential leads to the table, providing material that, with the help of the sales team, can result in opportunity not just for yourself, but your colleagues in the company.

Put another way, one of the best ways to be a hero in a consulting company is to bring a good lead to the table that results in billing work during a drought—or at least helping others who do. Being the person who brings the water to the caravan stuck in the desert is one of the most significant accomplishments you can do for yourself and your colleagues. So how do you go about this?

Derik Whittaker During the dot-com bust, my team was able to work with our client to take on a new project with our firm when we were able to identify a few very significant efficiency issues with one of the client’s products. This allowed our firm to provide additional resources to a new, albeit short-term, project which helped the company and made our entire team look good in the eyes of our company.

If you are in the middle of a recession, reaching out to long-lost clients you worked with five years ago might be a valiant effort, but it is probably not going to be terribly effective. To do this really well, you have to think like an account executive, even if you are not. During the good times, you need to establish a Rolodex of people you have enjoyed working for and with and regularly keep in touch with them, checking in once every three months on a friendly basis to see what is up with them personally and professionally. There are two things that are almost always true with people:

- People love to talk about what is going on with their lives.
- People love a free lunch or cup of coffee.

If you have genuine interest in keeping up—or can at least do a very good job of trying—there is a good chance you may be alerted to opportunities for your company without trying too hard. The secret weapon the technical person has over the salesperson is that people know telling a salesperson about an opportunity means a barrage of phone calls. Because the technical person has his or her guard down, you might have a chance to learn details a salesperson from the outside could only dream of.

Derik Whittaker When you're a consultant, nothing can be more valuable than gaining the trust of your client, especially the decision makers. If you can gain their trust, you may be able to see and hear about new needs of the client by simply having a friendly conversation.

Do you then break this trust and send the salesperson calling the minute you find the opportunity? Of course not. A much better strategy is to dig deeper, see whether your firm can help, and then ask if it is okay for you to get an account executive involved so you can win the company's business. By this point, since this person already likes you (heck, you have been buying lunch for a couple of years), he or she is more than likely to return your favor to at least be on the field competing for the business.



Survival Strategy #3: Keeping in contact with previous bosses, client managers, and colleagues is a good way to build a source of leads that make you very valuable to the consultancy you work for.

By the time things get to this point, you should probably be working with your management team at the consulting company to allocate the account. (Note: Never do this with an active account managed by a current account executive.) By virtue of bringing the relationship, you will likely be part of the pursuit team that will make an attempt to win the business. This activity of building relationships, turning them into leads, and winning business is colloquially known as *making rain*. It is the job of account executives, but given that you, as a consultant, will have a lot of natural contacts through the course of your work, it is certainly viable for you to work these contacts over time and make some rain yourself. Consultants who are seen as potential rainmakers, even when they are on the bench, tend to be seen as valuable resources who more than make up for their own salary costs.

If you decide to go this route, it is important that you honor nonsolicitation agreements you may have signed with previous employers. Nearly all employers, especially in consulting, bar you from developing business with former clients after you leave the firm for a period of a year or, in some cases, up to two years. If you have any questions, you should contact your management and potentially hire your own attorney to review with them any nonsolicitation agreements you have from former employers, and make sure you are clear to contact anyone you have worked with in the past if it was through a previous employer.



One-Trick Pony? Better Be Good at Your Trick!

Nobody would ask that the world famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma join an orchestra so he could play bass. That said, Yo-Yo Ma is truly the best at what he does. Of course, there are quite a few of us who have a high opinion of our own

capabilities, thinking we are the Yo-Yo Ma of our chosen speciality. However, unless you are really in the top ten programmers of a given technology with a world-famous reputation, chances are, you will likely need to be what is often called a *multiposition player*.

A multiposition player is the Java specialist who also has a deep understanding of ERP systems. It is the DBA consultant who has developed her skills in business intelligence (BI) and is working to extend those skills to dashboard development because she is frustrated by all the great BI that goes unused and unseen. There are thousands of ways you can specialize in more than one complementary skill in a manner that makes you substantially more marketable.

Taking this step, of course, is a win-win deal for you and the consulting company you work for. It helps you because in the event that despite your efforts, your technology consulting company lacks the cash flow to keep you around, you have a better resume with which to look for work. For purposes of survival, it helps because you are now an easier sell to clients, and thus, it is more likely that the consulting company will be able to place you on a project during a downturn.

Survival Strategy #4: Avoid being useful for only one kind of skill.

The more different things you can do technically, the more likely you will find a spot on a project or with a client.

The reason for this is, during good times, budgets for projects are larger, and thus, it is easier to have both a DBA and BI expert with separate roles on a large project. When project budgets become smaller, some companies will insist that two complementary part-time roles be combined into one. Thus, the project manager has to become the business analyst/project manager. The BI expert has to become the BI expert/DBA. The developer becomes the developer/build expert, and so forth.

Is this ideal? Not usually. In recessions, there are lower budgets to be had, and frequently, the solution is not perfect (separate roles concentrating on what they do best) but is good enough to get the job done given the available budget. Having the flexibility to move between roles gives you a leg up on



people who can do only one thing—particularly those specialists who might have an overly high opinion of their own capabilities and therefore refuse to do anything outside their chosen domain.

When choosing your complementary skill (often called a *minor*), work with your account executives and management to determine what is currently marketable and complementary to your own skill set. Given that they hear from needs frequently and from clients directly, they usually have good guidance about what you should go about learning next so that you can more easily fit into the projects coming up. Ideally, it will be something interesting to you as well, given that people are rarely happy working on technology they hate. But in the worst part of a downturn, having billing work might just be better than nothing at all.

Derik Whittaker When choosing your minor, make sure it is not only something that is marketable, but also something that you can become passionate about. If you can become passionate about this technology, you will most definitely become better at it, thus making you more valuable to your firm and new clients.



Leave the Drama at the Theater

The art of survival depends on attracting the right kind of attention. Attention for being that person who, somehow, can be placed on any project with an opening. That is great attention. Attention for being the person who, somehow, manages to go beyond his or her role and find leads. That is also great attention. Attention for being the person who is always mad about something, is never satisfied with his or her pay or promotion prospects, and generally always seems to have a problem with coworkers. You might as well paint a target on your back!

This is not to say that you should not bring up problems or that you should just let people walk all over you. The issue is not so much whether there are

problems, but how and in what manner they are brought up. Bringing up legitimate issues with a project backed up by verifiable facts is a good thing. In most cases, bringing up an issue in a constructive way will be applauded, not punished. On the other hand, someone who just complains a lot, whose arguments center on what is right for him or her versus the company as a whole, well, that is never going to go over well, but it especially goes over badly when there are ample numbers of people who would be happy to be doing billing work at all!

Survival Strategy #5: Engage in office politics as little as possible. When doing so, always be seen as the cooler head—a force for “drama reduction” rather than “drama escalation.”

Of course, this survival strategy is easier said than done. The term *office politics* exists for a reason. Even in the best companies, there are those who will use the office to act out their own version of the TV show *Survivor* during harder times, forming alliances, bad-mouthing coworkers, and otherwise creating drama as a way of coping with conditions that are not ideal. Strangely enough, these instigators tend to have the same behaviors in good times too. As tempting as it might be to get into these games, consider the following:

- This person says things behind the back of others. What might he or she be saying about you? (Even if not now, someone who acts like this stands a good chance of turning on you in the future.)
- Is this person creating drama with good intentions? If that were true, would it really be something handled in a manner where you need to be involved? (If the intentions were good, the issues would be going through more discreet channels.)
- What does getting involved in something like this really say about you? (Most office political issues tend toward the relatively petty; you don't want to be seen as someone like that.)

When it comes to these kinds of issues, you want to be seen as the “adult in the room.” The person everyone knows is fair-minded (considers both sides),



trustworthy (does not spill information back out in a gossipy manner), and fact-based (when judgments are made, the question is, “What are the facts of the case?”). By demonstrating an even-handedness and fairness with how you approach office politics, by being a force for drama reduction rather than drama increase, you become perceived as someone who can keep your cool when dealing with clients that can be difficult. By being the person who is known as the cooler head, you put yourself far past someone who, even if that person has more well-known technical skills than you, is perceived as an engagement risk because of his or her demeanor.



Being Overpaid Is a Curse

Imagine you are working on your personal budget. If you want to figure out where you are going to save some money, where might you look? Are you going to start with small expenses, or are you going to look at the larger expenses first? Well, when companies do this on an organizational level, they first target the highest expense, namely people.

As strange as it may sound, when you are working for a company, unless you are the CEO, being the highest compensated person in your peer group is a perilous place to be. This concept can seem strange at first blush; most people associate having a very high salary with happiness and security. There is no shortage of articles on the Internet about how to get a raise and so forth. So how can this be a bad thing?

When times are good, being overpaid generally is *not* a bad thing. The downside to having the highest salary in your peer group does not really become evident until you start thinking about layoffs. At this point, you start to really wonder whether you are bringing in enough money to cover your salary, benefits, and other ancillary costs.

Survival Strategy #6: Being overpaid is hazardous to your job security during a recession. If you don't bring in revenues equal to at least 1.4 times your salary, you are probably overpaid. Consider volunteering for a pay cut.

The way technology consulting companies do layoffs is as follows: Generally, the office of the chief financial officer (in a smaller firm, this means *the* chief financial officer) looks at the individual utilization rate and, more importantly, the profit that each consultant has brought to the company over the past 12 or so months. Even if you have been consistently billing, if you are a highly compensated person who finds yourself on the bench during a downturn, and your rates have been slipping as a result of the economic conditions, you need to be aware that you are at risk.

On the other hand, people who are paid less generally have a better means to survive because the firm sees them as more profitable. If you don't stick out as having a cost that is high compared to what consulting revenues you are bringing in, you are much less likely to be let go. Indeed, in technology consulting, like most other business endeavors, there is a trade-off between risk and return. When the downturn hits, taking a lower return (salary) results in less risk of layoff, assuming equivalent skills.

Now, this isn't linear, per se. If you are the highest paid person in your firm, and your billings are not only consistent, but your profit margin is also higher than most others, you are safe despite your higher cost. If you make a substantial salary, you should not just volunteer a pay cut right off the bat. On the other hand, if you can figure out how much you have billed over the past year, and that number is less than your salary times about 1.4 (at least!), you might want to consider the proactive move of offering to reduce your salary.

Yes, you read that right: If you are overpaid, you should offer to reduce your salary. Although some firms will be happy to offer salary reductions as an alternative to layoffs, most are of the opinion that they would rather let someone go than ask someone to take a salary cut of more than a few token percentage points. The reason is that many believe that for reduced pay, someone will, in turn, put in reduced effort. However, if you offer to work for a reduced base salary plus a bonus that gets you even more if you hit a number like 90 percent utilization, for example, you accomplish a couple important goals.

First, you demonstrate some flexibility and understanding of the situation that the consultancy finds itself in. By stepping up to the plate and volunteering, you again seem like the "adult in the room" who is sacrificing himself or



herself to make the company successful. Demonstrating you can take the pay cut helps the company understand that you are probably able to operate your household on less money. If you weren't, you probably would not make an offer like that!

Second, if you really are as good as your pre-pay-cut salary indicates, if you can strike a deal that gives you a bonus based on hitting or exceeding your old revenue target, you actually give yourself the opportunity to do better than you would have in the first place! By formalizing the exchange of risk for reward (you had the risk already), you at least give yourself a chance to capitalize on the situation.



Early to Bed, Early to Rise

It never hurts to be seen as the person who has just a little more work ethic than the next guy when it comes to surviving a downturn. Of course, this won't matter a hill of beans if you are the person who is always in the office but never billing. However, as a deciding factor that can tip the scales, there will always be a tendency to keep the person who seems to be more dedicated to the success of the company.

Is this entirely fair? Of course not. When it comes to surviving rounds of layoffs, from criteria *A* to *Z*, fairness would probably be a *Z*. When you get down to it, perception becomes reality when hard times strike. While it isn't fair, you can use this fact to your advantage as a survival skill. If you are staffed at a client when times are tough, do not be afraid to come in a little early, particularly if you can use the time effectively to get some work done before 8 a.m. when people are not around to bother you. I know many consultants who get more done from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. than other consultants get done all day! Mostly because the office tends to be a distraction-free environment during those hours.

Now, for some of you, 6 a.m. is the time you tend to get to bed, not go to work. You might think you can apply the same strategy to staying late.

Although that is certainly better than nothing and can potentially result in your getting more work done, management tends to notice the industriousness of early risers more than people who stay late. Part of the reason is probably due to the stereotype that software developers play World of Warcraft and Halo late into the evening, putting them into another cycle of “in at 11, out at 7.” Bucking this stereotype can help create the perception that you are more business-focused than technology-focused. Furthermore, because meetings tend to occur during the middle of the day—the period between 10 and 3 when most people are in—you will generally be better prepared if you have had the entire morning to prepare with the most recent information versus preparing the night before and having more outdated information.

Survival Strategy #7: Come in to work one to two hours early, if at all possible. You will get a leg up on the day's events, be there when most of the executives arrive, and be as prepared as possible for any of the day's important meetings, which are typically held in the morning. Don't overdo it though; more than 10 hours a day and you are at risk for burnout.

Does this mean you should work 16 hours per day when your consulting company is only getting paid for 8 of them? Not at all. This really means you should make sure you are putting in 8 full, professional hours, after deducting the time spent checking personal email, viewing sports scores, and catching up on RSS feeds. Most people (maybe not you, but probably) spend a net 2.09 hours per day in nonproductive work (a.k.a. goofing off), so extending yourself is really a mechanism to assure that your clients are, in fact, getting the 8 professional hours they paid for (source: http://news.cnet.com/Stop-reading-this-headline-and-get-back-to-work/2100-1022_3-5783552.html?tag=nefd.ac).

One of the worst things you could do is to throw yourself so into your work that you have no balance in your life. Burning yourself out is the opposite of a survival strategy. When the economy is down, you are going to need the energy to keep going, even when things seem like they are going very badly. Working enough to show you are committed more than average but not so much that you burn yourself out is the key to implementing this strategy.



Billing Work = Good Work (with Few Exceptions)

Let's assume you work for a reasonably good consulting firm, one that does not send you to coal mines after your previous gig doing COBOL because some client decided it would pay a software developer to mine coal. If the firm you work for is somewhat less than horrific, if it was good to you during good times, you should probably allow the firm some leniency when the client pool starts to thin out and you end up doing some work you would rather not do.

In other words, now is the time to consider "taking one for the team." There are exceptions to this, in decreasing order of importance:

- Someone at the client's office is putting your life in danger.
- You are being asked to shred documents for a company whose name starts with *E* and ends in *ron*.¹
- You are told that flex time is offered and you need to pick the 20 hours each day you want to work (and oh, you can bill for only 8).
- The commute is in excess of 3 hours each way, and mileage expenses are not covered.
- You are independently wealthy and in a position to say, "Take this job and shove it."

Outside reasons on that scale, it is probably not a good idea to ask to be moved to a different engagement because you don't like the technology, you don't like filling out TPS reports,² or you don't like how your coworker smells. Asking to be moved in a declining market means there is a good chance you

¹ For those who missed the financial scandals of 2001–02, the answer is Enron.

² If you have not seen the movie *Office Space*, (a) shame on you, go see it right now; if you don't, you won't understand half the pop culture references that exist in this business; and (b) *TPS reports* is a general term for useless paperwork that serves no reasonable purpose whatsoever.

will be moved ... to a bench where, during recessions, the time period from hitting the bench and getting a pink slip shortens appreciably.

Survival Strategy #8: A recession is a very bad time to ask to get put on another client, unless the issues at the client have to do with ethics, morals, or legal concerns.

If you find yourself in this category of an engagement—the irritating but modestly tolerable—you are best served by doing everything you can to cope during the downturn. The upside to working in such a situation is that there is a good chance—exactly because the place is such a hell-hole—it will have a hard time getting permanent employees, recession or no. If you can stick it out, there is a good chance you might be able to hold your nose there and at least get to the other side of the recession.

Make sure of two things: that the firm you work for knows what the conditions are and that you are happy to work with the client to “take one for the team.” By letting the firm know the conditions and that you are happy to live through them for the good of the firm, you position yourself to be rewarded once better work comes along when the economy improves. Of course, you do need to be careful: There is a fine line between informing about conditions and complaining about them. But if you can state in fact-based terms what the challenges are and do so in a way that is more about a warning to others than your own misgivings about it, you can definitely get points for being a trooper willing to go into tough conditions to help the company rather than demerits for being the jerk who complains just because every day isn’t sunny.

Jason Bock When the DotBomb occurred, I ended up on a project that wasn’t very technically challenging. I didn’t have the maturity to understand that in lean times, I sometimes have to take a gig to keep the money coming in, even if the work isn’t what I really wanted to do. I made a bad decision to leave the consulting firm to join another one that I thought would lead to better gigs. In hindsight, it was a shortsighted move, and I ended up back with my current employer, where I’ve been happy ever since.



Derik Whittaker If you are going to “take one for the team,” do yourself a favor—don’t complain that you really do not like your engagement. You are doing your company a good thing, and you are helping out a client. If you are really unhappy but know this is a short-term job, suck it up. You will be better for it in the long run.



The Three Words You Want to Hear: You’ve Been Extended

During good times, you should strive to work for different clients so that you can build out your network and diversify the amount of vertical industry knowledge you bring to the table. However, when bad times hit, you are most interested in being extended at your current client.

Most firms consider the strongest consultant during a recession to be the person who has been at a client forever, who somehow manages to get that client to bring others in when everyone else is sending consultants packing. To get to that position, not only do you want to extend your term as much as possible, but you want to do everything you can to become the trusted advisor to management. You want to be the kind of person about whom, if your name is Sam, people say, “We need three more Sams to get this *critical thing X* done.”

Survival Strategy #9: It is always in your interest to get extended on an engagement during a recession. More than ever, during bad times, you should do everything possible to get contracts at current clients extended, even if the client isn’t your “favorite” client.

When times are good and the market is constrained by the recruiting pipeline (a seller’s market to the consultancy), it is in the mutual interest of the consulting firm and you to get exposure to different clients because it is easy to spread good people around to different clients. On the other hand, when times are bad (it is a buyer’s market), that same collusion of interests

makes it better for you to stay with a single client. If you are doing your job well, that client probably will value you more than any new client is likely to. To put it another way, all things being equal, the rate at your current client during a recession is likely to be higher than your rate at your next client. The reason is that deals are harder to close, and in many firms (though not all), rate cuts become a tool to secure the subsequent engagement.

So how do you go about getting extended? Coming in early, being extra vigilant about documentation and putting in extra effort to make it effective, going the extra mile in small ways and large ways so that you demonstrate your value—these approaches are all helpful. That all said, the one single best way to become indispensable to the client is to speak and act as if you own the deliverables you are working on. If you can manage to treat each project for the client as though it was your business and your next meal depended on doing the best job you possibly could, chances are you will deliver value at a far higher rate than the median software developer.

Of course, to be extended, you need to be aware of how long your current contract is going to last. Whereas some firms post this information on a staffing sheet, others are less public about this information, and still others don't really know how long a given project will last or when the next round of project funding will come in. That said, it never hurts to ask your project manager, account manager, or other person at the consulting firm when your end date is and what you can do to help tip the scales toward getting extended as that end date draws closer. Most of the time, based on their knowledge of the client relationship, those people will have real good ideas about what can be done to help.



Don't Live “Three Steps Ahead”

If nothing else, software developers, particularly in the First World, are some of the most well paid people on the planet. Are they on the tier of Hollywood actresses, rap stars, CEOs, and plastic surgeons? Well, no. But they generally



are in the top quintile (20 percent) with regard to compensation compared to the general population. Nobody is going to cry too much for the plight of software developers with respect to their paychecks.

Although a primer on personal finance best practices is well beyond the scope of this book, a chapter on surviving could not be considered complete without some words of wisdom about saving for a rainy day. The boom and bust cycles of technology, as pointed out earlier, can play tricks on your mind. For years, it can feel as though you do not need to save money so you can handle the possibility of a layoff. Why bother when you have recruiters calling you once a week, right?

In fact, this feeling makes some feel so invincible that they live “three steps ahead.” Also called “fake it until you make it,” it is the tendency for some to extrapolate current successes in a manner that makes them feel as though buying a 7-Series BMW for \$80,000 is a good idea when they are making only \$60,000. In general, it is the act of borrowing against an extrapolated expectation of future success. This is also known as “living above your means.”

Sadly, most of the time, what goes up does inevitably come back down. The comedown that occurs when you operate from such a feeling of invincibility is really tough on your mental health. When a recession hits, you discover just how mortal you are with respect to the job market. You can take up each and every survival strategy in this book, but if you work for a company that, for whatever reason, is experiencing sharply declining sales, there is nothing you can do, outside of changing companies, that will make it possible for you to keep a job. Remember, when it comes down to it, “you are what you bill.”

As an individual, you can't control the sales force, and you certainly can't control the economy. One truism in life is that it is much easier to control the sail of a ship than it is to control the wind. This is perhaps a more eloquent way of saying *concentrate on what you can control*. One of the things you can control is your personal standard of living.

Does this mean that technology consultants and their families need to live on Ramen noodles their whole life? Of course not. But it does mean that if you can help it, you should always be building a base of capital, otherwise known as *money*. Most personal finance experts recommend having three

months' worth of expenses in "safe" savings (no, cattle futures are not safe). My recommendation for consultant software developers is to extend it to 12 months—one full year of expenses.

Survival Strategy #10: Live within or, better yet, below your means. All the stuff in the world does not mean a thing if you are in a job you hate. Having low personal expenses and high savings allows you to be more selective about whom you work for and less likely to choose a bad consulting company just because it happens to offer employment.

So how do you do that? Well, notice I didn't say one year of *income*. If you are doing this right, your expenses should be well below what your income is. If you make \$5,000 per month after taxes, strive to have your total of all expenses, *regular and occasional*, average less than \$3,500 per month. If you can manage that and save the money as though your career depends on it, you will probably be close to a goal of having a year's worth of expenses saved in around two and one-half years. This does not count investing for retirement or other long-term savings; this is purely for building a hoard of money you can reach at a moment's notice.

So what happens when you have this cash hoard? Well, for one, you become less likely to succumb to fear, which helps with survival skill #1—avoiding fear. It helps you make better decisions because you are making decisions based on what's best for your client and your company, rather than what is least likely to put you in an unemployment line in the short term. Having a cushion allows you to sleep better at night, making you a more effective consultant.

Most importantly, though, having these savings helps you be more selective in what company you join, in the event you ever do become unemployed. People who live three steps ahead end up working for one of the Seven Deadly Firms from Chapter 2. Their choice is either do that or miss their mortgage payment and eventually get foreclosed on (unemployment insurance does not cover a \$4,000 monthly mortgage, after all). Then they wonder why they are miserable, working grudgingly in a job they hate because they are slaves to



their stuff. The stronger your own personal financial position, the lower your own expenses, the less likely such an awful scenario will come to pass.

Michael Hugos The greatest opportunities come when the economy gets tough because tough economies weed out so many of the people or firms that would otherwise be competing with you. If you practice living below your means when times are good, you will have the room to maneuver when times get tough. The more maneuver room you have in tough economic times, the better the chances you will find (and be able to capitalize on) opportunities that lead to real wealth and not just the overpriced appearance of wealth.



Summary: What's The Worst That Can Happen?

Of course, you could implement all ten of these strategies and still find yourself out of work. There are plenty of reasons why layoffs occur that have nothing to do with you. You could just find yourself on the bench at the wrong time, when management is looking to cut costs. Indeed, a certain amount of luck is involved in surviving downturns, which is why I stress not only factors on the job, but factors that transcend your job, such as how you manage your finances.

So what options do you have if you find yourself laid off? Well, the good news is that during recessions, the time is often ripe for finding contract work. During a recession large companies often get mandated headcount reductions from their CFO (“cut 10 percent of all full time employees, and I don’t care how”). This does not mean the company stops doing business; it just means that there are going to be fewer employees. This scenario usually comes about the same time as the demand to “remove all contractors” comes about. However, the latter tends to be short-lived because individual directors tend to have budgets too, and most of them have some reasons to need technology

projects done. So while full-time employees (FTEs) remain under tight control, there tend to be fewer controls around hiring individual contractors for short- to medium-term needs. In fact, economists usually look for this uptick in temporary help as a leading indicator that the economy is starting to improve because it happens well before companies start hiring salaried employees again.

And if that contracting work does not materialize? Well, there are always routes such as taking out a student loan to work on an MBA or some other advanced degree. Or, especially if you took the advice to have 12 months' worth of savings or more ready and available, perhaps you can use the downtime to consider starting your startup or micro-ISV (Independent Software Vendor). The key is not to let yourself get into too much despair in this situation and do nothing while your skills rot. If nothing else, do something you should have been doing anyway, and do open source work. At least then you put some code out there, you stay sharp, and you prepare yourself for whatever interviews you can manage to get.

Michael Hugos Unless you are born into a rich family and endowed with a large trust fund, you will have to work for a living, and layoffs are an inevitable part of working. Layoffs have never been easy for me, and they do test my self-confidence. Sometimes I've been laid off because I personally screwed up, and I've had to get over my pride and learn from my mistakes. But often layoffs have nothing to do with me or with anything I could have or should have done. So I've had to get over blaming myself for being laid off and get on with preparing myself for the next thing I want to do with my career.

Chris Williams When I found myself in this situation, I was fortunate enough to be able to do exactly that. I actually took out two loans, one for school and one to live on for a few months. Even though it didn't feel like it at the time and I ate a LOT of Ramen, it ended up being a good thing and a pivotal moment in my career.

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