

## **Finding a Career**

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### **Introduction**

For over 50 years (1963 to present) I have worked in the Information Technology (IT) business; 40 of those years were happily spent at Boston College. Fortunately as I was entering the job market in 1963 following college and military service, the information Technology profession was in its infancy, and the nature of the work turned out to be a perfect match for my aptitude and interests. Once I found my initial job as a computer programmer, I knew I was on the right career path.

Importantly I was now working in a dynamic industry where emerging technologies and challenges would constantly be creating new opportunities and pointing me in new directions. I am particularly grateful to the mentors that I encountered along the way. All of these individuals all had one thing in common; they weren't afraid to take risks in the deployment of technology to create innovative business solutions.

Writing this piece has provided me with the chance to step back and reflect on my career events, especially the decision points and the pathway that I selected. And of course, there was a degree of luck; being in the right place at the right time, starting in high school.

### **High School Science Project Proposal**

When I was in high school, the practical use of computing didn't exist. So there was no way that I could have chosen a college major and foreseen information technology as an occupation. I did however recognize what turned me on.

In my senior year we were required to submit a proposal for the Science Fair. I didn't have any particular curiosity in the areas of Biology, Physics and Chemistry but I loved Mathematics. It so happened in 1955 that the main highway (Fellsway) close by my home had become severely over-crowded each day with a rapidly increasing number of vehicles. As a result the roadway underwent a massive expansion, adding additional travel lanes and introducing left-turn lanes. After completion of the improvements my casual observation was that daily traffic seemed worse than before, which didn't make any sense to me. The main issue appeared to be automobiles backed up at the traffic lights because of a lack of synchronization.

So I decided to see if I could develop a mathematical model to maximize traffic flow by optimizing the timing of the traffic lights that controlled north and south traffic as well as the cross traffic. Of course I also had to consider other variables such as auto volumes at different times in all directions (e.g., heading south into Boston in the morning) and desirable speed of the vehicles, distance between the lights, etc. Today creating a traffic-control simulation model that I described for the Science Fair would be rather simple to construct using computer technology. Back in 1986 I would have had to do all the calculations by hand and redo the lengthy calculations every time a single variable was altered.

Unfortunately when I enthusiastically presented my proposal to the Science teacher, he promptly rejected my idea and suggested that I work on something like solar energy. At the time I was disappointed but now I can recognize that a seed was planted and sixty years later I can see that followed my dreams.

### **Boston College Undergraduate**

When it was time for to select a college to attend, Boston College was the logical choice. I was going to have to commute; my family couldn't afford to live at college. And about 50 percent of my high school graduating class continued on to BC. In those days BC primarily serviced the Irish Catholic families in the Boston area.

I elected to matriculate to the School of Management with the intention of majoring in Accounting but I really no idea what I wanted to do for a career. In my Freshman year I found that I really enjoyed my Math class and convinced myself that I should become a Math major. The problem was that in order to major in Math I needed to transfer to the College of Arts and Sciences and repeat from Freshman year. I decided to stick with Accounting but down deep I knew that I never wanted to become an accountant.

### **United States Army**

After participation in ROTC and upon graduation from Boston College I was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army. My training was as an infantry platoon leader, which meant that if we went into combat I would be responsible for leading about 40 men. The experience of being in charge of lives of 40 men at 21 years of age was at times overwhelming. While service in the military had no direct impact on my career in information technology, I was fortunate to be acquiring personnel skills that served me well later in my management roles.

### **Travelers Insurance**

Following my military service I accepted a civilian position as a Statistical Quality Control Analyst for the U.S. Army. The job entailed using statistical sampling

methods to select and inspect goods being procured by the Army. About that time I began reading about computer programming but I didn't know how to break into the field.

By chance a friend, Warren Howe, who I met while on active duty in the U.S. Army, had taken a job at Travelers Insurance in Hartford, CT. In a conversation with Warren he mentioned that Travelers was recruiting college-grads and employees would receive a \$50 referral fee. I told him I was interested but only in a computing job. I had an interview, took a set of aptitude test and was hired.

Travelers had a terrific training program and provided a great place to get started in the business. In addition, the company paid for Statistics course that I took evenings at Trinity College. More importantly, I got to work with a progressive boss, **Al Alexander**, who knew how to energized his staff and to generate interest so that we would work long past normal work hours . My fondest remembrance was in 1966 when Medicare was launched and Travelers (our group) gained the distinction of being the first insurance company to set up a telecommunications link with Social Security Administration in Maryland. We computerized the claims process while all the other insurance companies remained in a manual mode.

The downside was that the company didn't understand that the skills, employment challenges and what motivated technology people were different from other employees in the insurance business. As a result, turnover was high. In my case, in 1966 Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute opened a graduate school in Hartford and I was accepted to the evening program for a Masters Degree in Computer Science. Unfortunately Travelers wouldn't pay for the coursework because Human Resources deemed that it was not insurance-related. That decision prompted me to look elsewhere and to accept a programming position at M.I.T. in Cambridge, MA. Al Alexander used my case to get the tuition reimbursement policy decision reverse, but by that time I had already decided to terminate.

### **Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.)**

The transition from an insurance company to an academic environment was strange at first. I went from a suit-and-tie and very structured to very casual and experimental atmosphere, and into a group where I was likely one of least intelligent. Fortunately the leader of our group, **Bob Holz**, was in my mind a genius but also someone who was very nurturing. Unfortunately Bob passed away at an early age.

I remember my first assignment in the Fall of 1996 was to work on the creation of new course registration system that would employ a heuristic modeling approach. I remember sitting there and saying to myself, "Heuristic? I don't know what he talking about." In addition I had write in a homegrown programming

language called GASP (I can't recall the what the acronym stood for). In any case with Bob's guidance we created the application and in the process I got my first introduction to area of Student Information Systems.

For many years after I left M.I.T. I would voluntarily go back for a couple of days each year to make code changes to the application. The creators of the GASP language were gone and current staff didn't know the language. In addition MIT had also created a custom version of the operating system (OS) for the IBM 360 class machine. In the process I was learning a value lesson of "what-not-do."

As a response to environment that had been created by a bunch of "mad scientists," M.I.T. hired a recent graduate of the Sloan School of Management to head up the organization. The guy was sharp but he knew nothing about managing a computing organization, especially understanding the idiosyncrasies of programmers. Instead the director created a very structured hierarchy of administrative types with the talented programmers at the bottom of the reporting and decision-making ladder. Again, I gained another value lesson of "what-not-do."

While I my primary occupation was a computer programmer, my career ambition was to mangle an information technology organization. At M.I.T. the best technologists had little interest in management, creating a void, which I saw as a personal opportunity.

### **Babson College**

When I initially went to work at M.I.T., I intended to take courses at the Sloan School of Management, but I discovered that I would be limited to one course per semester, and at that time I was starting a family and I needed to complete my MBA in a shorter timeframe. One of benefits at M.I.T. was that they would pay-in-full for my MBA degree from Babson College. I completed my MBA with a concentration in Quantitative Methods in December 1969 and opened up a search for a new position that would combine my technical and management skills.

### **Boston College**

I was offered to two jobs (Harvard University and Lahey Clinic) and was leaning toward the job at Harvard. The position at Harvard satisfied my salary and job level requirements but I had reservations about the management structure; it seemed like the M.I.T. bureaucracy all over again.

Then by chance I met Leo Sullivan at the F&T Diner in Kendall Square. Leo had worked in Personnel at M.I.T. and had taken the job of Director of Personnel at Boston College a year earlier. He mentioned that BC was looking for people to staff the Data Processing and encouraged me to apply, which I did and was

offered a position. BC met my salary demands but surprisingly the most attractive part of the position was that BC was a mess and I would have an opportunity to build from the bottom up. Ten years after receiving my undergraduate degree I was back working for the college.

My first task at BC was to automate the Undergraduate Admissions