49th Storyworth: How Did You Choose Your Career(s)?

It is somewhat odd in retrospect that I never really thought about alternative careers, since you could say I have had four distinct professions. I grew up in Hyde Park NY, which is a bedroom town for Poughkeepsie, where IBM was headquartered, so all my friends' fathers were "Engineers" and were home with their kids in the evenings. Of course, I had no clue what that actually meant, nor what any engineer actually did for a job. I just wanted MY kids to see their dad once in awhile, which I rarely did with my dad until I was a teen.

Truth be told, IBM called pretty much EVERY job some kind of engineer, so it was really not a good model for my career. But that's life ;-) I probably could have been a good mechanic. I still am, but not professionally, as in "paid for it". However, if you recall my work with Virginia Chemicals and their transfer machine making refrigerant filters, those skills were evident in my ability to recognize the missing jam nuts, and fix that.

During my first year at Clarkson, which at the time was not a University as today, but simply a College of Technology, which meant it's students were largely engineer wannabees, I took the same aptitude tests as everybody else, and those showed about 90% of us would be good computer programmers. This was in 1970, so personal computers were not yet "a thing". We had there a PDP-11, with the off-limits "room with the 5-button locks", and had to pass our punch card programs through the "matrix portal", which was simply a large opening with dividers, only to have returned simple printouts saying "Syntax Error" if there was even a single problem of any kind in our program, the most often of which were that our explicit instruction sets were not perfect. FINDING that problem was where you learned good practices ;-)

The programming languages at the time included COBOL, which was the business management language, FORTRAN, which was used for Engineering and Scientific which involved a lot of calculations, often iterative, which was necessary for things like Calculus. But the language we used for our initial programming was BASIC, which is what I still use primarily to this day, despite adding various PLC, C and C++ languages to my repertoire. And BASIC has proved to be the one most duplicated in things like spreadsheets, which is where most people do programming even if they are totally unaware of the fact.

So, there I was as a Mechanical Engineering student, with a test designed to show I should be a programmer. I know very few Engineers who don't use programming of one or another kind at all – it is simply in the nature of things to teach machines to do work for us, especially if it is repetitive. Accordingly, because I had learned so much of the machine control symbology as a result of my work reassignment by the Virginia Chemicals Plant Manager after he witnessed me bring his multi-million dollar asset back to productive life, I actually landed my first career job with Fafnir because of those skills, which I never actually studied at Clarkson. I also received what amounted to a lesser offer from a plant I saved $ thousands DURING my interview by suggesting they switch from ring gear and pinion drive to timed belt presses by dropping the motor and reversing two electrical poles, which stopped their breaking teeth on the ring gears regularly. Those were skills of a mechanic.

Fafnir allowed me to learn about the process of equipment runoff, what amounted to statistics before I got my formal prep in the subject in my MBA program, THE most useful thing I EVER learned in a classroom. With my good memory skills, however, I have tried to apply things learned anywhere to any application where they worked, which has done wonders for my careers. And without them Lynne would never have had the benefit of any of the computer nor EMR systems I setup for her, which allowed the management of her practice. Nor of the communications and networking I first learned with TRW which enabled her to have remote services by billers and data transfer which complied with HIPAA regulations as a non-physician working in the field where there were not internet nor WAN services everywhere she would need them, but instead depended on "hot-spot" connectivity, something which had nothing to do with "health care", but also something she simply could not do with her costly MEDENT system today, even if she had to.

My machine control knowledge also allowed me to get most of my employee roles, which often had me developing specialty machinery to be used in production activities, and included PLC programming because that was a less costly means of machine control systems development and flexibility. And while programming was my first role as an independent, developing my stand-alone support for the Gaylord Se-Lin system I had patented while employed by them, that was what led to my being available for the GE DSO project because I had used some of my available time to study C programming at OCC, which I used to exceed their needs.

With pretty much every production role I had as an employee, I had been exposed to quality concerns. Quality is essential for machine reliability and vice-versa. But that allowed me to understand industry standards like OSHA and relative failure rates in a lot of areas. Having made so many specialty machines, I was accustomed to writing instructions. So I was in a good position when I first went to TRW to do documentation and training on their use of hand assembly of RKE Transmitters, despite no specific experience with electronics yet, and the specs of QS9000, which were similar to ISO9000, but with the added needs for automotive OEMs included. So I knew the relative dropout rates expected, and could see their pattern in the "End of Line" reports TRW posted daily for their transmitter assembly and test automation. That was what led to my comment to Steve Hansen, with whom I have remained a friend since, that they had a problem. That led to my being converted to their go-to guy for data analysis, and eventually my receipt of their Chairman's Award for Innovation despite not actually ever being an employee for having solved the warrantee problems they had as evidenced by that data.

That analysis had depended upon the statistics I noted earlier as the most important course I ever took. But it confirmed my leadership cred as an independent consultant from then on. And formed the basis for the five separate stints I held for TRW over about eight years' span. And while I had not really expected to become a product development guy originally, my first managerial role, with Shade Roller in Ogdensburg, pretty much formed the credibility for that role too. And the selling of myself I had to do throughout my career allowed me to credibly offer the customer service effort which was my last professional role, for the Chinese Transformer Company which showed up as I was leaving my services for Lynne's Medical Practice. Unfortunately, that didn't last long enough to offset the negatives of our divorce, the economy and my own health which ended my professional career prematurely.

My brother has been suggesting I look into becoming a Remote Technical Writer, which I am exploring as an adjunct to my "retired" status, although I have kept my "shingle out" online. But having enjoyed the time I have spent with Dawn, I don't want to risk that by trying to resume any full-time career again, and our north-south seasonal location is not real compatible with onsite needs typically. But the job market looks to be changing, sometimes dramatically as a result of Covid, so don't count any chickens just yet – you never know. I have a lot to refresh about career work, as well as what the marketplace expects today. Note: I have always been very adaptable, so it is far from a fate worse than death. And besides; I have been doing a lot since I "retired", just not getting paid diddly for most of it. Maybe it's time for that to change ;-)

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