

Jim Carroll

# Tinker, tailor, soldier, accountant?

## It doesn't hurt to ask around for IT career advice

I've kept most of the e-mail I've sent and received since 1984. That's right, some 17 years' worth of stuff. It's a pretty big archive, and every once in a while, for a bit of fun, I browse through it.

I was looking at e-mail from the year 1995 the other day when I came across the following exchange. My *Canadian Internet Handbook* had just been published, was on the national bestseller list, and people were suddenly starting to come to me for career advice. I thought the following exchange of messages would be instructive to this issue of *htc*, given its focus on training and development.

I was contacted by a young Chartered Accountant student about his choice of career:

*Jim,*

*I realize that you must get hundreds of messages a day, (actually, you told me so in an earlier message a few years ago).*

*To the point: I am a CA student, with one of the Big Six firms. I am having second thoughts on my choice of career path.*

*Why am I writing you?*

*Could you please tell me if the designation has given you an edge in your current functions? I have no intention of becoming a controller, or anything related. I am more interested by the type of things that you have undertaken, i.e. less number crunching, more initiative.*

*Your insights would be much appreciated. Thanks in advance, and keep up the great work.*

*Mathieu*

To be honest, I've excluded a bit in which he described how bored he was with his job. I wrote him back, answering as best I could:

*Mathieu,*

*No, no, no, no! Don't even think of that. The only reason I am successful today in doing what I am doing is because of my CA background. Consider it a stepping-stone to get to where you want to go.*

*The training gives you a background that you won't get elsewhere: business/financial insight; corporate insight; systems insight; legal insight; gawd, you name it, it's there. It's experience that you can't buy elsewhere. A lot of it is dull, boring, and seems stupid — but in retrospect, it's sort of a business boot camp.*

*One has to understand business in order to understand how to deploy technology. You should ensure that you get a good, strong, workable business background in addition to technical expertise. It's critical...there are a zillion techie geeks, but there are few who have business insight/experience combined with technical experience.*

*I hope you reconsider. Give me a call in person if you want to chat and I can explain this better.*

*jc*

Fast forward to 1997, two years later. Matt wrote me back:

*Hello Jim,*

*I just wanted to drop you a quick word, and say thanks! I don't know if you recall the message below, but the advice that you provided me a couple of years ago (time did fly by!) sure helped out.*

*I ended up sticking with the CA program, and passed the UFE on my first try this past fall. Looking back, I'm glad to have stuck it out. As much as the audit work is boring, the people I've met and the experience I've gained is unbeatable.*

*Matt*

It's an interesting exchange, and I think offers anyone wrestling with their own career issues several important insights:

- When it comes to career change, patience is a virtue. Most people, at one time or another, find themselves in a job or career that seems less than satisfying. Frankly, some might be bored stiff. And it always seems that the easy way out is the quick way out. Yet it doesn't pay to rush — often, sticking with what you are doing will provide a better reward in the long run.
- Don't rush into things. This means that if you are patient, you're going to take your time to figure out what you should be doing and where you should be going. You are going to have several jobs and careers in your life, but don't fall into the trap of becoming a "hopper," moving from situation to situation. Do it too much, and employers will become quite wary of you.
- Always keep in mind that a broad range of skills is important to your career. I've stated it before, and I'll say it again — if you want a successful career in the information technology industry, don't restrict yourself to IT. Get a variety of different skills. Map out a career and training program that is going to expose you to the widest range of skills and core knowledge sets possible.
- Business skills are critically important to a technical career. Successful IT workers aren't totally immersed in technology, but have other skills with respect to business, change management, re-engineering, finance and other topics. Make sure you map out a career and training plan that gives you a wide variety of different skills, and you'll be one step ahead of your competition.
- Seek the advice and counsel of others. It doesn't hurt to ask — you might find that there are plenty of friends, peers and others who would be pleased to provide you with useful, practical guidance. «

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