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A Day in the Life of...

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How I arrived at my present job (academic and other influences): I majored in computer science in college. I took several classes in psychology and became interested in computational models of cognition. That led naturally to an interest in artificial intelligence. I went to graduate school to get a Ph.D. in computer science, thinking that I would look for a college-level faculty position. When I finished my degree, I was a bit burned out on the academic environment, and couldn't see working the kind of hours I thought it would take to get tenure. On top of that, there were very few academic jobs available. I heard about a research position in the applied AI group at SRI, and it sounded perfect. I sent them e-mail, had an interview two weeks later, and had an offer the week after that. I never even interviewed anywhere else. I've been here for 8 years, and have really enjoyed it, though I've decided to go back into academia in the near future.

How I organize my day: This varies a lot. One of the things I like most about a research environment is the flexibility. I don't have to be here at any particular time, and I can work from home if I want to. I typically spend an hour or two in the morning reading e-mail, taking care of miscellaneous administrative tasks, and getting organized for the day or week ahead. On any given day, my work might involve writing and testing software for prototype systems, reading technical papers, thinking about problems we need to solve and developing approaches to solve them (vague, but that's what research is like!), writing papers to be submitted to conferences or journals, reviewing papers for conferences or journals, writing status reports, and meeting with colleagues at SRI or clients to talk about ongoing projects.

Amount of time spent working daily (at home and office): I have made a conscious decision to work 40-hour work weeks. If I work more than that one week (because of a project deadline, meetings, or heavy travel), I will usually take some time off the following week. I have two small children and a lot of outside interests, and I find that I work more productively and effectively if my life is balanced. At the moment, I'm actually working a reduced work week (averaging 32 hours/week) so that I can spend more time with my children. I get about the same amount of work done as I did when I worked 40 hours. The hardest thing for me is that I tend to be involved in too many projects, and sometimes I spend so much time context-switching among them that I don't make much progress on any of them. I think this is very common with busy people in research environments.

What I do to get myself thinking creatively: I try to change my work environment: I'll take my

laptop, a pile of papers, or a printout of the software I'm working on, and go to a coffee shop or sit outside on a sunny day. I also find it really useful to bounce ideas off of colleagues, and to brainstorm in small groups. (However, most meetings are real time-wasters: in my experience, people too often schedule meetings without an agenda, don't keep them on track, and let people waste too much time talking without making progress on the real problems.)

My problem-solving strategy: If I'm stuck on a problem, I try to set it aside and come back to it the next day, when I'm fresh. (The danger is procrastinating for too long and never really solving the problem!)

What I do to relieve stress: Non-work activities are really important to me. I sing in a choir, spend time with my children, family, and friends, read a lot, and try to find time to be by myself. I try to take work seriously and be successful at what I do, without getting so caught up in it that I lose perspective about what's really important.

My hero, mentor, or person I most admire and why: The person who made the biggest difference in my life (other than my parents, who have always been wonderfully encouraging and supportive) was my ninth-grade geometry teacher, Lynn Collins. She really encouraged me to succeed, and to take my talent for math seriously. She gave me extra work and lots of positive feedback, and made me realize that I could make a career out of math and science, which I hadn't really thought about before. She also taught me that what people think of you isn't as important as what you think of yourself.

What I do to mentor those who work for me: I try to encourage open communication about problems *and* breakthroughs, to give praise for a job well done, and constructive criticism when I think things aren't going as well. I like everybody to be actively involved with the projects, rather than to see myself as a leader who's telling other people what to do. I've realized over the years that this doesn't always work: some people need more explicit direction than others; some people simply don't have the vision to see the "big picture" and need to be guided more clearly. I really like teaching, advising, and mentoring, and try to make sure everybody I work with knows that I am always available for advice about technical issues or "meta-issues" like career guidance.

How a negative event changed my life in a positive way: Years ago, I hurt somebody's feelings greatly by criticizing them in a way that wasn't very helpful or constructive. Looking back on it, I realize that I was so focused on what this person was doing wrong, and not on how she might be feeling, or how she would interpret what I said. I tend to have very high standards, to be a perfectionist, and to be hard on myself, and sometimes it's hard not to project that perfectionism onto other people. I'm still working on this -- people sometimes tell me I'm too critical -- but I think I've made a lot of progress in finding ways to be honest and direct without being hurtful.

One event or decision in my life I wish I could go back and change: This is a bit embarrassing, but it's hard to think of anything significant. I've been incredibly lucky in having things go my way, for the most part. (Though it's often hard to remember that when I'm in the throes of a project that isn't going well, or after having a paper rejected.) There are plenty of little things I can think of: I wish I had focused more on long-term achievements instead of near-term client-pleasing activities in some of my projects; I wish I had re-submitted papers that were rejected; I wish I had tried harder to find summer internships during graduate school, to gain more life experience. But there really aren't any critical decision points where I think I made the wrong choice, or where I didn't have any good alternatives to choose from.

What values are the most important to me and what I value in others: Honesty, integrity, compassion for others, and a commitment to doing things well. (If it's not worth doing well, it's not worth doing.)

What inspires, motivates, or gets me excited about my job on a daily basis: I really enjoy the

high-level thinking process of research, where you take an abstract area or problem (for example, "developing intelligent agents that can communicate effectively and efficiently to solve a joint problemm") and reduce it to a set of technical challenges to be solved. I also enjoy the low-level process of implementing a working system that solves one of these technical challenges. (I've discovered that I'm not quite as good at, or as motivated by, the "mid-level" part of putting the high-level ideas into practice. Because of that, I really like working on a team with people whose strengths lie in that part of the process.)

Biography: Marie desJardins recently left SRI International to become an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She has technical interests in machine learning, knowledge representation, planning, multi-agent systems, probability theory and decision theory. Dr. desJardins was awarded a Ph.D. in artificial intelligence from the University of California at Berkeley in 1992, where her dissertation presented a model for autonomous machine learning in probabilistic domains. She received her A.B. in engineering / computer science from Harvard University in 1985. She can be reached at the Dept. of Computer Science and Electrical Engineering, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore MD 21250, mariedj@cs.umbc.edu, http://www.cs.umbc.edu/~mariedj/