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# A Day in the Life of...

## Michael G. Brown

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**How I arrived at my present job (academic and other influences):** Life is full of interesting twists and turns. I didn't start out knowing what job I wanted, but I knew what I liked. The rest was evolution.

As an undergraduate at Swarthmore College, I started out studying Engineering but found it a little too impersonal, so I also got a degree in Philosophy. At the time I wanted to understand and work with technology, but not necessarily have to develop all of the bits and pieces. Working with other people and figuring out how we could solve a tough problem using some sort of technology is what got me excited.

After MSEE and MBA degrees as well as working stints at HP Labs, LLNL, and DEC, I came to work at SGI in our Supercomputing Systems Division. At the time SGI didn't sell a supercomputer, so my job was to determine where to target our upcoming products and who to work with. Building a new market and changing the way the world solves problems is fun and very rewarding.

Today I manage SGI's marketing efforts around high-end graphics. These products are used to find oil deposits, simulate surgery, teach pilots how to fly airplanes, design cars and make movies. Since SGI's high-end graphics products use the same core technology as our supercomputers, this was a natural evolution, and one that is incredibly fun.

**How I organize my day:** The start and the end are pretty typical, get up at 7:00, get the kids to daycare and school by 8:50. My work is only 10 minutes away from the school, so I am to work at 9:00. I usually drop the kids off and my wife picks them up so I get to work until 6:30.

During the middle of the day, most anything is possible. Typically about one hour for e-mail and voice-mail, 3-4 hours of meetings sprinkled throughout the day, and another half-hour for e-mail and voice-

mail at the end of the day.

Meetings can be anything from customers wanting to spend \$10M on a company- wide installation of SGI Reality Centers to more efficiently find oil to figuring out what images to create for product brochures. The rest of the day, 3-4 hours, is working with industry specialists to position our products, create sales tools, or write press releases.

**Amount of time spent working daily (at home and office):** 9-10 hours - including a 30 minute working lunch. Since I live close to work and have three small kids, all of this is at work.

**What I do to get myself thinking creatively:** Several different things. I draw solutions or I write something and throw it away, or I ask people lots of questions on related topics. A chance comment can spark creativity. Actually, by the time it's done I usually do all three before I have found a path that works.

**My problem-solving strategy:** I have a very holistic approach. Take a look at the big problem you are trying to solve and don't over-engineer a solution. Get started, get a framework, see if it can possibly work, then try it out on someone else. You can't have too big of an ego because your first ideas usually get pretty well trashed.

**What I do to relieve stress:** Play with my kids and fix things around the house. It's amazing how good it feels to take out a hammer when you've had a frustrating day. However, I must say that stress is sometimes good. My best work gets done on a deadline, when I have to perform.

**My hero, mentor, or person I most admire and why:** My hero is my father. By training, he was both an electrical and mechanical engineer and worked at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. After I was born, he took a risk to live a better life for himself and his family. He quit working at "the field", took out his retirement, and bought into a hardware store in a suburb of a 20,000 person town. He worked hard and late, but always had time to teach me how to solve problems, go camping, go fishing in Canada, etc. He also gave me a tremendous amount of freedom to take risks and fail, but he is always there to give me guidance when things didn't quite work out the way I planned.

**What I do to mentor those who work for me:** Seeing the big picture and asking the right questions are the hardest things to do. You can always find someone to write a datasheet or create a web page, but to understand why something needs to be the way it is is hard. I try to give people freedom to do those things that they excel in, but to also understand how to determine how what they do fits into a bigger puzzle. Sometimes that means that everyone, including me, is heads down doing simple but necessary tasks. Helping people to understand that these simple rote tasks are critical and that everyone has to pitch-in is part of that big picture.

**How a negative event changed my life in a positive way:** In 1994 I was working for DEC in Geneva Switzerland and having a great time. Even though he wasn't paying my salary, my "home country

manager" needed to reduce his "cost overhang" -- whatever that was. As a result I was forced to move back to the US. Once I was coming back to the US I decided to look around at other jobs and SGI was at the top of my list because I was tired of losing business to them. I wouldn't be where I am today without that bone-headed decision that my home country manager made. Thanks!

**What values are the most important to me and what I value in others:** Honesty, openness and a little bit of sensibility. I hate when people hide things or when management says "do this" but not why. Understanding why is very important to figuring out how you can help.

**What inspires, motivates, or gets me excited about my job on a daily basis:** I work with the coolest technology that is used to solve the hardest problems on the planet. Everyone is pushing the envelope, and I get to work across the entire range of industries. One day it's medical research where they used SGI technology to plan the operation that separated the Siamese twins joined at the head. The next day it's people designing a really cool car. The next it's people flying through 1-meter satellite data from all over the earth. The next it's collaboration with Steven Hawking's group in Cambridge on how to visualize the evolution of the universe. The level and variety are just incredible.

## **Biography**

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Michael Brown is Advanced Graphics Product Line Marketing Manager at SGI where his group is responsible for all aspects of marketing for SGI Onyx and Reality Center solutions. Michael joined SGI in 1994 and has also held responsibilities for supercomputing product marketing, Weather Forecasting market development, and scientific visualization marketing. Prior to working for SGI, Michael worked for Digital Equipment Corporation in both Geneva Switzerland and Marlborough Massachusetts in marketing manager roles. Michael holds a BS in Engineering and BA in Philosophy from Swarthmore College, a MSEE degree from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and a MBA degree from Wharton Business School, University of Pennsylvania. Michael is married and has three children. He can be reached at [mbrown@sgi.com](mailto:mbrown@sgi.com)