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Level Up Coding

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I'm a middle-aged developer, and my time to shine is setting

How I move forward, long past my prime



Jeffrey Bakker

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You might read the headline and guess how I got here. I've spent two decades with the same company or programming language, and now I'm lost because I'm losing relevance.

Quite the opposite. The languages I've used, platforms shipped on, and business problems solved are as varied as it gets. However, I'm not without my specialties.

I enjoy feature development, architecture, code coverage, test automation, build automation, user experience, and even tech documentation. A technical all-rounder.

I should be doing well, so what is this story about?

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My brain has changed

At 45, my technical prowess has gone from thriving to surviving, as my cognitive ability has reshaped over time. My mental stack can handle more breadth, but my focus is scattered; I'm cognizant of a lot more than I didn't worry about before. My once super-sharp memory is making as many false recollections as the average person.

I am less of a coding machine and now more of a human being with flaws. I have to utilize my people skills more often. As an introvert who liked to hide in his work, that idea used to scare me.

Speaking of scary, they say that dementia starts up to 20 years before the symptoms are noticeable. People's brains are good at filling in the gaps to compensate for what's missing. Not at all suggesting that's what's happening with me, but it's fun to think about (not really).

It's not worse; it's just different

As I applaud the younger developers for their new and exciting feature work, I fondly miss that same praise, but I don't miss the pressure that often comes with it. Yes, I still work overtime sometimes, but I like to do it for the relatively boring stuff. Especially when it's for the codebase, the infrastructure, the developers and the testers.

I've had my time in the spotlight, but sometimes background work is its own kind of reward. I can support others to shine when they need a hand with

anything.

I'd like to work on stuff that counts towards the theme of my mid-to-long-term career goals, rather than the feature of the month.

I'll never forget my Golden Age

It was a period from 2012 to 2019, spanning three software corporations. It was before COVID-19, before my burnout and before my cognitive changes.

Before that period, I had already spent several years building software in the very typical wrong ways. At first, I was in denial and resistant to some best practices, because unlearning habits is hard, but in the end, I came out better for it.

It wasn't long before I championed every best practice that I believed in, because I felt that was giving back. I was heard and was revered because I delivered. I remember when a CTO, who liked almost nobody, called me a "top-notch Developer".

A few years later, I burned out trying to change a company that was in the same denial I had years before.

I don't need to relive the past

Everyone has at some point reminisced back to when things were going perfectly. For my career, the peak of greatness was in my early Senior Developer years.

Ten years after becoming a Senior Developer, I can confidently say that the new Senior me knew lots about tech, but still didn't know much about people

or corporations.

He had a lot of lofty goals and ideals about the development process, having seen the contrast with and without them. He could execute when enabled to do so, occasionally enabling himself to forge his own paths, but his vision was limited to what he was allowed to see.

He was capable and holistically technical, but on the business end, he had the Dunning Kruger effect. Ignorance must be bliss, I guess.

What's in my future?

Right around ten years ago, I had a team lead go further into people management, admitting he was “too old to keep up with the latest technology and practices”. He was a few months younger than me, IIRC. I was a little disappointed to hear that from someone who mentored me at one point, but I get it now.

Conversely, my manager said he got into management because feature development started becoming the same after a while. He needed a new challenge.

I always thought I'd go the route of technical leadership. That's now less likely after I walked away from a tech stack I specialized in for several years (cross-platform native mobile app development). I'm hardly in a position now to display any technical leadership in my current stack.

DevOps is looking attractive right now, as it aligns with what I find important. Though I would miss the time of being a feature Developer, a bit

of SDET, and a bit of DevOps all in one. It's not glamorous, but it supports the glamorous work, and that is noble enough for me.

Final thoughts

My nine years of side projects and my 15 years in corporate software development have led to a fulfilling career. With a wide range of skills which can extend into career paths on their own, I have options. I don't shine as bright as I once did, but I'm wiser.

I'm not even a blip in the tech achievements from my generation, but hopefully I've made an impact on those around me and will continue to do so.

As one who borders between Baby Gen X and Elder Millennial, I'd like to say that young Developers are being left with a lot to build from so that you can shine. Never has there been a time when there were as many layers over layers over layers of software development technology.

Execution was never easier, and modern programming languages can be a joy to work with. We've failed enough times to show you what doesn't work and have enough examples of what consistently does. Your biggest challenge now is standing out. Shine bright!

Now, excuse me while I become a background task.

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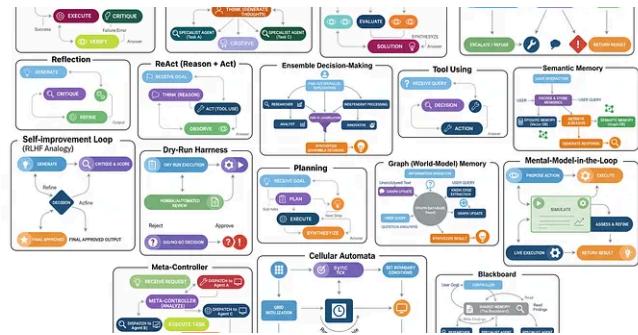
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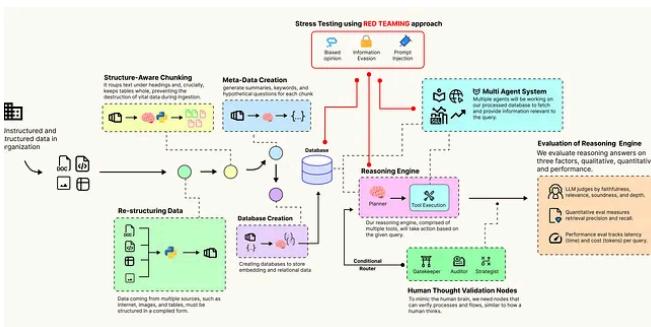
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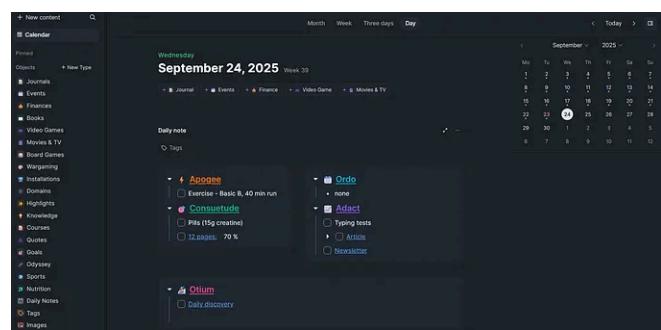


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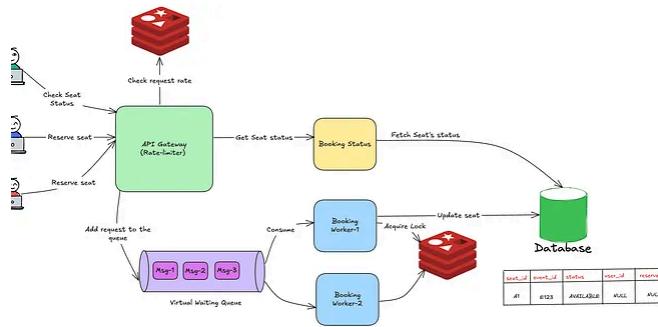
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