

# Voices of Gatsby: Building a Better World Through Data



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*Gatsby believes in cultivating inclusion and elevating the many members of our diverse community. Our new Voices of Gatsby series, publishing every other Friday, showcases and celebrates our users for who they are as they share stories from the tech life. True tales from the front lines, personal accounts of each of us came to be where we are today. Got a story to share? Visit the [Voices of Gatsby](#) info page to learn more and connect with us!*

My five year plan didn't last long, but my journey in data did.

A lot of us finish high school with that five year plan for landing in an amazing career. My career goal was to be a Registered Nurse (RN) and work my way up to become a doctor.

I started college with the thought that, just like my mother, I was going to be the most credentialed RN there was. It was what I knew. It was the vision my mother imparted to me as a child and into my adolescent years. From toy doctor kits to unpaid internships in pharmacies and hospitals, I knew for sure that I would end up in the medical field.

And then, in my freshman year, fate decided to pay a visit to my five year plan. I had an instructor for Excel, PowerPoint and Word applications who, unfortunately, didn't quite know how to work the technology. I so often wondered how she came to teach a technology course that one day I finally asked. She told me the course had been *assigned* — if it was up to her, she'd teach childhood education. She then asked me a question right back: *Why I was pursuing the RN path?* I told her I loved to help people and communities and had a passion for solving real world problems. She gave me a long, slow stare then a sigh.

Eventually she said, "That's cool...**but you know technology solves real world problems** and elevates communities too, right?!" I was baffled. I had just told her I was on the path to be a doctor and she responded *That's cool... but*. And then showed me a completely different way to see things. Years of my childhood spent reimaging the computer because of the many viruses I put on it? Tons of time working with and troubleshooting mobile phones? I did these things to solve my very real world problems. But, her words made me realize, these are also technology jobs. Why am I in these nursing classes, nodding off and struggling to connect with concepts, when I could be in a class where I actually loved the content and could relate?

Before making it even halfway through my original five year plan, I switched paths. I was now going to become either a software or database engineer!

## A change of direction

After changing majors I came to realize that my mother had encouraged me with experiences and opportunities based on what she knew as a good career for herself. I hadn't, however, been exposed to anyone, male or female, working in any kind of technology. As a result, imposter syndrome (now it has a name) weighed heavy on me in my computer science courses.

In my very first CS class I was one of two women. Then the other female student dropped so I became a lonely *one*. As the course numbers increased, working with men only became harder and harder. It seemed like they thought I wasn't getting the concepts because I asked more questions. I knew the concepts, and I also knew that asking questions was my way of verifying how I understood them — but still my imposter syndrome intensified. The turning point came when I decided to take an elective course in Management Information Systems (now Information Systems and Analytics). Both the material and the instructor's teaching style motivated me — I *got* it. I worked well with the other MIS students who got it, too. Best of all I could build real world solutions while getting feedback from my instructors and classmates — I felt free to speak out without heavy sighs or other signs of annoyance. So, MIS became my major, and CS my minor.

At this point my five year plan was technically up, but this change was worth it. I started to do projects outside of class, many being showcased to high profile university sponsors and staff like the Chancellor. ***Imposter syndrome was no more.*** I secured internships, additional scholarships and spots in leadership conferences like TMC's Leadership Institute. I doubled up on my courses, graduating a year earlier than scheduled. I started my career.

## Creating my own path

First I jumped into a role as a Business Systems Analyst (BSA). I evaluated how an organization leverages systems in their business processes and then created technical solutions to empower growth. **I wanted to be the best BSA my company had.** I was

on a data project, working with federal clients. I showed value immediately by producing data models in a way that wasn't presented before. I implemented data models in Microsoft Access as a prototype of how they could be implemented in SAP. My team was proud, the client was fascinated and all I could think was, *What's next?* I loved the work. I was continuously growing and learning while also showcasing great solutions, just like in college. I was receiving awards, including **the highest award in the company**, and I didn't want it to stop!



Meanwhile the contract I was on required me to get a few tech and data management

certifications, so I did that too. Soon, SAP dashboards were a hot topic and I also wanted to be the “go-to” consultant for that, so I started picking up that skill as well. Next up, I realized SQL was necessary to query the data so I added that to my after-hours study schedule as well. I learned every way I could, about everything I could. Through attending conferences I realized that Tableau and Power BI were also the hottest emerging data analytics tools, so I learned those plus a few other skills through the Business Analytics certificate program at Indiana University. I was absolutely “doing the most,” as many would say, and I learned so much.

But I also made a lot of mistakes along this learning path — mostly because I didn’t have a super structured plan.

## Lessons learned along the way

Not having a well-defined map is not all bad: The flexibility allowed me to pick up skills as I needed them. This is very helpful when you’re a consultant. However, thinking past your next step is also important!

For example, early on I noticed that SQL skills were going to be heavily needed and I started down that learning track. Too soon, though, I dropped it for data visualization when I saw how much clients loved interactive data. But that data has to come from somewhere, right? Right: A database...that needed a SQL query to extract the data. So now I’m back to expanding my SQL knowledge. If only I had finished it first! Ha... easier said than done.

I’ve had some time to reflect over the path that got me here, what worked and what I wish I could have avoided. I make it my mission to use my voice to help others benefit from my lessons learned, so I will leave you with some key mistakes to avoid during college and in your career.

Don’t do these things:

- **Trying to learn multiple tools or languages at once**

Too often I meet people who realize they may want to be a data analyst, scientist or engineer and the first thing they say is, “I’m learning Excel, SQL, Python, R, *and* Tableau.” You can’t learn all of this at one time! You’ll create tool and skill confusion and actually interfere with your progress.

- **Relying solely on certifications and degrees to get in the door**

Experience is just as critical as certifications. Being in tech consulting I learned there are people that can pull off passing a certification just by learning and reading without application. Companies know this too, and so they will be looking

for where you've applied the actual skill in your experience.

- **Spending too much time on theory over hands-on application**

Don't overwhelm yourself with figuring out the best way to do something and miss out on the actual application of doing it. Practice applying the skills and then refine them through theory. A good example is Tableau. Practice building the dashboard first — then iterate and improve your visuals, for example applying theories from [the Edward Tufte book](#).

- **Jumping into the deep end (like machine learning)**

This is a hot area of data today. So hot that everyone wants to do it. But how can you do it if you don't know the basics of Python or R? Don't jump into classification models if you don't know how to cleanse data! Learn the fundamentals first and *then* use them to get where you want to go.

- **Having too many technical skills on resume**

Filling your resume with technical skills because you've done something one time is great to pass an ATS system, but what happens when a recruiter asks you about it during a phone screen? Can you truly speak to the knowledge and application of 20+ skills? Focus on becoming advanced in a few key area, or truly mastering a couple.

- **Not building your communication skills verbally and visually**

If you can't effectively communicate what your visual means for the business or gather requirements, this will slow down your ability to deliver. Practice by building dashboards or conducting analysis and communicating the impact in written and presentation form. The more you do this the better you will get.

- **Not creating a project portfolio to showcase your knowledge and expertise**

This is a lesson I learned after leaving the consulting space. I worked on classified projects, so I never had examples of my work. I ended up using projects I did in my Business Analytics certificate program and a publication to showcase what I was capable of building. Not having a portfolio can make it very hard for recruiters and hiring managers to tie the words on your resume to real world experience. Create that portfolio. It will also serve as a reference point for you to see how far you've come!

I didn't do all of these things at once! Many are lessons learned along the way, but they all helped me become more focused and happy with where I've come from — and where I've managed to go.

I made many mistakes in my journey to a tech career, and both the path and technologies themselves have changed along the way. As I become more experienced I reflect on the mistakes I've made and feel gratitude for the experiences that have



I reflect on the points above and feel gratitude for the amazing mentors that have guided me in my journey. I never thought I would be working in an HR function but technology, mentorship and passion led me here. And if you keep your mind open to all opportunities, have exploratory conversations and learn new skills whenever you can, and become intentional with your time, you too will find your destination.



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