How Secure is Your IT Career?

Six Strategies to Keep Your IT Career **Secure** (and **Lucrative**)

As you get older, you get slower, uglier and more expensive. As your work rate goes down and your cost goes up, you must compensate by expanding your skills and adding more value to the organization. Whether you are starting out on a career in IT or on the home stretch to exiting one, this paper looks at the threats to your career security and the strategies for ensuring you stay in one.

Written by
Rob England

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How secure is your IT technical career?

As you get older, you get slower, uglier and more expensive. As your work rate goes down and your cost goes up, you must compensate by expanding your skills and delivering more value to the organization.

Growing more experienced at the same thing isn't enough. After a certain level of experience with technology, more doesn't count for much: enough is enough.

Experience counts for less in the 21st century. The new technologies are not as arcane and inaccessible – it is not a closed priesthood now. In the past, our industry has leant heavily on experience and lightly on qualifications. Once, if someone had a few years on their CV, they could always get a job and ask a lot for it. Now the industry is getting more professional, and certifications and academic backgrounds are beginning to count for more.

It isn't enough to know one technology well any more, or at least it won't be for much longer. Look behind you. There are kids coming up with MCSE[1] or B Sc in object programming or whatever, versed in LDAP[2], Java and Oracle. And those kids are cheaper, keener and smarter than you. **Ask yourself frankly:** How long would it take a technical school graduate - with the right skills and a few years experience in the industry - to learn enough about your technologies to be able to do a credible job?

They would get paid a lot less than you to do it, I'll bet. Product technologists are falling down the pecking order. As technologies become commodities, so too do those who work with them.

The industry is changing. We don't choose technology anymore – we create solutions. We aren't tinkering with products - we are engineering systems. And with engineering comes a new professionalism.

In the past we bought the product and figured out how to get use out of it. Now users want to lay out the business requirement and hear how we are going to deliver against it. Features, functions and benefits are secondary. They will cover that off at some point. The important question is the deliverable. That deliverable isn't measured in bandwidth or transactions or use cases. It is measured in ROI and timelines and EVA[3], in personal CSF[4] and industry directions.

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[1] Microsoft Certified Service Engineer

[2] Never mind

[3] Economic Value Added

[4] Critical Success Factors

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If you didn't get the message already, here it is spelled out: if you depend on technology expertise alone, you will compare less and less favourably against eager cheap young pups wanting a crack at your job on their way up.

The Changing Face of IT

Commoditization and consumerization of professions

Since technology is central to what we do in IT then it is no surprise that the industry is full of technology-centric people. We need geekiness. But the days of the pure technologist are on the wane. Like other specialist professions before them, technologists are slowly becoming of lower value and less esteem.

Generations ago, the career ambitions of an intelligent and fresh, technically-inclined young man (this was pre-emancipation-of-women) might well have included such demanding and technically advanced professions as steam engine driver or typist or telephone operator. The technically-inclined among their children and grandchildren aspired to be business machine mechanics, electricians, and then computer operators. A generation ago, leading edge roles for young persons included programmer, or – for the elite – systems programmer or database administrator. Then it was network administrator or communications architect or web designer.

The relentless advance of the technological revolution over centuries creates an interesting phenomenon in the technical professions that doesn't happen to other professional areas such as law or finance or even medicine (at least not as markedly or as fast): jobs become commoditized.
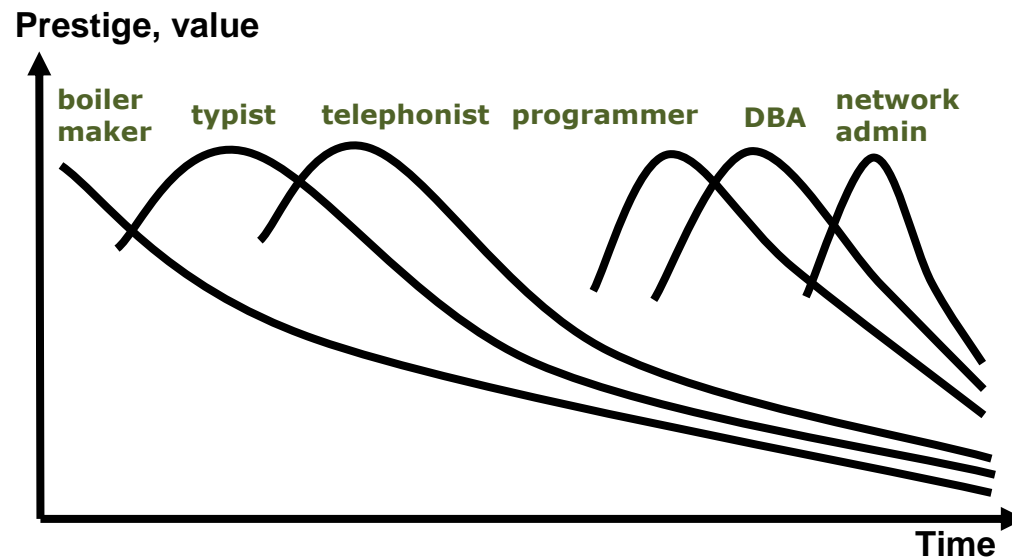
Example:

I knew a support center in the U.S. staffed by people who had been with the products for a decade. They were highly experienced, knew every nuance of the software, and had had pay rises every year for that decade. Then the company brought in the "farm boys" (and girls): graduates of nearby rural colleges who couldn't believe their luck in getting a job with a big software company, even if it was at low pay "to begin with." They were smart, and eager to prove their worth. They soon figured out the software well enough to support it. They didn't do as good a job as the old guard, but they were a third of the price and they were good enough. Within a few years they were nearly as good, and all the old guard were gone. This is not a fable.

Lesson Learned & Action Item:

Keep a weather-eye on your chosen occupation. Have a plan for your career. Make sure that plan doesn't assume the value of your current skills will continue to increase, or even hold the same level. Advanced jobs eventually become commoditized.

New professionalism

There have always been professionals in our industry, sprinkled about like gold flakes in the mud. Other IT people have aspired to professionalism but been ill-equipped for the task.

And yes, there have been those who exploited the immaturity of the system: the ethically- and motivationally-challenged who went for a ride. They blew their school years and they don't like to work hard, but they were blessed with brains. So they are smart enough to bluff their way in to the high-paying positions of our industry.

However a sea change is underway in the IT industry. Leading the way are the project managers and system testers, who have had formal bodies of knowledge and accreditation for some time. More recently, industry certifications like the British Certified IT Professional (CITP) are emerging, along with associated skills frameworks like the SFIA[5] and e-CF[6]. Now it is the ITSM practitioners with ITIL and ISO20000 accreditation, and the first baby steps of professional organisations.

We still have a long way to go to meet the levels of best practice set by other industries but professionalism is emerging. Organizations such as PMI (Project Management Institute), national Computer Societies, ISACA, prISM, and others are offering accreditation. Occasionally a university offers a degree that means something useful to the industry. The industry is attracting more professional people.

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[5] http://www.sfia.org.uk/

[6] http://www.ecompetences.eu

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1. Keeping ahead of the lions

A cameraman and his assistant were filming lions on the plains. The alpha male lion got annoyed and started taking a noticeable interest in them. The cameraman filmed on, then noticed that his assistant had pulled off his heavy boots and was lacing on sneakers. "No point" said the cameraman, "If he decides to go for us, you will never out run him." "I don't need to outrun him" replied the assistant, "I only need to outrun you."

The moral of the story is don't film lions.   No wait… the moral of the story is to **keep an eye on those around you**. It may sound brutal but when the 5% layoff tranche comes through, your colleagues are your competitors. Just make sure you are doing more to **add value** back to the business (and to be seen to add value back to the business) than most of them are. Make sure you are not running right at the back of the pack. If you are the highest paid with the narrowest set of skills (don't measure range of technical knowledge – that counts as one skill), then you are walking.

2.   Be heard, be seen

Being seen to **contribute** is important.

Technical people are often modest, and take a dim view of those who blow their own trumpet. But ask yourself, what the odds are of your manager doing the investigation necessary to get a good picture of who really wrote the document, or who was here over the weekend.

Tell them.

3.   Be valuable

See yourself as the company sees you: as a **productive unit**. Your salary must be justified by the value you return, *as perceived by the employer*. If your value does not increase, then your salary will not either. Understand how that value is measured: not in technical genius but in results, productivity, versatility, and keeping up with change.

investment

pay

employer

employee

perceived value

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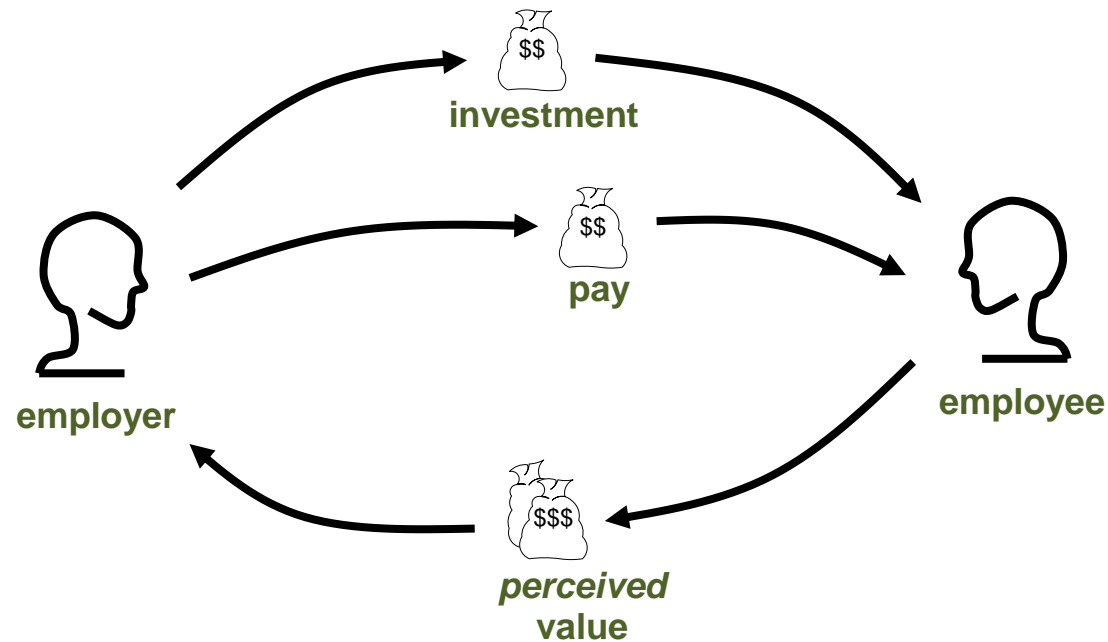
4. Be aligned and know the power groups

Don't be politically naïve. **There are three kinds of people; those that make things happen, those that watch things happen, and those who say "what happened?"**

You may choose not to play the corporate power and politics games ("make things happen"), but you owe it to yourself to at least be aware of what is going on.

Understand company directions and strategies. Examine the real financial state of the company. Know the power groups and games being played. Then you can have a better idea of the direction you should be headed in.

Another challenge is this: if you see things one way, and your employing organization sees it another, which one will have to change? If the organization has decided on a certain strategy or course of action, how much will it value criticism or resistance to that action once the decision has been made? People need to understand that they either "get on the bus," go somewhere else, or remain unhappy.

Technical people seldom take a hard look at their career future. Consider career options: business analyst, architect, consultant, management, dropping out (sometimes you are better off leaving).

IT is about business as much as technology now.

Examine these three questions:

1. What kind of people does the company want in IT now?
2. What kind of people does the company want in IT in five years?
3. What skills are most useful?

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5.   Learn, grow and manage

You need to **grow to retain your value** to the business and maintain your personal satisfaction. This growth needs to be sideways into broader skills, not deeper into technology. As the business aspects of IT gain prominence - and as IT matures into a new professionalism - it is the analysts and architects and systems engineers who step into the limelight: those who can combine an understanding of technology with an understanding of business and process and people – the whole system. The ones who do not, or can not, escape the technology silo will be increasingly marginalized, and displaced by young usurpers.

Obviously any employer needs to be supportive of career development.

Seven steps to learn, grow and manage your IT career:

1. Make a plan and spell it out to your manager.

2. Seek training that develops different ways of thinking.

3. Look for a mentor: someone you respect who can offer advice and guidance.

4. Learn about how to do mentoring properly.

5. Coach and mentor others to take your place.

6. Ask your employer for support and training on a mentoring program.

7. Find out what support is provided for tertiary education.

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6.   Have an exit plan

Make sure you have a parachute.

Where will you work next?   Doing what?

Make sure your CV looks attractive and your skills are adequate now, before the crunch comes. Being laid off is a traumatic experience. You will cope many times better if you already have a plan and are at least part of the way along the path to being prepared. Better to spend redundancy money on a brief job search and a nice holiday, rather than crammed training and endless door knocking.

Start now

However you approach your career development, if you are a technologist you need to break the mould and grow into new areas.   If you get complacent and comfortable doing product implementation or support, your status and worth will slowly erode over time. Like the slowly boiled frog, you may not realize the situation you are in until it is too late.

Start now: think about where you might like to grow and start heading there.

About the author

Rob England is an independent IT management consultant and commentator in Wellington, New Zealand. He is a published author of several books and many articles. He is best known for his controversial blog and alter-ego, the IT Skeptic. Find out more at www.twohills.co.nz

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