

Fired. Not the first time it's happened, but it reinforced what I already knew; I'm a terrible employee. I just had to face facts and move on. So rather than getting back on that "how the hell am I going to find a job" train, the only right thing to do was to start my own company.

My first act of business? Pile into my buddy's 1982 Celica, nicknamed Celly, and drive to galveston to party. Of course we stayed in only the best \$19.95 a night, plug the hairdryer in the wall and the circuit blows, motel. Nothing but the best as I prepared for my journey into entrepreneurial territory again. I could say I was preoccupied with how to get my new business off the ground. That while my friends got drunk, did stupid tourist tricks and ate at greasy spoons, I sat by the pool on the 1 chaise lounge chair with rust on the clean side and wrote up my business plan. I didn't. I got just as drunk and ate the same disgusting food. Then we faced the road trip terror that everyone knows exists, but refuses to admit, the ride home. It wasn't until we pulled up to the apartment that it hit me. No job. No money. No way to pay the bills. But I had nice towels.

Fortunately the hangover didn't last too long, and I realized I had to get off my ass and make something happen.

First day, first task, come up with a name. This was the start of the microcomputer revolution, and I wanted a name that said what the company was going to do, which was sell personal computers and software and help companies and individuals install them. I was going to offer microcomputer solutions. So after struggling with different names for about 30 minutes, I chose MicroSolutions Inc.

Now came the hard part. I had to call all the people I had done business with at my last company, and let them know that I had been shitcanned and ask them if they would come do business with me at MicroSolutions. I got the expected questions. No I didn't have an office. No I didn't have a phone yet other than my home phone. Yes it was just me. No I didn't have any investors. The only question I dreaded was whether I had a computer to work with. I didn't. Fortunately, no one asked.

I made a lot of calls, and got some decent response. We love you Mark, we want to give you a chance. A lot of let's stay in touch. I got two real bites. One from a company called Architectual Lighting and the other from a company called Hytec Data Systems.

Architectual Lighting was looking for a time and billing accounting system to allow them to track the work with clients. I don't remember the name of the software package I told them about, I think it was Peachtree Accounting, but after going out to meet with them it came down to this. I offered to refund 100 pct of their money if the software didn't work for them, and I wouldn't charge them for my time for installing and helping them. In return, they would put up the 500 bucks it would take for me to buy the software from the publisher, and I could use them as a reference. This was my "no money down" approach to start a business. They said yes. I had a business.

My 2nd call Hytec Data, was run by Martin Woodall. I met with Martin at the S&D Oyster House on a beautiful June day, and I remember sitting there and him telling me, "I graduated in Computer Science from West Virginia University. I have 50k in the bank and I drive a brand new Cadillac. I know technology better than you. We can work together". I had a customer, and now with Martin's help, I had some hope. Hytec Data sold multi user systems. The old kind that used dumb terminals. He bundled it with accounting software and he and a contractor named Kevin, would make modifications to the Cobol source code. They were the hardcore geeks that could help me when I needed it. I was still just 10 months from my first introduction to PCs, and had zero clue about multi user systems. If I came across prospects that could use their system and software, I would get referrals. That was good.

Even better was Martin's offer of office space. He and Kevin shared office space with the distributor of the computer systems he sold. They had this one office, that when the CEO of the distributors son wasn't using it to study his spanish, I could use it to make calls, and keep my folders and paperwork. Still no computer, but hey, I had an office and phone. I was bonafide...

At some point I'm going to have to go back and look at my appointment books that I kept from those days to remind myself of who my 2nd, 3rd and on from there customers were. They were small companies that I got to know very well. People that took me under their wing and trusted me, not because I was the most knowledgeable about computers, but because they knew I would do whatever it took to get the job done. People trusted me with keys to their offices. They would find me there when they got in in the morning and I was there when they left. I made 15,000 dollars that first year. I loved every minute of it.

As time went on, my customer base grew. I got my friend and former roommate Scott Susens to help with deliveries. Scott was working as a waiter at a steakhouse at the time. I remember asking him over and over, would you please help me out. I have a customer that had bought a bunch of Epson dot matrix printers from me, and I had to sell Scott on how it wouldn't be hard to learn how to hook a parallel cable to a pc and printer, and how learning all of this would be a career move compared to working at the steakhouse. Unfortunately, I couldn't pay him as much as the steakhouse. My good fortune was that Scott worked nights and weekends and decided to take some time in the afternoons to help me out. Not long after that, he was working fulltime installing PCs, learning whatever he had to figure out before an install.

Martin also began to play a larger and larger role. His company was growing, and he was watching my company grow. I would get the PC based stuff, he would get the accounting system stuff. It was a nice split. The better part of the relationship was based on Martin being the most anal retentive person I had ever met in my life. While I covered my mistakes by throwing time and effort at the problem, Martin was so detail oriented, he had to make sure things were perfect so problems could never happen. We could drive each other crazy. He would give me incredible amounts of shit about how sloppy I was. I would give him the same amount back because he was so anal he was missing huge opportunities. We complemented each other perfectly. It would only be a matter of time before we both knew we had to be partners and work together instead of separately.

That first year in business was incredible. I remember sitting in that little office till 10pm and then still being so pumped up, I would drive over to the gym I belonged to and run 5 to 10 miles on the treadmill going through that day, and the next in my head. Other days I would get so involved with learning a new piece of software that I would forget to eat and look up at the clock thinking it was 6 or 7pm and see that it was 1am or 2am. Time would fly by.

It's crazy the things that you remember. I remember when my accounts receivable got up to 15k and telling all my friends. I remember reading the PC DOS manual (I really did), and being proud that I could figure out how to set up startup menus for my customers. I remember going to every single retail store in town, BusinessLand, NYNEX, ComputerLand, CompuShop, all those companies that are long gone, and introducing myself to every salesperson to try to get leads. I would call every single big computer company that did anything at all with small businesses, IBM, Wang, Dec, Xerox, Data General, DataPoint (remember them?), setting meetings, asking to come to their offices since I couldn't afford to take them to lunch. I didn't need a lot of customers, but my business grew and grew. Not too fast, but fast enough that by the time MicroSolutions had been in business about 2 years, I had 85k dollars in the bank, a receptionist/secretary, Scott helping me out, and a 4 room office that I moved into along with Martin and Hytec Data Systems.

Then I learned a very valuable lesson. Martin had done a great job of setting up our accounting software and systems. I got monthly P&L statements. I got weekly journals of everything coming in and everything going out, payables and receivables. We had a very conservative process where Martin would check the payables, authorize them and then use the software to cut the checks. I would then go through the list, sign the checks and give them to Renee our secretary/receptionist to put in the envelope and mail to our vendors.

One day, Martin comes back from Republic Bank, where we had our account. He had just gone through the drive through and one of the tellers who he would see every day dropping of our deposits asked him to wait a second. She comes back and shows him a check that had the payee of a vendor, WHITED OUT and Renee Hardy, our secretary's name typed over it. Turns out that in the course of a single week, our secretary had pulled this same trick on 83k of our 85k in the bank. As Martin delivered the news, I obviously was pissed. I was pissed at Renee, I was pissed at the bank, I was pissed at myself for letting it happen. I remember going to the bank with copies of the checks, and the manager of the bank basically laughing me out of his office telling me that I "didn't have a pot to piss in". That I could sue him, or whatever I wanted, but I was out the money.

I got back to the office, told Martin what happened at the bank, and then I realized what I had to do about all of this. I had to go back to work. That what was done, was done. That worrying about revenge, getting pissed at the bank, all those "I'm going to get even and kick your ass thoughts" were basically just a waste of energy. No one was going to cover my obligations but me. I had to get my ass back to work, and do so quickly. That's exactly what I did.