



## **INDISPENSABLE DOES NOT MEAN ALWAYS EMPLOYED**

With the advent of outsourcing, increased competition, and a tighter job market, the technology professional struggles to ensure that he remains gainfully employed. Using the techniques and ideas in *The IT Career Builder's Toolkit* can go a long way toward ensuring your ongoing profitability and growth in the field. This chapter discusses key ideas to increase and ensure your value within the organizations you serve, the goal of which is to make you indispensable.

# MAKE YOURSELF INDISPENSABLE

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I would love to tell you that the information in this chapter will ensure that you are never out of work. I cannot make that claim. Too many intangible factors make such guarantees impossible.

However, the ideas that I share in this chapter go a long way toward ensuring your ongoing marketability to a broad range of organizations. Together with strong professional networking, the job/project search techniques covered previously in the toolkit, your ambition, and a strong commitment to excellence, these ideas provide greater overall career stability and growth.

Many of these ideas involve some level of professional risk. However, failure to enact these strategies is equally risky. If you are to build a career that places you at the top of your profession and positions you as a problem solver who has organizational value, you necessarily must incur some risk.

Not doing so means that you are not at the top of your profession and are not perceived as a problem solver who has organizational value. Making one of the following two choices seems relatively easy on the surface:

- Incurring calculated risks to achieve dynamic career growth
- Assuming the default risks that are associated with more passive career activity

However, you will need to assess this important decision for yourself.

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## A Word About Value

The idea of value is one that I have attempted to infuse throughout this book. Your value is a central theme in the toolkit approach to career development. Understanding your value to an organization and how to increase that value is critical.

This understanding can help you model your career, actions, and focus. It can ensure that the work you do brings value to the organization that you serve. This understanding also helps you find the right type of employer. Your understanding of where an organization places value can help you determine if you and the company are a good fit—if those items, tasks, and projects that the company values match your desired career path.

This understanding of your value can also help alleviate the frustration I hear many technology professionals express in regards to compensation. I've counseled many technology professionals who complain about their low compensation. However, in speaking to them, these professionals indicate that their organization does not pay well in general.

Although salary surveys abound, they do little to help you in your current situation. You will receive the best compensation by finding an organization whose idea of what is valuable matches yours. You might be excellent at user-level automation, and you might be building great solutions for your employer; however, if their perception of the value of such solutions is low, you will remain undercompensated.

I often state that if I take the skills I've learned as an IT professional and go to work for a one-person automotive shop, I can still put many of my skills to work, but I cannot expect to be compensated in the manner I desire. Such an organization will not and cannot place a high value on what I provide.

You need to match your skills and desires with an organization that both needs and values those skills.

If you are persuasive, you might be able to help build a case for the value that you and your solutions provide. This is an excellent way to build your career within an organization, but it requires the ability both to quantify the results and tie them to the business case for the organization.

As you read through the ideas in the sections that follow, keep in mind your own career, and evaluate steps you can take to improve your value in your organization.

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## Being Proactive

Business owners and managers need proactive people. You must be able to make decisions and take responsibility for the impact of those decisions—whether positive or negative. Many employees seem to work on an “I will act only when directed” mentality. They do so with the assumption that management will frown upon independent ideas and action.

To be honest, if you work within an organization that does not foster independent and proactive ideas and actions, you need to consider other employment options. Unless you know of some convincing reasons to remain in place (pay, training, and so on), such organizations are unlikely to provide true growth opportunity.

If you have not been proactive in the past—always waiting for specific directives to move on a project or specific tasks—make a change now. If you have an idea for a technology or process that would improve operations or create a level of automation or efficiency within your job or on a current project, act on this idea.

Demonstrate your idea’s benefit to management. Let your manager know of other ideas to improve process or information flow.

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## Understanding Technology’s Role in the Organization

A large part of making yourself indispensable is a clear understanding of technology’s role in the organization that you serve. Of even greater importance is helping define and expand that role in a way that provides business value.

In most cases, business value is tied to improving profits, lowering costs, or increasing efficiency, consequently providing more production throughput.

Your ability to define your role as someone who helps technology provide value in the areas of profits, costs, and efficiency is critical. To do so, you must understand how the company works. Excelling only within your direct job scope with the technology is not enough. You must perceive how the technology that you build and support works seamlessly in the organization.

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## **Maintain a Business-First Mentality**

Understanding that technology is, first and foremost, a business enabler (something that enhances the ability for the organization to perform its functions) helps your longevity in the field and at your company.

Too often, technology professionals become so focused on their specific technologies that they fail to grasp their impact within the greater organizational structure. This is particularly true with back-office support roles.

Placing vital importance on the optimization of the technology is a mindset that most professionals can plead guilty to. Although such optimization can be extremely valuable and important, it is only so because of how it supports the business, not because of the technology.

Maintaining a business-first mentality can help you see the importance of your technology within that context.

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## **Create Standards, Automation, or a Programmer's Toolkit**

One of the single greatest areas of impact is that of standardization and automation. Technology is, if nothing else, a tool to automate the mundane tasks or provide better and simpler access to good information.

To have the time to build the best technology possible and have the greatest impact on the organization, you must first find areas of your own job that can be streamlined. You can best do this through standards, automation, and a library of code, files, and ideas.

Also, stay current with new ideas, tools, and methods in the industry. Subscribe to appropriate journals and professional magazines and see what others are doing. Adopt those items that fit within the work that you do.

Standardization removes the guesswork from many areas of technology. New projects and systems become more self-documenting because the environment begins to look and feel “the same.” One of my past network engineers and I used to tell our clients that we build “boring” systems. They always look and work the same.

Standards also greatly improve maintainability. Technologists who are new to the organization can learn and support the standards more quickly. Standards reduce errors and make re-engineering projects much simpler.

Automation is of critical importance, too. Many tools can help automate back-office functions and functions at the user's desktop. Some of these tools are free, whereas others can cost thousands.

Some automation tools are built into the operating systems and can provide excellent automation. Many of the tasks that you and other users do every day can be reduced or completely removed. This results in a more effective use of your time.

If you find yourself repeating certain tasks over and over, consider writing a macro to automate them. Macros effectively reduce time and errors from tedious and repetitive tasks. Macros are a simple example of a time-saving technology.

When it comes to how things are done, don't be satisfied with the status quo. We as technology professionals should be the first to apply automation and technical tools to help get our own jobs done. If not, how can we demonstrate the effectiveness to the organization(s) we serve?

As a general rule, user-level automation provides greater direct/tangible benefit to the organization. However, to be able to provide user-level automation, you must first automate the tedious tasks in the back-office.

User configurations, software configurations, server maintenance, and so on can be automated. This leaves you time to provide support directly to the users. When you create user-level automation, you greatly increase your exposure in the company.

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## **Create a Peer Knowledge Network**

This might be the most useful piece of advice in this chapter. As you meet other technology professionals, you will naturally meet some who you believe have great skills. You need to create the most effective method to stay in touch with them.

I am not a big user of online chat programs. Usually they are a distraction and waste time. However, in the context of your peer network, these programs can provide instantaneous information.

At a minimum, you could use any one of the online discussion/forums software packages to track conversations with your network. Group communication websites such as MSN Groups and Yahoo Groups can provide e-mail notification of messages and are free.

You must also take part in thriving technical forums. When I say thriving, I don't mean constant friendly banter. I am talking about technologists who post and respond to legitimate questions.

Such a network increases your available intellectual capacity. You become part of a larger, more experienced community.

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## **Be Known As the Go-To Resource**

Never take a not-my-job attitude. You want to be the first person that your company thinks of when it needs answers. Having a strong peer network and having a thriving professional network is critical in meeting this objective.

In addition, you need to have a good list of online resources, knowledgebases, and discussion lists. Your ability to quickly find solutions for the problems thrown your way will cement you as a go-to resource.

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## **Be Ready and Willing to Take on the Necessary Responsibility**

Your willingness to take on responsibility can go a long way toward making you indispensable. In general, management and business owners want individuals who make their jobs easier and more productive.

Your willingness to take on responsibility for projects and people is a critical factor in career success. This is a key career ownership attitude. Wherever and whenever possible, you need to find projects that you can be responsible for.

As stated in Chapter 19, "The Move to Management," the risk is that you must take responsibility for the failure of a project. However, I view this as less risky than taking no responsibility at all.

If you work within an organization that doesn't provide opportunities for project ownership, I recommend making a move. Your career will always be limited in such companies. To make moves into management or other higher paying roles, you need to be able to take responsibility for and push the success of many projects.

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## Have Experts You Call On for Your Organization

You might fear that if your company knows of a resource that is technically better than you, your job is in jeopardy. This might stop you from referring your peers into your organization. The fact is, you can't have all the information and expertise. Being able to have access to other experts and willingly refer them to your company when needed positions you as a solution provider.

It doesn't matter that you did not directly solve every problem. It's more important that you understand the resources that you have available and make the right connections. This understanding is critical for several reasons.

Your company will come to identify you with a great list of resources. That alone is a career-enhancing perception. Secondly, however, is how you will be viewed with those professionals you refer. They, too, extend your professional network. They will perceive you as someone who passes opportunity when appropriate.

Maintain an active contact list that identifies available resources. Make sure these individuals share your passion for solving problems, have great attitudes, and communicate well.

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## Be Passionate About Something!

This is a critical life skill. I'm not necessarily specifying that you be passionate about technology or about business. I'm merely proposing that you have deeply rooted passions in life. Make them a driving force in your professional life.

I find that people who don't have passions or interest often have lackluster performance at work. It is as though their entire life is marked by a general disinterest or lack of focus.

Carrying a passionate attitude about something can help you separate yourself from those who are not so internally motivated.

I'm passionate about many things. In the business world, I love understanding what a client's business is. I enjoy catching the vision of the executive management and then helping to crystallize and realize that vision. This isn't contrived or artificial. I actually take an active interest in what a company produces.

This helps me create better, more proactive solutions. Coupled with a passion toward solution-driven technology, I join the company vision with the possibilities in technology. Following this model will put you on the top of the list of producers at the company.



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## **Never Blame, and Always Have a Corrective Plan**

Sometimes things go wrong. This is inevitable. When this happens, don't pass the blame on. Most business executives understand that mistakes happen. What they struggle with is an unwillingness to take responsibility and then move forward with a corrective plan.

I recently spoke to a group in which my message was to work with passion and to work decisively toward a solution. If you do so, when you make a mistake, you might find that you can correct it before anybody notices.

Although I was making a humorous point, the underlying message has some truth to it.

If you are decisive and moving forward, you will automatically separate yourself from your peers. The ability and willingness to make decisions is one of the most sought-after qualities in an employee. And yet, many people don't do that. In many cases, this is because of a fear of failure.

Informally, here is the model I used. I believed that I would make the right choice or decision 80 percent of the time. I created a course of action and then put it into place. Usually it worked out great. However, in those instances in which something went wrong or didn't work, I quickly adopted corrective action and moved forward.

By modeling that attitude, you demonstrate both initiative and responsibility. If the company that you are working for doesn't want that type of employee, I recommend looking for other opportunities.

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## **Adopt Concept Over Process**

Concept Over Process (COP) is a rapid analysis tool. (See Chapter 21, "Concept Over Process," which is entirely devoted to this idea.) People are going to view technology as either a necessary expense or a value-add within your organization. Your ability to help others perceive technology as a valuable contributor to the organization's success is critical in making you indispensable.

COP provides a methodology for helping you see where the greatest positive impact exists. Then it's up to you to develop the skills necessary to make that a reality.

All of these ideas form a holistic picture of what makes an employee indispensable. It isn't that any one of them is "the key" to your career growth and stability. However, when you match these ideas with your technical skills, they are powerful.

Analyze those whom you see advancing rapidly in your industry. Identify which of these ideas they seem to put into practice. It is likely that the top producers you know are practicing many or all of these ideas. Your objective should be to do the same in your career.

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## Conclusion

Remember, it isn't that learning skills to become indispensable means you will never be unemployed. What it does mean, however, is that you are committed to developing skills and attitudes that are value-rich—that contribute to your company or client.

This commitment will separate you in the quality and quantity of work you provide. You will be known as a producer and will be viewed as a valuable resource. Even if a company you work for shuts doors, downsizes, or moves to a new geographic area, you will have a readily available list of professional contacts and excellent referrals to bring you your next opportunity.

Start today! Work to become indispensable!

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## Actions & Ideas

1. Evaluate your peer/mentor network. Do you have a way to rapidly get in touch with other members? Do you see yourself as a contributor to this group? If not, start today to correct that situation.
2. Create a short list of websites that include active technical discussions and a searchable knowledgebase for several technologies. Don't pick sites that are primary meaningless discussions.

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3. Look at your professional contact list. Identify key experts that your company might be able to use now or in the future. Maintain this list.

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4. Determine if you have something that drives you, a passion. If you don't, identify why and work to remedy that situation.