

The IT Career Builder's Toolkit

Matthew Moran



Cisco Press Copyright © 2005 Matthew Moran

Visit **ciscopress.com** to purchase this book



DEFINING WHAT YOU DO BY DEFINING WHAT YOU ARE

Although many are excited about the prospect of a career in information technology (IT), many do so for the wrong reasons. Using income as a primary objective, while ignoring your ability to maintain the level of performance required in the hi-tech sector, can lead to burnout and frustration.

On the other hand, income is a powerful motivator and should not be ignored when determining career direction.

Creating a comprehensive picture of your skills and desires allows you to more quickly make career decisions that emphasize those factors, in turn increasing your enjoyment and performance on the job.

CHAPTER 4

DEFINING YOURSELF: APTITUDES AND DESIRES

You’ve probably heard the question your entire life: What do you want to be when you grow up? For some, the answer was simple. In elementary school, I would hear kids talking about wanting to be a doctor, a surgeon, a construction worker, and so on. Even though they might have modified their answers over time, they had answers ready.

I, on the other hand, never really had an answer. I struggled, thinking through possible career choices—something I wanted to do over the course of my life—and came up empty. My entrance into a career in technology somewhat reflected this.

I have been programming since I was 13 years old. During that time, however, and even in early adulthood, I never viewed technology as a career choice. While in school, I spent my time taking courses I enjoyed—English, philosophy, earth science, and so on. I believed that I would enter teaching one day.

However, as I moved from job to job, adopting new skills, my “life’s work” was forever elusive.

Eventually, a large insurance company hired me as a data entry clerk. The job was offered more because of my typing ability than any true computer skills I had. However, I soon found myself offering assistance to the department for computer-related issues. When a staff programmer left on vacation and management needed some ad-hoc reports, I muddled through the tasks, providing them the information they needed. Nine months later, I was across the street, in a new department, working as a junior database administrator.

I mention this to emphasize a point made earlier. No career move is without benefit, and if you actively review your aptitudes and desires, a career choice will start to become evident.

This is especially true in the computer industry and technology professions. Individuals often approach me asking my advice about entering the technology field. “Should I learn programming?” or “Should I go to school for network security?”

These people are, unfortunately, letting the proverbial cart drive the horse. My answer is typically the same in all cases, “Sure, if you like it.”

What they are really asking is whether they can make a decent living as a technologist. However, I am more concerned with their long-term prospects and whether the career choice is a good one for them. I have already made it apparent that I believe the IT industry is a great place to build a career.

Ideally, you can make a lot of money as an attorney; however, if you absolutely hate the field and the prospect of working in that industry, the money is secondary. Job burnout is caused by pursuing a career—any career—without regard as to how it makes you feel. You are going to be in a career for a long time, so you might as well like it.

While working for a large law firm, I had the opportunity to work with some of the highest paid attorneys in the country. Many of these men were making more than a million dollars a year. During one project, a managing partner looked at me and said, “I wish I was doing what you’re doing.”

He had been a programmer in school and thoroughly enjoyed it. Now he was a well-compensated attorney who disliked the field but was caught in a gilded cage of sorts. I, of course, commented that I would trade some of my fun for some of his money. But the fact remains that performing work you dislike, even when you’re well-compensated, is usually miserable.

And yet, people continually look at their careers from the standpoint of money first, desire second.

I am a realist, too. I understand that someone’s desire might be to be a professional baseball player. However, that person’s aptitudes simply do not provide the opportunity. I am not advocating an irresponsible perspective whereby you pursue a dead-end profession with no opportunity, simply because you like it. If you are realistic, these types of desires are best relegated to hobbies and pastimes.

The same can be said for technology careers. Be honest and realistic with your particular aptitudes. If you have a hard time understanding control constructs and the logic associated and required for programming, your desire might not be enough to overcome that barrier. Matching your desires with your abilities and aptitude is critical for career growth and long-term career enjoyment.

All is not lost. The person who likes technology but has a love for baseball can still create a truly enjoyable career. With proper positioning and a dedication to networking, that person could work for a sports-centered organization while providing technical solutions. I have seen this type of thing done with great success for the individual. It is a molding of professional aptitude with an area of extreme interest, to create passion in a day-to-day career.

It is not my intention to downplay the need to find a career that provides good compensation. In fact, you will find that pay is of primary importance when determining what your options should be.

Considerations in Your Career Choice

The following sections provide some considerations as you build your career. They are not listed in any particular order—certainly not in an order of importance. What is important to me might not be important to you. In addition, what is critical at this juncture of your career might be far less significant in the future.

The sections that follow provide general guidelines and topics of internal assessment.

Factors to Help Decide Your Career Path: Needs

What must a job provide you? In many cases, people view this strictly in the form of monetary compensation. I would like, however, to look at the topic more comprehensively. Certainly, money must play a part—unless, of course, you have inherited a family fortune. For the majority of us who have not been so lucky, the following needs will be framed as both physical and psychological:

- Pay
- Insurance
- Training
- Commute
- Working conditions (people, culture, environment, hours)
- Future growth potential

Pay

After all my talk de-emphasizing the importance of pay, I've placed it first on the list. First, remember my disclaimer: The list is not organized in any particular order. Also, pay is no small issue. Pay is significant, but it shouldn't overshadow your love of what you do.

Pay and associated material compensation such as vacation, auto expense, insurance, and training (although the latter two are considered in a separate section) are critical. You must be able to eat and live. In addition, there is a psychological benefit to being well compensated.

However, at different stages of your career, pay should have more or less importance. Too often, people—especially young professionals—place so much emphasis on pay that they overlook great opportunities. Pursuing the short-term dollar places you at risk of missing opportunities for long-term payback.

When I counsel technologists on their careers and when I have hired technologists, they often refer to the “average” salary for their field. Salary surveys become the guiding factor in helping them make decisions on which job they want to take.

This is a dangerous practice. Typically, I counsel them to throw away the salary surveys. I simply ask them, “Are you planning to be an average professional?” Normally, the answer is no. “Then, why do you care about the average salary?”

Looking at the average pay in a given field, although perhaps informing you of the salary range, creates an artificial ceiling on potential earnings. I have never been one to strive for average. I don't recommend you do that either. You certainly deserve compensation for your work, but remember that we are looking at a more holistic approach to your overall career.

Note

While I was with the large insurance company, I worked in a user department. I did not work in the traditional IT organization. From the standpoint of the work I produced and the skills I brought to the table, I was paid poorly.

However, I was the sole technologist for the department. I selected the tools to use, provided hardware and software support, performed almost all of the network administration tasks, and was free to work outside of my job description.

The experience gained during that time has been instrumental in my career growth. The year I left the life insurance company, my salary *quadrupled*. Yes, quadrupled. I suppose I could have left the job I was in for one where I made an additional \$5,000 more per year. This would have been more in line with the *average*, but it might have cost me thousands in opportunity and experience.

Pay is a principal factor, but you must weigh it properly against future potential and the experience offered.

Insurance

Although insurance should ideally be viewed as part of the material compensation, along with pay, I dedicate this small section to its discussion because of its importance.

Caution

Disclaimer: I am not serving as a financial advisor, and you must determine your insurance needs based on careful analysis and your own comfort level. This topic requires consideration of your individual circumstances. I recommend speaking to a qualified professional on this matter.

At different times in your life, insurance is more or less critical. I believe you should always have insurance and must look for opportunities that provide it or at least pay you enough to buy your own. However, the level of insurance for someone who has a family is different than for someone who is single.

If you have or are starting a family, for example, health insurance should be comprehensive and not include high co-pays or prescription drug payments. Insurance might become a primary factor in deciding which opportunities to take. A single emergency can be financially devastating if you are inadequately insured.

However, if you are a healthy single, you might need only major medical coverage—insurance that starts paying after you have paid a larger out-of-pocket deductible. Monthly premiums on this type of insurance are typically far less expensive. If you visit the doctor infrequently, coverage is less expensive over time. You are basically “betting” that you will remain healthy.

Insurance needs change over the course of your lifetime. You should factor them into any career decision you make.

Training

For the technology professional, the question, “What have you done for me lately?” is a career constant. The pressure to perform is exacerbated by frequent changes in the tools of the trade. Your ability to stay up to date on key skills greatly enhances your overall value and provides continuous opportunities for professional advancement.

With this being the case, a company’s commitment (or lack thereof) to continuing education must be factored into the total compensation program. With certification courses running thousands of dollars and management seminars costing even more, training in the proper area is like money in the bank.

When I say in the proper area, I mean from both a pragmatic (which is what I'll be using) standpoint and an industry trend standpoint. For example, you might be required to learn an outdated technology because it is necessary for the job at hand. Although the technology is highly pragmatic, it has little future worth. Or you might have the opportunity to learn technology that is not being used by the company in the hopes of a future adoption of that technology.

In addition, soft-skills training is invaluable. Skills such as time management, communication (both written and verbal), and leadership are critical to your overall career growth. In fact, these skills will go further to provide long-term career stability and growth than your technical talent. These are the skills you need as you move from being a staff technologist toward management.

Note

I often tell technologists that understanding business communications and business concepts is more critical than their technical skills. As an employer, if I had my choice between someone who was highly proficient technically but lacked an understanding of business concepts and communication skills versus the opposite—someone who was highly proficient in business concepts and communications but lacked some of the technical know-how, I would hire the latter. Technical skills are rapidly obsolete unless coupled with good conceptual business knowledge. (See Part IV, “More Options to Build Your Career.”)

Commute and Travel Time

Commute and travel are worthy considerations when making a career choice. Their impact on your quality of life can be dramatic. I have seen some whose commutes consume nearly four hours of their life every day.

Time is our most valuable commodity. When you consider a position, factor your commute and associated on-the-job travel into the equation. For instance, a job that pays you \$25 per hour is quickly devalued if your commute averages more than two hours per day. With commute time factored in, you lose \$5 an hour—reducing your actual earnings to \$20 per hour.

You must also factor in wear and tear on your vehicle or any rapid transit fees that apply. This further reduces your actual compensation. I have watched individuals make career moves that include a higher salary but actually produce lower total compensation when these other factors are considered.

I am not indicating that you should never take a position that requires a commute. I only recommend that you consider its impact on quality of life and total compensation.

I have effectively kept my commute to less than an hour each day for most of my career. I would rather move closer to my company than commute. I did, however, once take a position that required a two-hour commute. However, when considering all the other factors, it was a sacrifice I was willing to make. Part of what made it feasible was the fact that the employer paid for train and subway fair. I used the time on the train to catch up on reading.

Travel is loosely associated with commute. A position that requires extensive travel time can be devastating to your personal life if you are not careful. The rigors and demands of living out of a suitcase and logging considerable airport time are quite stressful.

For a time, these job demands might be fun, even glamorous, but you have to consider their overall impact. Although I have enjoyed those business trips I have taken, I can't imagine spending weeks at a time away from family and friends.

You must also factor in what that travel time means to your overall compensation. Even if you are not working, your time away in a hotel is still being sacrificed. Invariably, being away on travel leads to longer working days in many cases. There is simply little else to do in an unfamiliar city.

Once again, I am not indicating that you turn down a job that requires travel. You need to gauge the impact to your life and overall career plan.

Jobs that include travel do have some benefits. My sister travels professionally. She actually assesses various destinations and travel programs for her company's clients. Although she would honestly tell you about the rigors of constant travel, she has also had the opportunity to visit exotic locations and stay at world-class resorts.

Working Conditions (People, Culture, Environment, Hours)

When considering potential career choices, you would be wise to assess the overall working conditions at the company in question. Several factors make up working conditions.

The people you work with and the overall attitude and feel of a company (the culture) play a central role in your satisfaction and enjoyment of a particular opportunity. If the culture is stoic and conservative and you are not, you might find that personality conflicts occur. The adverse might also be true.

I am cautious here. I don't want you to preclude an opportunity just because your personality or style might be different from the company as a whole. The variation you provide might be (should be) a great addition to the culture's diversity.

Still, you would do well to understand the personality of the company and how that might impact you. I have been in organizations that I considered stodgy. They lacked creativity, imagination, and any concept of levity. Even as a consultant, I turn down such clients and the potential revenue. I know that eventually, my nature is going to create a culture clash somewhere.

Your ability to feel as though you share goals and interest with the team is a big factor in career satisfaction.

The physical environment also plays a factor in your overall career enjoyment. I once worked in a building with virtually no windows. I found it stifling to have no view of the outside world. I didn't necessarily need to have a window desk, but the ability to have more than a clock's input as to time of day proved crucial for me.

Is the environment clean, inviting, and well-maintained? I bring this up for two reasons. First, a poorly maintained work environment can be depressing and sap energy. This in turn can lead to poor performance and dissatisfaction.

More important, the physical environment might indicate business management or ownership's care for its employees. If employees are working in subpar conditions, advancement might be similarly subpar.

You have to evaluate this for yourself, however. Perhaps the business is just starting out or saving money for future expansion. This might be an excellent place to work—effectively hitching your career to their upcoming growth.

The hours you are expected to work are also critical. There are always times when additional hours are required for project completion. In IT, this is particularly true. If you find, however, that long hours are considered the norm and that advancement is tied largely to your working those hours, consider how this will impact your life.

I have four children. They take part in various activities and sports. Every season, I try to coach one or two of my children's sporting activities. I would not work for an employer who had unreasonable expectations for the time I spend at work.

You should, however, have a realistic expectation in this area. Sometimes, particularly early in your career, long hours are necessary. As you develop your skills and tools, you will exert additional effort and spend additional time to do so. It is when the lengthy hours become part of your life that problems and conflict can occur.

Future Growth Potential

Often, long-term gain is sacrificed when the future growth potential of a given position is overlooked. At some companies, technical talent is strictly relegated to each person's particular job function. Network administrators perform only network administrative tasks, and programmers work only on their particular programs. Cross training and exposure to new technologies are extremely limited.

From a career growth standpoint, this can be limiting and can also lead to job burnout and boredom. If you entered technology because you desired exposure to the many facets it offers, such a situation will frustrate you.

However, as we evaluate a prospective employer's offer, pay so often dominates our evaluation that we overlook the opportunities provided in ancillary areas. A smaller company, or a position in a non-IT role where IT skills must be diverse, can provide opportunities that are seldom available in larger, more established IT shops.

Particularly, when you are new to the field, you should carefully consider what you hope to glean from your job experience. If you simply want something to put food on the table for that year, pay will be the deciding factor. If instead you want to develop a broad skill set, with exposure to as many different technologies as possible, you might sacrifice in pay.

I am certainly not saying you cannot get both. When you constantly expose yourself to new technologies and take on diverse projects, you become more valuable to the company you are with and more valuable in the job market. Although most people have their specialties, a specialist who also develops many general skills is a unique commodity; when this person is discovered, he can command a larger salary.

Your commodity as a technology professional is *solutions*. For companies, this means creating tools that help increase revenue or reduce costs—either directly or through increased efficiency or better information. To be effective at creating such solutions, you must understand the broadest range of technologies and the company products or services, how they bring these into the market, and the departmental support and interaction within the company. A company that provides cross-training and cross-project opportunities can help you learn to create these solutions.

Factors to Help Decide Your Career Path: Desires

Although you must meet core needs, don't overlook your desires. Once again, in your long-term plan, your desires are vital for keeping you motivated to pursue career growth. It is hard to stay at peak performance when you are doing something you dislike.

I caution you, however, not to use this as license to pass on great opportunities because of some uncomfortable or difficult facet. The happiest workers are those who are generally happy in any circumstance. I want to emphasize happy or content, not satisfied. Happiness and professional contentment can exist without satisfaction. Be content in your job, but be intent on growth.

For example, if you want to become a programmer, but the only technology-related position involves simple report writing and administrative functions for some period, don't become frustrated and quit. If, while performing these functions, the company you are with treats you well, compensates you fairly, and is not overtly attempting to thwart your attempts to advance, consider staying.

It might be that the job you want is simply not there for you—yet. Are you consistently performing your job so well as to have your employer take notice? If not, you might still have some skills to master.

Sometimes you need to be diligent and demonstrate the self-discipline to work independently (at home, after hours) on the new skills you want to acquire. If you relegate this responsibility to your employer, you will not only be frustrated, but you will limit your potential growth and earnings. Part of what makes technology an exciting career is the new skills you get to learn, but this is your responsibility, not your employer's.

Also, have you talked to your employer about your career desires? There is a damaging notion among employees who believe that an employer should recognize their desire to move up or change jobs and proactively present the option. In a fantasy world where deadlines, their own career concerns, other employees, and day-to-day operations do not exist, this might happen.

It is better to have a candid discussion with your boss early. Let him know where you would like to be professionally and why. Employers would rather find in-house talent—a known commodity—instead of going through the expense and time attempting to hire from outside the company.

Take stock of your career desires. You should have both short-term and long-term desires to motivate you and direct your decisions.

Factors to Help Decide Your Career Path: Skills

This one can be a killer for young technologists. Why? Because they often overestimate their skills. In many cases, they rank themselves as more talented or knowledgeable than they actually are. This can lead to bitterness because they perceive their entry-level role and compensation as beneath them.

Your skills will, of course, play a part in your overall career plan, both short term and long term. You must have a realistic perception of what you bring to the table. If not, you will overlook those from whom you can learn, and you will not be motivated to find optimizations and enhancements to your current skill set.

I frequently tell my clients when addressing a new technology project that I am going to get advice from the “smart people” in the field. I say this tongue-in-cheek, but in a real sense, I understand the limitations to my knowledge. My willingness to acknowledge and understand these limitations provides continuous opportunities for learning.

Even those things that I believe I have mastered are subject to the evaluation of my peers. With technical knowledge, someone always knows a little optimization or tweak that you have overlooked. In addition, new tools are developed for existing technologies on a daily basis. Your willingness to gather information and advice from your peers keeps you up to date on such developments.

On the other side of the spectrum, don’t underestimate your ability to acquire new skills while on the job. If you take a position that places you well within your skill set, there’s little hope for advancement. However, if you take a position that involves skills that are far beyond your actual talent, you are inviting failure.

It is best to find a position where your current talent can make an immediate and positive impact, but the need for new technology is available to motivate and stretch you to advance your skills.

BEWARE: ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

A note of caution: I’ve given you several factors to consider when making career decisions. Certainly take these into account. However, don’t overanalyze these factors in a way that freezes you. I know too many people who play so many what-if scenarios in their head that they never make a choice.

Or if they do, they spend the next several years second guessing the wisdom of their decision. I’ve mentioned it before and will do so again: No job makes or breaks a career. All jobs, even those that result in negative situations, add value. They give you skills and experience that you will use to make better career choices in the future.

Conclusion

There are many factors to consider when taking a job or leaving a job. More important, there are factors to consider when choosing a career path. You need to find a realistic combination between those items I discuss in this chapter and any other intangibles that you can bring to bare.

Information technology offers a myriad of possibilities, from the highly creative to the highly analytical. As you progress through various opportunities, try to determine the factors that best motivate and mesh well with your innate abilities. Doing so will provide you both opportunity and enjoyment.

Actions & Ideas

1. Create a list of needs and wants.

2. Use the Weekly Cashflow Planning Spreadsheet found on the book's accompanying CD-ROM to create a budget so that you can have a base understanding of your material needs.