



Blindsided! Career disasters I never saw coming

IT pros tell about the backstabbers, career dead ends and megatrends they never saw coming.

By Mary K. Pratt

March 17, 2008 (Computerworld) Caution: Watch for backstabbers, career breakers and emerging megatrends.

That warning should come with each IT job, but it doesn't. As a result, most IT professionals have stories about the ones they never saw coming.

A few of them shared their tales in hopes of saving you from experiencing the sudden jolt of your career hitting a wall, the view from behind as a megatrend streaks away or the sickening thud of an unexpected hit from your blind side.

Straight Through the Heart

Former CIO John Stevenson remembers grooming a particular employee to someday succeed him. But after two years of working well together, the relationship underwent a radical change. "That person was anxious to take my chair much [sooner] than I realized," Stevenson says.

He learned from a colleague that his protégé had been plotting a career assassination for a few months, spreading rumors and undermining Stevenson's authority. "It was sudden and a surprise," he recalls. "It was affecting my ability to lead the organization.

"And," he added, "it could happen to any manager in any job."

Stevenson struggled with how best to handle the situation and eventually followed some tough advice from a colleague at the [Society for Information Management](#) (SIM). "I was getting to the point of anger and angst, but he said to be calm about how I approached things," explains Stevenson. "He said all I could do was hold my hand out and turn the other cheek and see what happens. And by turning the other cheek and doing what I should be doing -- and that's open and frank communication and embracing people at all levels -- I outlasted him. Others saw through what he was trying to do. He eventually resigned."

Stevenson is now a [SIM Foundation](#) board member and president of consulting firm J.G. Stevenson Associates LLC.

The Errant E-mail

As an IT architect at a large vendor, Jeffrey Callan has his own bosses as well as those at client companies. He also has peers at competing firms, although he sometimes collaborates with them while working for client companies.

Callan successfully managed these complex relationships for about 25 years, until a peer used a collaborative situation to land a deal that both vendors had sought. Callan says this peer got an edge by questioning Callan's work at the client company, bringing into doubt his IT competency.

Preventive Measures

Office politics, bad blood and public accusations can be prevented, says Susan Bethanis, CEO of Mariposa Leadership Inc. and author of [Leadership Chronicles of a Corporate Sage](#) (Kaplan Publishing, 2004).

To prevent being blindsided, she says, build relationships so that co-workers are more likely to approach you with issues before they become problems. Use formal and informal channels such as meetings, lunches and coffee breaks to ask co-workers for advice and feedback. "They're going to come to you if they're hearing things, and they're going to come to you 'offline,'" Bethanis says.

If something does hit you unexpectedly, first understand the situation: Who are the players? What is your role? Why is this happening?

Then begin damage control. Seek advice from neutral parties, and, depending on the situation, consider approaching the person who blindsided you, Bethanis says. Then chart your path forward and follow it.

The move caught Callan by surprise, but the fallout from the situation was even more surprising. Callan's own bosses asked for his assessment, which he provided in a frank e-mail intended only for internal review. Somehow, though, that e-mail ended up not only at the competitor's company, but also at the client. It put Callan in the awkward situation of having to explain his words to the client.

Callan continued to work for his own company, and he worked with the client company for 10 more months. But he learned to watch what he writes, making sure his e-mails are carefully worded and providing only as much detail as necessary, with no personal notes or emotion.

"If I have something [sensitive] to tell someone, I make sure it's the old-fashioned way -- 'Let's talk' -- because e-mails are so easily forwarded," Callan says.

Career Dead End

Jerry Luftman had worked at [IBM](#) for 23 years when the company unexpectedly offered him an early retirement package in 1993. Under the offer, he would have to leave that year but wouldn't be eligible for benefits until 2000.

"The question was, could I get [another] job, and how much [salary] could I get?" Luftman says -- big questions for someone who had started with IBM right out of college and had stayed.

Luftman, who had been teaching at [Columbia University](#) and Stevens Institute of Technology, sought advice from trusted colleagues in business and academia. He decided to pursue an offer from Stevens to build the college's business and management training for technology students.

"I can say without any hesitation that the move I made was one of the better things I have done," says Luftman, who is now the associate dean and distinguished professor of Stevens' School of Technology Management.

The Technology That Got Away

Like most executives, Subbu Murthy receives reams of e-mails, many from unknown sources. So in early 2003, when Murthy opened an e-mail from a small company promoting social networks, he gave the material only a quick glance. "Social networking was just coming up. We had 14,000 doctors in the network, and I thought, 'Does this apply?' And then I thought, 'Maybe not; it's another hype,'" says Murthy, who was then the CIO at a health care company that managed disability claims.

But in retrospect, Murthy wishes he'd paid more attention. "It turns out that it's a very powerful tool to collaborate. I just missed this trend," he says.

But he learned his lesson. "My advice to my CIO colleagues is to build some intelligence filters around what is really important, so you don't let good ones pass," he says.

Murthy, now president and CEO of USourceIT Pvt., a company that provides IT offshore services, is setting up social networking tools for programmers to interact. He also takes part in several executive roundtables where he can talk and hear about various topics, including which evolving technologies are worth watching.

The Report That Bit Back

As a group CIO at Bausch & Lomb Inc. in the 1990s, Dan Gingras helped evaluate the IT department at a company Bausch & Lomb planned to acquire. He reported finding several problems, including a failed ERP implementation. After delivering his report, he assumed his assignment was done.

But Gingras was soon surprised to learn that he'd been assigned to fix the problems he had outlined. "I thought I'd write this report and go back to my old job," he says. "I wasn't thinking beyond what I was doing. I wasn't thinking about the next step. I never thought I'd be asked to fix the situation." Despite his lack of foresight, he got the job done. But Gingras, now a partner in the New England practice of consulting firm Tatum LLC, learned from that experience. "Now I know if I'm going to make a recommendation that I'm [likely] going to be asked to implement it," he says.

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