

# Competing For Your Own Job

Free trade is great! There, I've said it. Even in the face of rampant off-shoring in my own chosen field of IT, I believe that in the long run, fair and true free trade offers the most benefits to the most people. But it can be painful getting there.

IT work is being outsourced / off-shored to parts of Asia and Eastern Europe and other regions of the world where workers are educated, intelligent, and articulate. And they can work for significantly less money because the cost of living is significantly lower.

In this paper, I would like to examine how to deal with this phenomon. Because I think it is not only possible, but desirable, to compete for your own job. Do not roll over and give up. Get some backbone and at least give it a shot.

And the first point to make is: do not compete on price alone. You lose. This is about fighting the fight on a larger battlefield where you have more options and more value to offer than your competition.

[Over the decades, our profession has been known by several different labels: EDP (Electronic Data Processing), DP (Data Processing), IS (Information Systems), MIS (Management Information Systems) and now IT (Information Technology). We use the current term throughout our discussion here.]

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## How Did This Come About?

From our perspective, most of us entered the business in our twenties, either hiring directly into IT or moving there by some company transfer program in the days when managers were looking desperately for people to help out in IT.

We worked long hours at low salaries because we were paying our dues, learning the IT trade as well as how our respective industries worked, and how our particular company worked. We became effective and helped our companies survive and prosper by handling vast amounts of information effectively.

Over time, our pay and benefits increased, as we proved our value to the organization. This is a normal, typical progression in most fields.

Then, perhaps, we got lazy, or comfortable, or complacent. We started to believe our own press clippings, as they say. We couldn't be challenged. Never mind the UNIX and PC worlds: they were just toys for engineers and geeks. True or not (and it was certainly accurate in some cases), IT workers became viewed as arrogant and non-responsive.

Then came real change: maturing of UNIX and PC hardware and software, advent of very high speed networks, GUIs on every desktop, and the Internet.

From management and executive perspectives, IT became invisible, except when there was a crisis. Major applications were in place, return on investment seemed way too low for the IT function part of the enterprise.

When the economy turned down, managers were looking to cut costs. IT was a good target. Downsizing, then outsourcing, and now off-shoring all looked like viable alternatives: cut costs, get out of the IT business ("it's not our core competency"), keep the business viable and running. And we won't have to deal with those arrogant geeks in IT.

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## What's Wrong With This Picture?

There are a number of flaws in this approach to handling IT. And there have been some reality changes we in IT need to address, and that is what I want to cover here.

First, despite what the business schools say, net profits are not the only necessary measurement of a successful enterprise. After all, we can cut costs by firing all the sales people, or all the managers, or all the executives. This will create a brief spike in net profits (less personnel cost, income in the pipeline). And the company will die.

The first measure of a successful enterprise has to be long term survival. The organization has to produce goods and services the marketplace wants, at competitive prices that cover costs plus some profits, in a long term sustainable manner, without committing fraud or breaking laws.

The role of directors, and executives, and managers is to organize the enterprise to accomplish that. And that is no easy task. It requires wisdom, insight, patience, knowledge of the markets the organization serves, and some willingness to take appropriate risks and make hard decisions. Tough work.

Success deserves rewards (let's not get greedy though, as that tends to sink the enterprise), and failure deserves penalties (or, at the very least, the removal of rewards). If managers and executives are going to chase after the next bonus, the next raise, the next job (which is pretty much human nature), directors need to structure rewards in a way that includes the long term health of the organization as the primary metric.

So let's examine the handling of IT in this context. After all, that's our area of concern. The question is: what does IT provide an organization in the service of meeting its goals? I believe there are two main benefits from IT:

- \* Manage information flow; that is, provide tools to handle the information related to production, sales, marketing, shipping, invoicing, accounting, personnel, inventory, and more. IT provides information infrastructure.
- \* Provide creative services that differentiate an organization from its competitors.

To the extent the above are important to an organization, it is probably important to keep IT as integral to the company. If IT does not provide the above, it is time for some changes.

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## Taking Care of Your Own Needs

However, most of us do not have much clout in the executive suite. If we want to keep (and even enhance) our jobs in IT, it is incumbent on us to take actions in the areas we can control. So here are some suggestions that may help...

### Lose the Attitude

It is time to recognize the world of IT has changed permanently. We can never again rest on our laurels. IT is changing continuously, and we need to be responsive to these changes. That does not mean blindly accepting the latest technology fad, but it does mean

- \* keeping current in our own base
- \* learning what technologies are emerging, and trying to choose the ones that are significant for our business
- \* actively learning those emerging technologies

I've had students tell me in class "I'm only three years from retirement. I don't need this stuff." As my colleague Hunter Cobb says, you might as well paint a sign on your chest that says "Fire me first." Stories are legion of people close to retirement losing all or part of their benefits simply by being let go shortly before vesting or retirement.

Being in a constant mode of learning makes you interesting and engages you in work again. It keeps you humble because today no one can know it all. Besides, this stuff can be fun, challenging, and rewarding. Work can actually be like it was for you in the early years.

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### Make Yourself Invaluable

Here, I don't mean by knowing how some arcane application runs and no one else knows how to fix it. That's degrading job protection - and it keeps you locked into an area that no one else cares about.

Rather, you have to prove your value to your organization every day. This means

- \* sharing what you have learned from your studies, formally, informally, or even casually
- \* giving careful thought to existing processes - how can they be improved using new capabilities?
- \* understanding how technology can provide new services for clients, thinking up new ways to keep existing customers and gain new ones; then following up:
  - \* discuss your ideas with co-workers, managers, anyone who will listen
  - \* refine these ideas, when they seem viable
  - \* take initiative to estimate the benefits of new alternatives
  - \* sell your ideas to management

This is the kind of thing no outsourcing service or company can provide: recommendations based on intimate knowledge of how your organization works and how to improve its effectiveness.

Do not be put off by the thought of "selling"; you will not become a scumbag. Everyone sells. You sell your family, friends, and colleagues on yourself, on what you would like a group to do, and other matters that you care about. Care enough about your work to help others see your value.

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### Make Yourself Invaluable, 2

There are resources available to help with this.

- \* The internet is loaded with sources on new and existing technologies
  - IBM makes all of its manuals available for free on the Internet, in both Book Manager and PDF format; lack of information is no excuse for not keeping current
  
- \* There are professional, technical training companies. We (The Trainer's Friend, Inc.) believe we are among the best. But there are other training companies.
  - Convince management to hold classes from these companies
  - If that doesn't work, we offer a self-study type program called Remote Contact Training; it's self-paced, tied to a mentor by phone and email
  
- \* Organize internal training sessions, using your own subject matter experts. Since these people know your company procedures, vocabulary, and business, these can be invaluable, practical sessions
  - Regular training sessions
  - Informal sessions (brown bag lunches, afternoon seminars, etc.)

No one cares about your job as much as you do. If you want to keep it, you must do your share. Work hard, continue to grow, offer new ideas. Even if you don't keep your job, this prepares you well for finding a new job.

Best wishes.

-Steve Comstock  
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