

Future proofing your IT career

Paul Foster et al. (2019) MD Balance Recruitment

Some lessons Learned from the GFC.

The Australian IT job market has had its ups and down over the years; the last major such ruction was the GFC in 2008. In Australia we technically avoided a recession (we only had one quarter of negative growth not 2), however for many in the IT jobs market it was a tumultuous time.

Fast forward a decade or so and we face an uncertain global outlook: “Trumpism”, a US-China trade war, Brexit and a wobbly Europe (amongst others). Add in some local factors such as the housing slump and low wages growth, and it’s hard not to feel a little uneasy. So with all this mind, now might be a good time to reflect on the last downturn, and pick out some lessons learned to ensure we’re prepared for all today’s eventualities.

Some people sailed through the GFC comparatively unscathed in spite of being made either redundant, having their contracts terminated or rates reduced, whilst others really struggled to keep their career on track. There is no doubt there was an element of luck involved with respect to projects being withdrawn, organisational cutbacks and corporate collapses, but there were also some clear patterns of behaviour that meant some IT professionals found it easier to maintain their career momentum than others. It’s worth noting these patterns and considering them in the context of managing your own career. And employers might also want to take note of some of these issues, so they can better help define the career path of their employees and improve retention.

Look ahead, stay relevant.

It’s absolutely critical that you’re working with the technologies that are widely used and the practices that are heavily utilised. Even if you were the best Visual Basic programmer in Australia, you would most likely be out of a job if you hadn’t moved with the technologies. At times that will mean leaving your comfort zone, and even perhaps taking a short term step backwards in order to cross skill into a new area, but it will pay dividends long term.

This is something successful candidates are very good at. They keep their skills up to date, have an eye on emerging technologies and are among the first to identify changes in the marketplace. They will also follow through and act on their observations.

As an employer, this drive to evolve is something that should frame your management of your best people. There’s a temptation to push your best people into your trouble shots and difficult projects, but if that’s not aligned with their career aspirations and changes in technology you might end up driving that person to leave. Just because a decision is the best one for the company, it doesn’t mean that it is the best decision for someone’s career.

The dangers of management!

Many people see the step into management as a natural career progression, but the reality is (1) not everyone has the skills to be a good manager, and (2) there are a lot more technical, hands on roles than there are management roles. Those who have been newly promoted into management are especially at risk when the market changes. With limited experience in their new role, they struggle to compete for jobs with more experienced managers. Equally, when these candidates attempt to drop back and apply for a technical role, they find employers questioning their motivation. Additionally, their lack of recent use of their technical skills has left them rusty and a step behind their talent competitors.

It is often the managers that are caught up in restructures and redundancies. Very rarely does a company facing a crisis decide “we need more middle management”. And management remains the most fiercely competitive layer of the job market. It has enabled employers to be very particular about what they look for in a candidate.

We’re not suggesting people not move into management positions, rather that you critically evaluate your strengths and weaknesses before making the jump. It might also be a good idea to do a split role, where you remain hands on while taking on the managerial responsibilities to establish whether this is a space you enjoy and are good at.

Certifications count.

There’s no substitute for commercial experience, and employers will indeed take experience over certifications alone. However during the GFC we were overwhelmed with candidates and often found ourselves looking at 15 or 20 great looking CVs. In these cases having some certifications to complement strong commercial experience becomes a great differentiator. It’s also worth noting that a number of companies require a certain percentage of their team to be certified in order to maintain industry benchmarks (such as Microsoft Gold partnerships) and meet client contracts.

There are though two key points we’d add around getting certifications:

- (1) Getting certifications without having the experience to back it doesn’t have great value, and
- (2) You need to target certifications that have some credibility in the industry (some of the more junior technical certifications are lacking in this regard). Feel free to reach out to us and ask our opinion before you spend thousands on your next certification.

Don't become a "slasher".

A slasher is what we call someone who does a bit of everything *i.e.* I'm a business analyst/tester/developer/DBA/help-desker/service level manager. While it might make for an interesting day at work, that versatility is a double edged sword – you're not actually a specialist at anything, and most roles in the market are clearly defined as requiring expertise in a particular speciality. If, for example, you're going for a job as a DBA, you'll find it hard to compete with DBAs who are doing the job 40 hours/week when you only spend a couple of hours a week in that capacity.

In contrast, there are some roles which sit together quite naturally, such as security & network engineering, or project management & business analysis. In these cases a combined role can actually be beneficial – it's more of an issue when you start spanning a range of disparate areas. It's important to remember just because the company asks you to take on some responsibilities (and perhaps will even pay you more to do so) that it may not be the best thing for your career!



Develop and maintain your network.

A huge proportion of jobs never actually make it to the marketplace, rather they are filled by people already known to the company or that have been referred to them. Too many people fail to invest time in their network, and when they are trying to find new opportunities, they have a limited amount of channels through which to broadcast their availability. Given there are fantastic tools such as LinkedIn to create and manage a network, there's no reason to let this lapse.

We suggest dedicating 30-60 minutes a month to setting up and maintaining your network. Take a broad based approach – link in with external suppliers, contractors, stakeholders across the business, people you meet socially, training providers, salespeople, recruiters, etc, etc. Any of these people might be able to make that critical introduction that results in you finding your next job.

The Question of Tenure.

An often discussed aspect of career management is the one of tenure. How often should I be looking to move jobs and/or employers? It's something we discussed at length here at Balance during the preparation of this article. There's no doubt stability is something that looks good on a resume (even for contractors) – potential employers like to see those long blocks of employment, as it gives them some confidence that you're both good at your job and will stick around for a reasonable period of time. The flip side of that is you don't want to be seen to be getting rusted on in any one role. You need to keep learning, you need to continue working with new technologies, you need to widen your knowledge of business processes and practices.

Ultimately the need to move depends on the nature of your role and your company. If you're working in a dynamic company that is changing & growing, embraces new technologies, and your roles/responsibilities are progressing in the right direction, you can pretty much stay with a company indefinitely without harming your prospects of landing your next position. If though you find your role isn't evolving, there aren't many projects, and the company is happy to sit on their existing technologies and systems, it might be time to consider moving. We would though suggest that *moving after any less than around 18 months would be considered a very short stint.*

Summary

If you are currently an IT worker in an East Coast Australian capital city, count yourself very lucky.

We've had more than a decade of consistent growth in our sector, the world is embracing technology like never before and there is a consistent demand for highly skilled tech workers in our region. Where once we were terrified that every job would be offshored, this trend has stalled and both international and local players see the value in what local workers produce.

However, do not assume the good times will last forever and some preventative steps to future proof your career will improve your ability to withstand whatever headwinds may come along.

If you would like to discuss this article further, or have any question. Call us on +61 2 9091 8222. We'd be delighted to chat.