

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

When You're 64?

By Douglas E. Welch

Having just celebrated my 39th birthday (really, not like Jack Benny), I find myself looking at the world, and my high-tech career, a little differently every day. Little by little, I have realized that no matter how much I love my work, I probably don't want to be toting computers and climbing under desks when I am in my 50s. From now on, any evaluation of *my* career will involve thinking of what I need to do in the next 10 years to make sure that I am not trying to have the career of a 30-year-old when I am 60.

Maybe you are only in your 20s or 30s today, but you would be wise to consider, even in the smallest way, where you might want to be in 20 years.

Age Discrimination

You might think only Hollywood actresses have to worry about their age and their looks, but these days anyone can be subjected to age discrimination. Depending on your career choice, it can happen sooner or later, but you might one day be facing a client who is 20 or 30 years your junior across the meeting table. While people like to talk about the benefits of age and wisdom, younger people don't always like dealing with their elders when they are trying to develop wings of their own.

As you grow older, you can find yourself engaged in a constant battle to maintain your status. Regardless of your skills, younger workers will want to flex their own mental and political muscle, sometimes at your expense. The closer you work to the "front lines" of high-tech, training, troubleshooting and tech work, the more exposed you will be to the slings and arrows of others. Your goal, as your high-tech career matures, is to move yourself into positions where you can still exercise your technology skills, while also managing or mentoring other, younger high-tech workers.

Rising to the level of a mentor and/or well-respected manager puts you in the position of assisting newer high-tech workers, instead of attempting to compete with them. It only makes sense to take all that you have learned over the years and pass it on. This doesn't mean you can't/won't get involved in some "hands-on" work, but you won't have to face the day-to-day crises that we all face as high-tech workers.

Moving Up, but Not Out

The trick to developing a career as a mentor is to start early. If you are in the corporate world, take new team members under your wing from the start. Everyone knows how nice it is to have a helping hand in the first rough weeks of a new job. You should make it clear to everyone that you are willing to help, whatever the problem.

In some cases, just listening to your coworkers can be a big benefit. When I was last in a corporate environment, I had a great coworker. We each knew that we had someone with which to discuss ideas and problems, especially those difficult troubleshooting issues that always arise, without fear that the coworker would exploit that discussion for his own benefit later.

Luckily, we treated each problem like a puzzle we enjoyed solving together. There were many occasions where we solved extremely difficult, and expensive, technology issues merely by talking them out over a cup of coffee. Relationships like this are essential to any high-tech career. They allow you to amplify the effect you have on companies and their employees. They also build your reputation as someone who can get things done by using his own knowledge and the knowledge of those around him.

Today, as an independent consultant, I have several people who can assist me with specific operating systems, high-end video questions, or network cabling issues. It usually takes only a quick instant message, e-mail or telephone call to discover the problem and prepare a solution. I consider these connections one of the most important parts of my career. More importantly, they are something that can be gained only over time. Help out newcomers to high-tech careers by giving them a jumpstart on these important relationships. Put out a helping hand and someone is bound to accept it.

As you get older, your high-tech career should take on new angles, new responsibilities and new ideas. Starting today, you need to keep this idea in the back of your mind. You need to constantly think about where you want your high-tech career to be in 10, 20, or 30 years. Before you know it, you will be there. □

Douglas E. Welch is a freelance writer from Van Nuys, California, and can be reached by e-mail at douglas@welchwrite.com or on the Web at www.welchwrite.com.