CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

The Art of the Small Deal

By Douglas E. Welch

America is often seen as the country of the big deal. Everyone seems to be looking for the big score, the winning lottery ticket or, in the case of the computer careerist, the one big project that will make enough money that you won't have to work for the rest of the year.

While you all probably know the fallacy of this thinking, you can be caught up in the search for the big deal, to the great detriment of your high-tech career. While you can and should continue looking for the big deal, you need to fit it in and around the day-to-day work that keeps you solvent.

Waiting, Waiting, Waiting

One of the largest problems in looking for the big deal is that it feeds on your time, your energy and your pocketbook. Very few individuals can muster the capital to sustain themselves while preparing draft after draft of proposals, bids and budgets.

Sure, the possible rewards are great, but the possible consequences are just as large. The failure to garner one big project, or losing one already in progress, can bring you to the edge of bankruptcy. This is the high-tech equivalent of "putting all your eggs in one basket" that your parents always warned you about. Searching only for the big deals in your career can leave you waiting and wondering where your career, and savings, disappeared to.

Constantly chasing after the big deal can also have consequences for your self-esteem. Despite what some people might say, most people like to work—to create something—not be engaged in an endless series of negotiations and planning sessions.

When you spend your days creating unused proposals, you might find yourself wondering what your career is all about. If you are like most people, you developed your high-tech career to do something, not simply talk about what might be done should the budget, time and price all work out. After sitting through yet another meeting, you might just begin wondering what you are doing with your career and your life.

Small Deals to Big Deals

In my own career, and those of my friends, it is consistently the small deals that have bolstered careers and finances. We might be trying to put together bigger projects as opportunities arise, but we also look at each client as a possible big deal, when considered in the long term.

I personally have three clients with whom I have worked for more than five years. Each of these clients started out as a simple call to solve some problem with their computers. There was no bidding process, no vetting of references, no contracts, just a simple troubleshooting call. Over this time, I have consistently made a steady income from these clients. This is especially welcome during the normally slow periods of the year and during a slow economy, such as the one we are experiencing now. The value of these clients, over time, far outweighs the possible big deals I may have made with them. Over my career lifetime, it is clients like these that will have made me profitable, not a few big deals.

One usually unexplored aspect of big deals is the difficulty in establishing a long-term relationship around them. On large projects, the long-term negotiations, sales and budget meetings, and "change order" conflicts can lead to broken promises and bad feelings on both sides of the table. At the end of a big project, the company may see you as a problem that they had to overcome instead of a partner in their success.

Conversely, you may be so tired of working with them that you simply move on to the next client with no regard to a future relationship. "Familiarity breeds contempt," so the old saying goes. Taking your business relationships "one day at a time" allows each of you to adjust and evaluate the relationship over time, and provides natural "out points" when the relationship becomes too strained.

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Big deals can be a wonderful thing, but they are few and far between. Your high-tech career is best served by building your clientele one small step at a time. I think you will find, as I have, that a significant number of these small deals will turn into big deals over time. Don't ignore a big project if it drops into your lap, but look at every call, every Web design project, and every programming gig as a big deal in the making. ❏

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