Matthew Ballantine

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Question: *What is your educational background? How did you decide to work as an IS/IT professional?*

Answer: So I did my major degree in sociology and my minor was in information systems. So when I graduated in the early 90s, to be honest, I kind of fell into an IT job, because there weren't many jobs for sociologists at the time, and I worked for a big global accounting firm in their IT department, initially just doing admin work and then managed to work my way up into, at first, a helpdesk role and then my career kind of started from that.

When I left university I actually was really interested in getting involved in the media, and I think in the early 90s when I first started working in business systems, that felt a very long way from a media role.

But a couple of jobs down the line I went to work for the BBC, and again actually doing IT support initially, and at that point in the later 90s, suddenly we started to see the worlds of IT and media start to come together, and I was working then on projects which were about helping the business part of the BBC to be able to do things online, particularly where it was about bringing together traditional media, digital media and business systems to do things like helping sales processes around the TV programme sales business and all those kinds of things.

So after about five or six years into my career, I suddenly found that by choosing a career route in IT, I'd actually managed to start to fulfil my ambitions around the media as well.

The social sciences part I think is getting increasingly important for me; that, actually, a lot of what IT is about, the focus traditionally has been on technology, and up until maybe five or six years ago, actually any organisation that was doing IT had to spend most of its attention on making sure the technical parts of it worked, and it often meant that the challenging parts around business change, organisational change, culture, that are actually the intrinsic parts of delivering successful business systems projects, were kind of pushed out to the periphery. It was easier to focus on the technical because it was very black and white, it was very engineering, it was very, you could see progress, and actually doing things like organisation and culture change is much softer, much more

difficult to be able to get people's heads around, probably more difficult to track and to measure.

What we've seen I think in the last five or six years as we've started to see the emergence of both commoditised cloud-based technology and also consumerised technologies become increasingly prevalent, is that I think now we're starting to see the IT department needs to worry less about the nuts and bolts of the technology, which means that either they need to focus much more on the social aspects, or actually they don't have a role, and I think that actually for me, now, that puts me in a really interesting position because I understand social science, and it's an interesting time to be in the industry.

Question: *In a few words, could you explain for our students, what your job entails? If you were to mention one aspect in which your job has changed over the last 10 years, what would it be?*

Answer: It's interesting, the idea of asking how my job has changed in the last 10 years. I see how my job has changed in the last 10 minutes! The industry that we're in changes so rapidly. 10 years ago, I'm trying to think back, I was managing teams of software developers producing software that was mostly internet based and was delivering to relatively small audiences. It was expensive to do.

These days actually my job's changed entirely. My job today is about helping to convince software developers to develop software using the products that we produce, but the means in which we do that, the fact that I am sitting here talking to a video camera that will be able to put that video straight onto the internet for little or no cost, where 10 years ago I was spending hundreds of thousands of pounds producing bespoke software to do video on the internet, I mean that's the kind of scale and pace of change that I've seen in just that period.

So the job today is about taking the complexity of the products that we have on offer, and being able to make those into something tangible and real for people who work within the IT industry to be able to see that they have a good future working with Microsoft's products and services. That's the essence of what I do.

The fact that I've done very different roles over the time of my career; of working in software development, in service delivery, I've been a CIO, I think all of that experience helps me to be able to help shape the work that I and my team are doing to be able to help one deliver.

Question: *If you were to mention one way in which an IT company, such as Microsoft can make a difference and bring value to the activities of other business organisations, what would this be?*

To distil everything that software companies do down to one thing is really hard, but for me, and maybe it's partly because of my background, it's about connecting people. It's about being able to provide the means for people to be able to communicate, to be able to work together, to collaborate, to be able to share ideas, to be able to do new things, and what we do as a business is provide the tools to be able to help people do that. That's a really exciting position to be in.

I think that technology that exists just to be able to serve the technology purpose, it doesn't interest me. Technology that helps people to be able to work more effectively or to be able to do things differently, or to be able to forge relationships they never would have been able to have before, to be able to work with people they couldn't work with before; that's really exciting, and I think that if we look at where we are today, the first big wave of business systems was about being able to automate computing.

The second wave was about being able to automate elements of structured business process. I think the big third wave is about being able to connect people and allow people to collaborate more effectively, and it's much more people centred I think than the first two waves of business systems.

Question: *If you were to mention one way in which an IT company such as Microsoft can make a difference and bring value to society as a whole, what would this be?*

Answer: For me I think now the balance is between how organisations like Microsoft make a difference to businesses and how we make a difference to society in general, are actually becoming almost one and the same thing, that the barriers that we traditionally had between what was business systems and what was something outside of business, I mean even 10 years ago there wasn't really a huge lot of computing going on outside of businesses.

If you look today, actually most people now in the developed world, most of their computing will be non-business related. It has been a very dramatic, very quick shift we've seen and how that's sat together.

Again I think for me, the thing above all else, whether it's people being able to Skype from one side of the world to the other or using Facebook to be able to stay in touch with people, or using LinkedIn to be able to forge new business relationships, the consistent theme all the way through is people.

Question: *Finally, what advice would you give to students who want to work in the IT sector in the future?*

Answer: I think if I was setting off in a career in the IT world today, maybe it's the joy of hindsight, I look back and I see that the fact that I studied a lot more than just technology, I think has held me in pretty good stead through my career, but I think that's going to be even more important going forward.

     I think the technology element is really important, but the complexity of technology that most people have to deal with on a day to day basis is getting simpler and simpler and simpler, and that applies both at a consumer level, but it also applies at a managing technology level; that the complexity now is about managing relationships with suppliers, it's about managing relationships with partner organisations, it's about being able to understand the impact that technology is having on an organisation.

     So I think that for me, above all else it will be for people to try to become as well rounded as they can, rather than going deep down into a particular focus on a particular sort of technology, because in five years that will be out of date anyway, and actually to have a breadth of understanding of technology and to be able to also have thinking around business management, thinking about some elements of psychology, some elements of social science, to be able to be that more rounded, an IT professional who can understand the context of the way in which technology is being used.