CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Tight, Isn't It?

Mark Denovich and Eric Renkey[*]

Only Pawn…in Game of Life, or "What's a Dazzling Urbanite Like You Doing in a Rustic Setting Like This?"

In August 1998 I received an email in response to a resume I had posted on an online employment website. I didn't think much of the contact at the time, but then I've failed to recognize all the major turning points in my life. A quick reply with my phone number led to a return call from the founder/president/CEO of the company. I could not predict that I was just days away from joining an extended train wreck of a company and becoming part of the most improbably great team I have ever known. The sum of my formal education was going to be dwarfed in comparison to what I would learn over the next six years.

Now, my words can have an uncanny habit of coming back to haunt me, and this story is definitely no exception. It would be convenient to claim that everything that follows is a work of fiction, but I'm not that good at making things up. I might also like to rely on my admittedly poor memory as a possible defense. But I had a great deal of help with the story from my once former and now again current coworker Stan Granite. His humor, his

[*] Editors' note: while this story was written by Mark Denovich and Eric Renkey (with help from Stan Granite, who wished to remain anonymous), it's told from Mark's point of view.

unique perspective, and his superior recall (often supplied with supporting text from his email archives) helped make the story far too accurate. He was also responsible for coining many of the nicknames that became part of the company lore. In most cases I've used those names to cover my ass, along with a few additional substitutions of my own when I deemed it necessary. Unfortunately, the guilty will still recognize who they are. I know words can hurt, so I can only hope that when they read this and think back, they will laugh as much as I have and take mercy on me.

Upward of 160 different people worked for the company during the six years I was there. Headcount ranged from a low of six or seven when I was hired to a high watermark of 42. Turnover was remarkably high, when you excluded the development team, who our CEO grudgingly acknowledged as a necessary and indispensable evil. But when any cash was available, it was soon lavished on a host of VPs and directors, often of dubious pedigree and even more dubious strategic purpose. When times were tight, they were the first to be shown the door, generally with little ceremony. But, through thick and thin, the core development team remained surprisingly stable. Starting from nothing, a core of eight developers produced a product with a Windows client comprising nearly 800 screens, totaling 700,000 lines of code, and a database tier consisting of 750 tables and 800 stored procedures containing 400,000 lines of T-SQL. All of this was developed while simultaneously delivering a score of custom projects, which were needed to help keep the lights on. I was too naive at the time to appreciate how impressive a feat this was. We were all too naive; and this was probably the key to our success. Anyone with some sense would have quickly understood that even our best efforts were no match for a string of comically poor decisions by management and the criminally bad behavior of our customers that resulted. In my defense, I had assumed anyone with the courage to risk his own money and that of his investors would be someone who was sure he had a winning strategy. My assumption was right, but I failed to consider that the same person could also be perfectly delusional. But then, I had never met anyone like Hedley Lamarr.

I met Hedley in an office building in downtown Pittsburgh. I remember our first meeting clearly, only because it was exactly what I expected. He was smartly dressed in suit and tie, was well spoken, and had a respectable office with a nice view. Hedley described Rock Ridge as a bespoke software shop, specializing in the energy industry. He seemed to clearly enjoy being a businessman that day. An hour or so later, I left smiling; convinced that I had delivered another commanding interview performance. A phone call confirmed it, and after some quick salary negotiation (20% over the first offer), I was hired. "Finally, a real job." Previously, I had worked in a few Mickey Mouse operations during school, spent a few months at a crooked dot-com hopeful that was run by the insane, and most recently was a poorly paid independent consultant. I wasn't looking forward to the dress code (shirt and tie), the start time (8:30 a.m.), or the commute, but I was happy to put all that silliness behind me and begin my career in earnest.

My new job enthusiasm quickly wore off. My few coworkers were odd, but uninspiring; I made a mental note to continue ignoring them. A busy hallway door opened without warning almost directly into my cube. Possibly worse was the diabolically bad coffee. I also didn't see much of Hedley again. What little direction I received was in intense but brief conversations from a harried (and hairy) software development manager, later to be dubbed C$. My task, I gathered, was to design the UI and application framework for a new project, a VB and Microsoft SQL Server-based utility billing system. I didn't have the experience to question the project's lack of any real requirements, specifications, or processes. So when I wasn't exploring the limits of how much I could goof off, I made up the design as I went along. Two weeks later I was introduced to another new hire in the next cube, Stan Granite. I was only beginning to take in what I was seeing as I reached out to shake his hand. This guy was completely out of proportion with everything in the office. He was a giant. He did not look comfortable in a shirt and tie, and looked especially uncomfortable in his tiny cube, which might now be doubling as a veal pen. When his junk heap of a computer immediately gave him trouble, I guessed it wouldn't be long 'til I heard "Hulk SMASH!" or words to that effect… I began to consider my escape route. But what I really wondered was, "What in the hell was this guy doing here?" Stan apparently was wondering something similar. I asked him about his first impressions:

> Even though our team eventually became close, it took awhile to reach that point. There's an old saw about marriage that states that the traits that you thought were charming before you got married are the ones that drive you crazy later on. For me, it was exactly the opposite in regard to our team: the traits that eventually provided us with hours of entertainment were those that initially made me wonder if I'd last three months.
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> When I first started working at Oxford Center, there were six or eight of us packed in a cube arrangement that looked like an ice cube tray and which wasn't much bigger than one. I received about three minutes of instruction and was given a PC that was out of service more than in service—facts that were dismissed when I was berated by C$ at the end of my first week, which concluded with the line, "I'm not even sure why I'm paying you."
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> I barely interacted with Hedley until we started working on the VPC version of Candygram, so my first memory of him is a 10x scale customer invoice, drawn with more detail than a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Nearly a thousand square inches focused entirely on layout, without any context given to the data. I mean, who mocks up a bill with a marker on an easel pad and feels the need to draw an accurately scaled, fully scannable PostNet bar code and account numbers rendered in MICR font? I think that if he'd written "bar code goes here," we'd have gotten the idea. If I were more perceptive, all of that exquisite layout detail with no substance to speak of would have given me some early insight into his personality.
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> And then there were my teammates: Friar Tuck is exactly the opposite of C$ as far as first impressions and lasting outcomes. Initially my impression was positive. He at least acknowledged my presence, which is more than I can say for The Mad S__tter (TMS), who appeared to be a modern-day Harpo Marx, or Rain Man (the guy that ritually arranged all of his pens, markers, and pencils on his desk, by type and size, making sure they were in perfect alignment before leaving each night). But after spending half an hour trying to help Friar Tuck remember the name of this amazing new restaurant he found (we finally determined it was Chick-fil-A), I got suspicious. It didn't take me long

> to figure out that he had all of the prodigious computer programming prowess and well-honed powers of logical thought I'd expect from a [decidedly non-technical subject] major.
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> Mark was prone to making seriously controversial statements. Like … murdering babies wasn't nearly as serious as murdering adults. He'd explain, "It only takes two years to replace a 2-year-old. I represent 25 years of investment, and I'm at the beginning of my economic prime." And when he wasn't on my ass, C$ had a habit of ceaselessly reminding everyone that they had no talent compared to him [by any measure]. I had not yet learned to appreciate the entertainment value of their antics.
>
> I think the turning point with C$ happened one night when we were working late. He was regaling me with tales of how powerful his brain was. C$ explained that he had four brain quadrants, each capable of working independently to solve the world's problems. One quadrant must've realized he was hungry, and he proceeded to leave to get something to eat. But not before he pointed in the general direction of his head, saying, "This thing needs a lot of fuel to keep it going." I replied, "C$, I couldn't tell: were you pointing at your brain or your mouth?" It was the first time we'd ever seen C$ speechless. Granted, it lasted only a few seconds, but it seemed to me that after I made that comment, he started treating me less like a minion and more like a peer.

Somehow we all survived the following month and a half to see the opening of the Software Development Center in the heart of Pittsburgh's South Side. Probably 50 bars and restaurants were now within a 10-minute walk of the office. Hedley was happy that the technical staff (the help)—below Hedley's standards, even with the help of the dress code—were no longer disrupting the professional image he was trying to project in the downtown office. But he still had his concerns. Stan writes:

> Most of the developers were in their 20s and male, so Hedley thought that we needed supervision, and he appointed a woman a decade or two older to keep us in line. Her sole contribution during her brief tenure at Rock Ridge was to institute a "whereabouts board," and she instructed us that each person was supposed to indicate his or her whereabouts and estimated time of return if they were not in the office. If someone was going to run downstairs to get a bagel from the bagel shop, it was supposed to be noted on the board. The whereabouts board was a contributor to team unity in that it was nearly universally reviled by the core team members. The fact that Mark completely disregarded the board, as did I, was probably my first sign that he was OK. Well, that and the fact that his lunch would occasionally consist of only a 10 fluid ounce gimlet.

Mark's note: to potential prospective employers, voters, or members of the jury…I'd like to clarify that when I complemented his recall, I was not suggesting that Stan's memory was 100% accurate.

Stan's note: Mark is correct…on occasion, the gimlets might have been as small as 8 oz.

With two offices, the company now got together only for special occasions (like Christmas, happy hours, and the periodic mass layoff). When the first happy hour found us all at Dingbats in town, the company was up to about fifteen or twenty people.

Editors' note: the authors put us in touch with Stan Granite. Andrew interviewed Mark and Stan, who filled in some of the more interesting details of the story.

Andrew: So I have two questions. One, how did you end up developing so much working code with such a small team? And two, why did you guys stick around to do it? It seemed like a kind of difficult environment to work in, even after the move to the South Side. It sounds like you had some real challenges. But you put out an enormous amount of code, and from what I understand it actually worked.

Stan: Let me answer those two questions as succinctly as I can; maybe we can flush them out. One, we built everything that we did because we worked like beavers on meth. And two, the team stayed together because every day was like going to work with an improvisational comedy troupe. I mean, you had to be on your game, and that was fun. If you said the wrong thing, man, you were getting crushed.

Andrew: But working like demons isn't enough. I've been on teams where we worked like demons, and basically produced nothing of value. In fact, what I've seen in the past is that for some teams, the harder they worked the less they produced, because they spent most of their time ripping things out that they'd built last-minute in a panic and that didn't actually work. You guys, on the other hand, got something out the door that's used now every day by a major energy company to manage their core business, and it works well enough that it's become critical to their operation. So it's got to be more than working like demons. I want to try to figure out what that "more than that" was.

Mark: I think part of it is that we didn't have a lot of overlapping or competing skills, so our ego problems didn't descend down to the code level. Or, maybe, there was one person, C$, whose ego was so enormous that it couldn't be subverted, so we had some consistency there.

But I don't think there were too many conflicts when it came to figuring out what to do. I think we had the right ratio of people that were there to get the work done, and enough people looking a little bit ahead who would say, "This sucks, and we need to do this better. If we don't, this will hurt." So I guess we had some sensitivity to pain.

Stan: But the thing about ego that you said—it really didn't extend to the code. Even C$, while proclaiming that he was the world's greatest SQL programmer on the East Coast, could face it. He took a lot of flak for the hidden text box thing after the fact.

Andrew: What was the hidden text box thing?

Stan: So when we started developing Candygram, there was a previously existing version, version 2.5. (We'll talk about that later with the Turducken story.) Candygram 2.5 was a Visual Basic 4.0 application. Mark and I started looking at the code, and we saw these hidden text boxes used to store state all over the place. We were immediately all over C$, making fun of him—"Are you unaware of the form-level variable?"—which, of course, irritated the crap out of him. We obviously had to do a bit of code cleanup there. He always claimed that was how you had to do it in Access 2.0, where there was some bug that if you used a variable it'd lose its state under certain conditions, and that got carried forward.

Mark: I think he was just being lazy by using a hidden text box with the built-in data binding, because otherwise he'd have to write a line or two of code.

Stan: Everybody was open to listening to new stuff. We occasionally would have design sessions where somebody would get pissed, but everybody would just shake it off. Even if people didn't admit it, they learned a lot from working collaboratively.

It was getting rid of Friar Tuck that actually allowed that to happen. He was the one that was holding us back.

Mark: I think that's probably pretty important. There were no bad apples when we were at our peak. Friar Tuck, on the other hand, was a jackass. He was the kind of person who sucked the life out of the projects he was on, because he did things poorly. You ended up having to do more work when that guy was around, because not only did he mess up your work, you also had to fix *his* work. He made you think he was working on things that were worthwhile, until it was time to get it out the door and you realized that you had to backfill everything he did. And then you'd be punished later because you had to maintain his terrible designs.

Once we got rid of him, and one or two other people who were marginal at the time, you were working with people who you genuinely respected. Each person had their own area where they were competent and even talented. Nobody was such a jackass that you were demotivated by it. Once we got rid of the bad apples, you kind of felt guilty if you weren't getting a lot of work done, because you could look around and see that everyone else was busting ass and doing what they had to do, so you'd do it, too.

Stan: There's a famous story that C$ still references every now and then. Early in the Candygram project, C$ had a meeting to talk about code and the standards everyone had to follow. People made their arguments for doing this or that, then C$ made a decision and that was the standard going forward. There were a handful of items—seven, eight items—on the agenda. Mark and I were arguing for the right way to do it, and Friar Tuck was on the other side of virtually all of the decisions. So we have this meeting, and C$ basically ruled on all eight items in our favor, because it was basically Code Complete kind of stuff that nobody in their right mind would argue with, except for Friar Tuck. Tuck basically evaluated every technique in terms of how little typing it would require; that was his primary motivator. He's a big fan of whatever syntactic hacks required the fewest keystrokes.

So we had this meeting, talking about how we wanted to approach these things and what our standards would be. C$ was always big on code standards. If he has a strongest point, that would be it—he always hated people doing things in eight different ways because that made it hard to maintain. It was probably close to a two-hour meeting that we addressed this. So we get to the end, and C$ asks if anyone wants to talk about anything else. And Tuck gets up and says, "I don't like the scent that we have in the bathroom. I don't like the spray that's in there. It's a berry scent, and I don't like that." And C$ turned bright red. He said, "Look, we bought that with our own money. It was all the store had. Is there anything *real* that anyone has to bring up?" That was Friar Tuck in a nutshell.

Andrew: And getting rid of him?

Mark: That was when things started to get interesting.

CMM Level Subzero, or "Processes, We Don't Need No Stinking Processes!"

> Mission Statement: To give our clients a competitive advantage by applying advances in technology that enhances their customer relationships.

To describe our early software development practices as primitive would be an extreme understatement. After several months of slow progress, we reached a level of technology in software development equal to that of the clan of monkeys in the opening sequence of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with similar levels of wild shrieking and skull crushing. In the plus column, I had previously seen the light, and had been delivered from evil, by the power and the glory of source control. From the start, we employed source control for our Visual Basic code. However, the vast majority of our business logic, a hundred thousand lines of T-SQL, remained unsaved in the limbo that was our development database. The extent of our SQL change management process started and ended with C$. All changes went through him. We had to assume he had some method to his madness. He was, after all, the self-professed greatest SQL Server developer in Pittsburgh (or was it the entire East Coast?). In his defense, he was not entirely conceited. He often brought up a developer and tech columnist who might have been better "…but he died when his snowmobile crashed into a tree!!…" And after his trademark paroxysm of laughter, he'd somberly say, "I feel really bad for his family, he was a father of three."

We rarely even knew what we were supposed to be doing. [Imagine Colts head coach Jim Mora's voice when you read the next quote.] "Detailed specifications!? Detailed specifications!!?" We were lucky to have detailed conversations. C$ was always on the move, and always in a hurry. Human communication was too limited to keep up with his quadrants. When he had time, you might get an email describing what we should have been doing. Failing that, if you were lucky, you might get a phone call. I wasn't the only one who recognized and complained about many of our process shortcomings, but no one was in a position to take unilateral action. Most team members were supposed to be working on Edsel, a system for managing petroleum exploration partnerships, but much of the application's design referenced functionality that existed in an AS/400 application—an application that none of us had seen and none of us could access.

Secretly, I was still holding out for signs of a plan. Maybe we were to beaver away day and night, like the World War II allied code breakers in Bletchley Park, cracking the German Enigma cipher, each focusing on some tiny chunk of the whole, never seeing enough to know what we were building. And one day, the last piece of the puzzle would be put in place and Hedley's and C$'s grand vision would be revealed: our state-of-the-art, multi-utility billing system we'll call the Candygram [because "the bitch was inventing the Candygram"]. We'd leverage the technical architecture we'd built for Edsel, and Rock Ridge would be positioned to take on the brave new world of the deregulated energy market. More likely, we were like a lot of the other companies that were struggling to get a foothold in a promising market; we often just sucked at what we tried to do.

But there was soon some reason for optimism in the atmosphere (and thanks to our new office, more than just optimism was in the air). Stan was revealed to be a surprisingly gifted employee. Most importantly for us, he had a personality bigger than even his physical presence, and he could program, too. The team recognized this, and for the rest of his time at Rock Ridge, he was its center of gravity. This meant his cube or office also served as a social center, which would remain a career-long drain on his productivity. Now the team had a chance to solidify, and with the help of a few more hires, it became an effective counterweight to C$. The improved group dynamics blunted some of C$'s rougher edges and helped to fill in the void left behind when his time was demanded elsewhere. With some success, trust started to take root and this found C$ delegating more and more. He was even becoming occasionally receptive to opinions other than his own. We had a long way to go, but soon we at least began to develop processes, standards, and what was the start of a truly impressive billing system. We had passed another critical point. Crucially, the nucleus of the team was forged while our roles were still malleable, and before anyone significant had a chance to defect.

Candygram's first customer would be a small division of a large utility company. We were lucky to have VPC (Very Patient Company) as its first user. And not just because the second biggest deal the sales team ever inked was our bar tab when our sales manager accidentally left it open during a much extended happy hour. VPC was like a homely and not-too-bright first girlfriend. They put up with our poor-quality releases and our sloppiness, and they gave us the chance to refine our technique on a real, live customer for a change. I just don't think they expected any better.

We were still a year or more from having any sort of repeatable release process. The best we had were some batch files that automated the application of the release's scripts to the database. Determining exactly what belonged in a particular release, and how to make those changes without corrupting the data, was an entirely manual process. Two developers working independently from the same code base were not guaranteed to create the same end result, so the final product varied depending on who built it and on what computer it was built. As a result, components and/or database objects were often missing or improperly configured, causing all sorts of downstream errors.

I got to see just how tolerant VPC could be, firsthand, when I got fingered to deliver the latest database release, as I was already going to update the client app. C$ had tapped a relatively new guy to assemble the database package: The Sigh Guy (TSG), a bright, hard-working, and chronologically young man. You could almost see the weight of the world prematurely aging him right before your eyes. I was shocked some months later when I found a picture of him from his college days. He was a portrait of vitality, but now it looked as if he had been made of wax and left in the hot sun. C$ ensured that he got no respite at work. I tagged him with the nickname (we all had many), because if he was around, you were soon to hear an exasperated sigh. The external pressures rendered him only about 90% great, which doesn't sound too bad, unless you consider it in terms of things like airplane safety, or more relevantly, database code. TSG was a pathologically bad typist. His typos were often so improbable that they seemed to have been made on purpose. Working from one of his designs, I created a half dozen dialogs implementing “Colon Batch” functionality. I knew it couldn't be right, but he couldn't have so consistently typed “Colon” instead of “Clone,” right? That was worth a good laugh, but it wasn't so funny when I began to update VPC's Candygram database. I liked TSG from the start, so there was little hesitation that afternoon when I initiated the upgrade. It had been “tested. ” Seconds later I was treated with an exception, and a database table was now empty of all its data. While the client's DBA restored the database, I remained on the phone with TSG. Finding an errant keystroke, we started again. We would repeat this cycle of events—Execute, Error, Debug, Apologize, Restore—for the next six hours.

One thing even C$ had difficulty exaggerating, where he was a master of his domain, was in his encyclopedic knowledge of the Candygram System. Our lack of change control, specs, and processes meant we relied on it almost completely. It was self-perpetuating, too. He was the only one who knew the whole story, which meant he had to be consulted on everything. Delegating the release process in those early days could be especially disastrous. Because the company needed the cash, we had prematurely released the system fully aware that significant functionality was far from complete. We now had the joy of developing and maintaining a live system critical to the client's business. Worse still, a host of quality issues turning up daily in production kept one of our SQL experts fighting fires on-site for weeks at a stretch. Since time was of the essence, we were often developing directly on the live system. The pattern of bad decisions leading to and from money problems would cripple all our efforts every single day.

I understood the definition of quality before I started working there, and it was something we all desired. I knew the non-linear nature of the cost of an issue versus product timeline. But it still took awhile to learn just how absolutely fundamental it was to the success or failure of a company. It was more important than any decision we could make in technology, hiring, or strategy. It wasn't just the raw number of issues, either. Perception mattered, and first impressions especially so. Once we lost the faith of one of our customers, no amount of effort, negotiation, or groveling seemed to win it back. Quality issues would poison our relationships, led to poor references, killed future sales, weakened our bargaining position, and led to unreasonable promises, piling more stress on an already overstretched development team. Hedley never seemed to grasp this. While we survived long enough to become much better developers, we were never good enough to break the cycle.

Date: 04/22/1999 04:59 PM

From: Cash Money *cdollar@rockridge.com*

> To: Rock Ridge Personnel
>
> Subject: Candygram System 3.0
>
> As everyone knows, Rock Ridge has been consumed with the Candygram System 3.0 (CS3) development for VPC Retail Services. Our entire organization has been working very hard to reach our goal and I would like to the time to acknowledge the effort. Thank you.
>
> The Beta date for CS3 is now May 5,1999. This Beta version will include customer inquiry; order, adjustment, and receipt batch processing; service cycle processing; bill processing and posting; as well as master and support table functionality. We will also implement security roles and permissions and robust error messaging. We have been Beta testing the Candygram System Import (CSI) Utility at VPCR over the past two weeks. The CSI was written for the VPCR custom data feed between RSSC (a VPCR system) and Candygram. The CSI will also handle lockbox data loads. This testing has been very valuable not only to work the kinks out of the CSI, but also to avoid the same issue in CS3. VPCR plans to begin using the CSI to load 130,000 Customers for the Beta testing period. CSI coding will be complete April 26, 1999.
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> We need to continue to focus and work towards our dates. Overall the system looks very good and I am pleased with the cohesiveness of the team. Soon the project will transition to an implementation and support phase, where other members of the organization will carry the torch handed off by the designers and coders.
>
> It's not easy being the best. We just need to make it look easy.

Quality issues were like landmines: able to lay dormant for extended periods. At what seemed to be the most inopportune time, they'd cripple us. Issues with Edsel, the project that functioned as an organ donor to Candygram, hit us well over a year after delivery. Just in time to hobble us in the lead up to our biggest Candygram development push. We'd have to work heroically to make up that time that was already overpromised to our biggest client, a multibillion-dollar company that had spent years waging multiple wars of attrition with companies much larger than ours, and which had only red ink, derelict billing system implementations, and ongoing lawsuits to show for it. Was this the recipe for success?

> Date: 09/29/1999 08:31 AM
>
> From: Hedley Lamarr
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> To: Cash Money <*cdollar@rockridge.com*>, Stan Granite *sgranite@rockridge.com*
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> Subject: Edsel Training/Implementation
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> Finally, there is quite a bit of history concerning JJ, Whiney, and the Edsel development. They are very bitter and angry that the system has taken so long to develop.

> Actually, it was shelved for a year by Sisyphus after which they said that Sisyphus would not use it. Less than two weeks ago Sisyphus decided to implement it and gave us only a week to do it. Sisyphus management knows that not all aspects of the system are completed. We will be limiting the scope to possibly the generation of commission amounts and a request for check form. Also, we will be transferring data to and from the AS/400 in Akron. In summary, I anticipate a lot of work on Edsel for several months to come.
>
> P.S. JJ can be combative and abrasive. He is rough but he knows his stuff. I think that generally we should give him what he wants. Whiney on the other hand does not have a firm grasp of the concept of databases. I would strongly suggest that we implement none of Whiney's changes unless they are approved by JJ.

The Brown Hole, or "I'd Say You've Had Enough"

The Software Development Center (SDC), while being in a prime location, was far from an ideal office environment. But then, lasting friendships are probably more often forged in a foxhole than in a corner office. On first inspection, we would now be working in a clean, well-lit, open-plan form office, complete with a dinette. There was plenty of natural light from the windows facing the main and side streets. We were on the second floor, conveniently located above a Bruegger's bagel shop. Parking was on-street, but free and not too hard to find in the surrounding blocks, a definite improvement over downtown. Next door was Fat Head's, our favorite bar and official hot wing vendor of the Rock Ridge development team. What could be better?

A number of months after the move, another seismic event forever changed the office. It started like any other day. C$ was up to his usual antics, as he held court at the meeting table. This meant everyone within 50 feet was in his meeting whether they wanted to be or not. I can't remember the trigger, but J-Pax must have had his fill of being harassed by C$. It seemed like the office suddenly got quiet when I heard J-Pax say, "F__k you, C$... I'm tired of this s__t…and here's your f__king pen back." I may not have remembered the quote exactly, but I clearly remember the first office-launched F-bomb. I don't know what was holding us back to that point. J-Pax had seemingly opened some sort of Pandora's Box of swearing. Overnight, the standard office chat went completely blue.

The insanity of having one phone, located centrally but not conveniently, for everyone proved to be an interesting social experiment. It would ring, and heads would begin popping above cube walls like prairie dogs to see who would be forced to answer it. Eyes would swivel back and forth, head fakes and false starts followed, before someone would finally cave. It was as though some evil genius had studied the book, *Peopleware*, applying the opposite of all that was learned to create the ultimate productivity killer. When it wasn't disrupting "the flow" (a state of greatly heightened productivity that comes after approximately forty-five minutes of uninterrupted effort) of almost everyone in the office, it served as a convenient petri dish for whatever cold or flu variant was in circulation.

Spending a few more minutes surveying the 50 × 50-foot office, you'd quickly realize that the 20 or so half-height cubicles were densely packed and were unlikely to provide much peace and quiet when fully populated. Who was going to get the two tall cubes, one on either side of the office? And that solitary cordless phone sitting in the middle of the office might seem a little worrisome. This is when you would finally take notice of the two doors on the far wall. One was a utility closet, and the other was *the* toilet. One toilet, with no vestibule or hallway. One closet-size toilet in full view of the office. Twenty people, living on a diet consisting chiefly of hot wings and coffee, relying on one toilet. This was going to get ugly.

Andrew: OK, I'm not quite sure I get this. Why's a toilet worth mentioning?

Mark: It was the essence of working at Rock Ridge.

Andrew: Seriously? Was it like that when you first came on board?

Mark: No. In fact, at the first office, shirt and tie was the standard, and it was a normal, boring downtown business office. That was the way Hedley wanted it run. And the first guy I was going to pick fights with or tease a lot wasn't going to be Stan—he was an imposing fellow, as he filled an entire cube.

We rarely saw C$ back then and the other characters who worked there at the downtown office were so boring that it wasn't even worth engaging them. It wasn't until we hit the South Side that C$ started spending more and more time there and we were free from the office drones that it kind of just happened.

It was a way of diffusing tensions. C$ has a really strong ego, and so do I, and so does Stan. And when you're talking about something in a meeting, you have to let off that steam. Making fun of people was a way of establishing that we're all on the same page. C$ liked to throw his weight around, and had a fairly important title compared to the rest of us. But we could always keep him on our level by harassing him on a personal level.

Stan: C$ didn't start treating us like human beings until we started ripping on him.

Andrew: But it's got to be more than poking fun. It sounds like you guys did this to an incredible extent. A lot of people would be driven to tears having to come in every day to the environment that you guys at Ridge Rock thrived in. Can we get to the bottom of that? And how did the toilet come into play?

Mark: The toilet was fertile ground for developing jokes. It was an ever-present actor, and that's why it came up a lot.

We wrote code, did our jobs, in order to get back to making jokes about each other. That's the approach we took at meetings. "All right, let's stop for a minute and get some code done, so we can get back to so-and-so being a *[expletive deleted]*." And that's kind of how it went. As someone was speaking, you were either coming up with a new idea about the code, or a new idea to rip on somebody about. It just kept the meetings going. Our meetings were incredibly productive, I think, despite all of the constant interruptions. No one was ever in the meeting talking because they just wanted to talk. And if they were, they weren't talking about the product because they wanted to talk. They were talking about somebody's *[expletive deleted]*. I think that also kept our work focused. Real work only came up when the idea was so good that it warranted stopping the hilarity to talk about it.

Stan: People actually liked going to meetings, which is probably in contrast to every other company in existence. We actually liked to get together to meet and talk, because you knew that was going to happen. So nobody dreaded going to meetings or tried to avoid them, because of the entertainment.

Mark: Nobody ever looked at a laptop when they were in a meeting.

Stan: Exactly.

The other thing about the poop stuff was that it was sort of the Rosetta stone, the lingua franca of humor. If you have 10 people in the room, the one thing you know you can make a joke about that everyone's going to find funny is poo.

Andrew: And that's where the toilet came in.

Mark: So the toilet actually came into the story before the incessant humor really emerged as the dominant culture on the team. We'd just come over to the South Side office, and we were dealing with the fact that 20 of us were all using the same toilet right in the middle of the office, in an open environment with no real walls or anything to limit the impact. It was the giant elephant in the room. It was something you couldn't *not* notice. And I think it was the initial pressure valve for us with talking about funny stuff. The first thing we could all agree about was that the toilet situation was pretty awful.

Everyplace else you work you hide the toilet. It's a safe place, and nobody talks about how you have to go there. At our office, it was in your face all the time. We could see the toilet door, we could see when somebody walked in, we could see when somebody walked out, and everyone knew exactly how long they were in there. There was no way to get away from it, and you were aware of it all the time—in every sense of the word. So the subject would just come up. You can imagine that it had a huge impact on how we worked together as a team.

So it started with the toilet, and pretty soon the jokes were flowing about progressively more off-color things. But the toilet was as far as it went with some people, because poop is a pretty safe subject.

Stan: There were two pretty key factors there, if you step back from it. One, we couldn't have had that culture and camaraderie develop if we didn't have the South Side for it to incubate. There was no way that culture would have taken hold in the older, ice cube tray office, where the hallway door opened into Mark's cube, where we had all that terrible coffee, and where it was isolated: there was nothing around, no restaurants, no bars, nothing at all. But we moved to the South Side of Pittsburgh, where the developers were in our own office in a part of town that was a much more casual, 24-hour neighborhood where you could be there off-hours and still have things to do when you got off work.

And it had the toilet. Without all that, the culture never would have loosened up and developed the way it did.

Mark: Nobody was there just to log time. It wasn't presenteeism. You were there because you wanted to be. It was either going to be funny, or you'd get work done so it could be funny when you were done. Or you were there because you were going to go out to a really good lunch or possibly dinner afterwards. Going to work was easy. And sometimes you'd actually say to yourself, "Man, I'm tired of making jokes, so let's do some work so we can reload." I think that's important to capture how critical the South Side—and the toilet—were. You were only ever really working for a short sprint at a time. You'd do a sprint, then go out to lunch, and do another sprint in the afternoon or evening. You weren't just sitting there watching the clock, because you could leave whenever you felt like it.

Stan: It was actually challenging. Whether it was ripping on each other or doing work, there were challenges there. It was a tough crowd, and you had to be on your game in order to not get destroyed when people were ripping on each other.

But we also had those ludicrous goals for our projects, and that was part of it. If we'd actually done the kind of stuff that "responsible" teams do regularly, where you plan the work first and take on projects that are realistic, it wouldn't have worked. There was a gallows humor around the kind of absolutely ridiculous demands that were put on us. I think it helped us bond against that external enemy—a ridiculous schedule for not very much money—that helped us all come together.

Mark: Somehow we were consistently being surprised by Hedley. Even though it was the same pattern over and over again, somehow we still managed to be shocked.

Stan: It's like the frog that gets boiled slowly. "OK, I see you guys can make this deadline, so let's tighten it by a week."

Mark: Or cut a third of the team, and keep the same deadlines.

Stan: Let's let the negotiations for the contract drag on for three months, but keep the due date the same. Oh, that didn't faze you…we're going to give you three weeks to turn it into Spanish. You made that work? OK, now make it work in Pakistan for 25 times more customers than your largest previous installation. And we'd just deal with it with relentless humor, and somehow that made it work.

Andrew: It almost seems like you took one obstacle after another—your terrible working environment, insane business deadlines, layoffs—and turned them into something that encouraged work, albeit not in a way that you'd read about in business school.

Mark: Right. You're not going to read in *Peopleware* that you should put a composting toilet heap in the middle of the office to help the team gel.

The daily unpleasant reminders of our limited sanitation facilities, combined with the office demographics, led to many scatological discussions. There were even meta-scatological discussions. The most infamous, after a particularly late programming session, led to some groundbreaking work in theoretical scatology. I believe the eureka moment was inspired by JDog, our technical writing manager, and the sole female employee willing to endure direct exposure to some of our more eccentric topics of debate. Exasperated, she noted that when there were enough guys in a conversation, sooner or later it invariably turned to the topic of poo. I had dreams of becoming a theoretical physicist, before my adviser at Carnegie Mellon University noted that my lack of academic rigor made me more suited to a career in computer science. Using Stan as a sounding board, I noticed striking similarities in the observed phenomenon to the implications of the Chandrasekhar and Tolman-Oppenheimer-Volkoff limits in stellar astrophysics. The TOV limit is upper-bound in the mass of neutron stars, beyond which the force of gravity will exceed the neutron degeneracy pressure with a subsequent collapse into a black hole. Similarly, I proposed that any conversation involving enough men will soon collapse under its own weight, forming a super-dense discussion from which no non-scatological discussion could escape, dubbed a brown hole. The theory has agreed well with considerable observational data. Possible refinements include factors to account for the apparent increased speed of the collapse in the presence of alcohol. Also, collapse may be prevented by having enough women in the conversation, but we have been unable to collect the necessary observational data to support the hypothesis.

Some of These Envelopes Contain Stock Options, or "I'm Through Being Mr. Goodbar, the Time Has Come to Act and Act Quickly"

After we had staked out our respective cubes and started to settle in, Hedley arrived to take stock of his minions in their new habitat. Hedley being Hedley, he immediately noticed that a few of us had moved our monitors from the middle of the desk to a position a little off to one corner or the other. This unauthorized cubicle customization was quickly proscribed. That should have been a clear signal to recirculate my resume. Someone unable to properly consider the costs of this affront to his aesthetic sense in comparison to the comfort of the developers, and more importantly, the message his decree would send to the team, should not be trusted with the helm. I mostly saw it as a slap in the face. Hedley could not have more clearly communicated his evaluation of the team. We were clearly not highly educated, highly skilled professionals who were an asset to the company. C$ picked up on the sudden onset of tension in the office, or maybe he saw my posture change to something a bit more hostile. He quickly shooed Hedley out of the office and immediately tried to downplay the situation. It worked. I was now focused on the immediate problem, which for me had an easy solution: "F__k him." I was going to put my monitor where I wanted the damn thing. But I should have remained focused on the fact that Hedley clearly had issues. I missed a clear signal to jump ship. It became a moot point when we came to realize that Hedley was unlikely to ever step foot in the office again.

The promise of alternative work schedules took a long time to be realized, too. When we did get movement, we were immediately disappointed.

Notes from our first meeting at the SDC:

> Alternative Work Schedule—We're still working out the details of the Alternative Work Schedule. To clarify, the envisioned Alternative Work Schedule is not a flex schedule. Employees will be offered a variety of start/end times from which he/she may choose.

He was implicitly trusting us with the fate of his company, but he was unwilling to explicitly trust us to come to work without punching a clock. Another sad message: I need a clock to evaluate your performance because I can't/won't be concerned with what you actually do. Hedley was also showing us his knack for highlighting the cloud instead of the silver lining. We'd see this several years later, when a company bonus scheme was rolled out. The company was seriously tight on money; benefits and any non-critical employees were cut again. It was correctly feared that people were soon going to bail, and we couldn't afford to lose a single person with so little staff remaining. A bonus was announced for those willing to ride it out. The details were typically fuzzy, but if the company made money, and we stuck it out, we'd get a cut. I wasn't counting on seeing a dime of it, but we appreciated the gesture. Sadly, I don't remember the bonus ever being promoted as an incentive again. When we did manage to hold the lines, and the company actually survived to make some profit, Hedley did not seem to be happy. There was enough delay and so little mention of when we'd actually get the checks that most assumed we had been screwed (it's what we were expecting anyway). We were all pretty shocked, at a company meeting, when the checks were actually handed out. Through his words and body language, he managed to make an unexpected payday disappointing. That layoff cycle was just one among many. However, there was one round of layoffs that forever changed the SDC and probably was an event that unleashed the full potential of the core development team.

"Some of these envelopes contain stock options; the others contain letters of reference. I ask that you wait to open them until after I leave." Hedley may have said more, probably about our always favorable sales pipeline, but that was all anyone heard. The entire company (about thirty-five of us) had been called to the SDC for this meeting with no explanation. We had been organized into a large circle in the center of the office before the envelopes had been handed out. He was walking out the door, while the employees were left clutching identical manila envelopes and staring at each other in stunned silence. Eyes darted back and forth looking for answers, or for a signal to start opening the envelopes. Some seemed to be trying to determine their envelope's contents without opening it, like a child at Christmas shaking his gift-wrapped package. My envelope was of little interest to me; instead, I had remote, but potentially more pressing, concerns. Namely, who was the most likely to snap and shoot us all or, more worryingly, might shoot me? I had recently been promoted to software development manager; all it really meant was that I had the excuse to get more pay and to lay claim to one of the two tall cubes. And, after that day, to call dibs on the only parking spot attached to the office. The org chart described an alternate reality. The entire dev team were listed as my direct reports, while I reported to C$, the VP of engineering. There was never any doubt in my mind or in the team's mind that anything would change in practice. C$ was still the alpha and omega of the Candygram System, and by having everyone reporting to him, it would stay that way. So although I had no real managerial responsibilities or control, I did get a sneak preview of who made the cut. The meeting was downtown the day before. The fact that I had been wearing a tie signaled I was there. I wonder if anyone thought I had some input in the layoffs.

Envelopes were opened, and soon the silence was broken with sounds of crying. With surprisingly little encouragement or organization necessary, we filed across the street to another favorite watering hole. We spent the entire afternoon commiserating, with some being a bit smoother than others. Empathy has never been my strong suit, so I stuck with the developers who had come out unscathed. The Cold Lamper, a.k.a. the Blind Guardian, was a more recent addition to the SQL team. He was a big, strappin', lantern-jawed lad from coal country. From his warm and thoughtful personality, he probably had some Boy Scout or altar boy in him in the past. Seeing her alone and clearly upset, he bravely went to console our office/QA manager. She wasn't very talkative. So he proceeded to tell her how sad it was that she lost her whole team, wondered aloud what they would do next, about how they would have a hard time finding work, and how it was a shame what the changes meant to her role. She cried just a little bit more with each thing he said. Finally, she stopped him, telling him she had been fired, too.

After what became known as Black Tuesday, the office environment changed dramatically. The remaining employees were almost exclusively male, with an average age of around twenty-nine. The oldest employee at the SDC was a ripe, old 34. With no "adults" present, the office quickly devolved. Within a week, it was one part *Animal House* and one part *Lord of the Flies*, an office situation in which virtually anything was allowable. Every statement uttered was a potential starting point for a filthy riposte. To this day I avoid certain words/phrases that were sure to be pounced on. (Recently, even in the presence of civilized company, I was at a loss as to how I could convey that the ground animal product packed in casing was too rich in sodium chloride for my palate.) The depravity was not confined to water cooler talk. During design reviews, comments were made that would make even Redd Foxx blush. Surprisingly, though, if one could ignore the filth, it was the most civil and egalitarian office environment I've ever had the pleasure to work in. Office politics, at least within our group, ceased to exist (other than some griping over good snacks being hoarded during the brief period that a selection of snacks was provided by the company). I suppose anyone who did not share the mutual respect of the group would have long since quit. But in spite of the enormous workload, it still was a remarkably easy office to drag myself into every day.

During this time period, the Hand Circle Game (*http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=The+Circle+Game*), which we played for pride and shame, not punches, became a daily ritual. Within days, simple attempts to catch someone with the circle were rendered useless. Cold War mentality set in with attacks and counterattacks becoming more intense and creative as the weeks passed. Two months later, virtually every surface capable of concealing a photo had been booby-trapped with a picture of a team member making a legal hand circle. This list included the refrigerator, kitchen cabinets, bathroom vanity, toilet paper roll, file cabinets, and even CD-ROM drive trays. One intrepid team member (the Cold Lamper) managed to get on the Jumbotron between innings at PNC Park, shaming more than 20,000 people with quick thinking and a cunning display of the circle. (I know what you're thinking: "There's no way 20,000 people were attending a Pirates game." But this was the year the park opened, and a lot of people were there just to see the facility. Plus, at that point, the Pirates' streak of consecutive losing campaigns stood at a mere eight seasons, so most fans hadn't yet given up hope completely.)

Now, you might understand why working there was almost fun, but you also might be wondering when we got anything done. We had almost zero turnover in the team. Between the filth, communication was clear, rapid, and effective. Management in the traditional sense was completely unnecessary. We did what we had to do, making considerable progress on the Candygram System. We ignored the company's fiscal uncertainty. And we somehow also made time to produce a number of custom systems to keep the trickle of cash flowing. The camaraderie and rituals that developed during this "Lord of the Flies" period kept us going, even following the shuttering of our communal second floor space in a vibrant, walkable neighborhood and the subsequent move to a sterile, isolated, sprawling space with private offices on the 52nd floor of a high-rise on the edge of Pittsburgh's downtown ("dahn-tahn" in Pittsburghese).

The circle game survived the move to the 52nd floor, although occasionally the intersection of the game and employees unfamiliar with its ways led to some awkward moments. One evening, a group of "regular" employees were leaving the office while several developers were trying to finish a design meeting before the Cold Lamper had to go for the day. The Lamper walked toward the elevator while continuing the design conversation. He recognized that the other employees and the just-arrived elevator presented a previously unused, and therefore unexpected, chance to drop the circle. As the other employees had boarded the elevator, he reached around the Colonel (as our accountant was known), flashing the circle. Unfortunately, the Colonel, being unfamiliar with the game, was also unprepared to have a large man, now standing closely behind him, reaching around with his hand making the circle in the approximate location of his groin. The Colonel's face, as he was clearly unsure of what this particular elevator ride was about to have in store, showed a mixture of shock, apprehension, and disgust; his expression is forever etched in the mind of more than one Rock Ridge developer.

A subsequent and final move to a suburban office park (chosen for its proximity to Hedley's house and its lower taxes) did not kill the game, or the shared insanity powering it. Lesser combatants eventually admitted defeat and left the battlefield, leaving two developers locked in battle until an epic one-on-one best-of-seven series broke the deadlock employing a clever gambit involving barbecue potato chips.

Although the game survived the moves, the close communication that knit the group together did not. With increasing financial woes, engineers were sent to work at customer sites in an attempt to salvage projects that had gone off-track and to log important billable hours. The physical separation disrupted the careful balance. Punch lines and joke setups that had been passed around Harlem Globetrotter style now were falling flat. Without the fun, it was just a job—and not even a good one.

The Blitz, or "Break's Over, Boys, Don't Just Lie There Gettin' a Suntan…"

Earlier in 2000, we signed our biggest deal with Succubus Corp., a major gas utility. Phase I would be implementing existing functionality. VPC had helped as a reference, but I'm guessing it was the wildly optimistic promises, timelines, and budget-friendly price of Phase II that sealed the deal. The thinking was that we might not make any money, but they'd cover the development costs. Then we'd starting making the big bucks, or at least that was the thinking. Weeks earlier, we had an event to celebrate the "merging and e-merging" of our company. We would be joining forces with a virtual company that controlled our IP and was bankrolled by a real estate company. Hedley would leverage the parent company's credit to swing a sublet of Alcoa's former headquarters on the 52nd floor of the second-tallest building downtown. The mayor, who was on hand to say a few words, seemed to be a bit suspicious of our projected revenues of $250 million in just a few years, and paused a moment for a sideways glance as he spoke the numbers. A number of recently bestselling books will attest to the many pitfalls of scaling up even the most successful small companies. But reality was never a significant input to planning decisions, so why should we let it start interfering now?

The Candygram System's current incarnation was able to handle basic customer functions and retail product and services billing. In Phase II, we had agreed to develop a much more sophisticated billing and customer care functionality. We needed to be able to support a wide range of features needed by regulated gas utilities, deregulated retail and commercial energy companies, and gas transportation and pipeline businesses. We were still implementing Phase I, concurrently with the new development. But that wasn't all; we had a few demos for other larger clients that needed some new features, too. This was in addition to our regular load of existing customer support and custom system development.

Recognizing that we were unlikely to start working smarter, doubling or trebling our productivity overnight, a bold plan was hatched: we would work harder, much harder.

Date: 10/31/2000 9:17 AM

From: Cash Money *cdollar@rockridge.com*

To: Development, QA, Tech Support, Training &Tech Writing, Implementation

Subject: November Work Blitz

Rock Ridge NOVEMBER BLITZ

> Rock Ridge Corporation has four major initiatives during the month of November: "Squeal Like a Pig" Demonstration; Much-Too-Large-For-Us Gas & Light Presentation; Succubus Phase I (Products & Services) Enhancements; Succubus Phase III (Transportation & Work Order) delivery. These initiatives overlap with continuing Succubus Phase II (Gas Utility) testing and coding, training, implementation, and developing technical documentation, online help, and courseware as well as supporting VPCR. Achieving these goals will prove to clients, investors, and ourselves that we are a small company with large abilities.
>
> To achieve these goals I realize that we will need to work extended hours. In an effort to make November more productive (and not go insane or require a divorce) Rock Ridge will sponsor the following activities:
>
> * Compensatory Time
>
> * Weekday Dinners
>
> * Weekend Lunches
>
> * Mid-Month Dinner Outing
>
> * End-of-Month Event

The effort rested squarely on the development team as we represented the long poles in this project plan. Training, documentation, and implementation would be, at best, playing catch-up. We had no real specs from which they could coordinate their efforts. We were making it up as we went along. Soon they were struggling just to stay abreast of new functionality spewing forth from development.

Even with the pressure of developing our real product, much effort was spent pulling off one of our most impressive tricks: creating a software equivalent of the Turducken. The Candygram System (technically CS3) developed during the spring was completely unrelated to previous generations of the product. However, one of those previous generations had an implementation of a gas-specific billing module that the new version did not yet have. Apparently noticing they had the same name, ownership suggested that we port the gas-specific module to the new system, and in fact had promised that we would demo exactly that concept at an upcoming trade show. At first, the development team laughed at the idea, but the owner was serious, so we had to find some way for it to work. I'm ashamed to admit that I found a package of Windows API calls that enabled screens from a compiled Windows application to appear as child windows in our new system. With the "hard part" out of the way, all that was left was the not-so-minor issue that the systems were using completely different databases. A few hundred hours of development and data mapping made for a convincing-looking system, albeit one that resulted in no revenue, but the owners were not discouraged.

Their sales claims, and by extension, the company website, became a ripe source of joke material for the development team. A prime example is the following excerpt from an energy industry research firm's 2002 CIS report:

> Candygram…Rock Ridge's flagship product, is an Internet-based, advanced software solution...Rock Ridge says that it has the functionality to manage all forms of energy including gas, electricity, oil, propane and other products and services such as water, telecom, security, and cable.

In 2002, the Candygram System was a Windows-based client/server system. The J2EE web-based version of Candygram was christened with the unintentionally dark but hilarious name "Candygram: The Final Solution" by Hedley at our first product planning summit. It remained a joke six years later, as each attempt to ramp up our Java efforts was soon scuttled by another development emergency.

The claim that the Candygram System could "manage all forms of energy" still makes me laugh out loud. I can just picture one of the owners at a sales presentation listing all of the forms of energy, à la Bubba in *Forrest Gump*: "Gas energy, electrical energy, thermal energy, kinetic energy, chemical energy, nuclear energy, rotational energy, potential energy, gravitational energy, nervous energy, sexual energy…" That claim soon had me crafting a host of regular expressions to transmute our core gas module's VB and SQL code into whatever energy market was targeted that week.

But we still had hope, and all the "fun" things about the office and our group were now amplified by 80+ hour work weeks. Running jokes no longer had an evening or weekend to fade. They were handed off from shift to shift, becoming more twisted with each iteration and compounded by weeks of accumulated sleep deprivation.

> Date: 12/04/2000 10:47 AM
>
> From: Cash Money *cdollar@rockridge.com*
>
> To: Development
>
> Cc: Hedley Lamarr <*hlamarr@rockridge.com*>, HR *t1000@rockridge.com*
>
> Subject: November Blitz
>
> November Blitz is over…
>
> I first want to specially thank each of you for your exceptional effort. Not only did we "meet" the deadline, but we were able to produce two new modules with minimal issues. I would also like to recognize Stan Granite and The Sigh Guy for their effort in architecting and designing the new modules. This was a new experience and I believe the modules are better because of their involvement.
>
> Second, I know that most of you have 80+ hours of comp-time. Please see to it that you use that time to do nothing, Recharge! First quarter of 2000 plans to be active and we need everyone thinking clearly. Mark Denovich has a spreadsheet that will be used to coordinate time off.
>
> Third, for those of you who are at the office when others are recharging, we are not done improving the Gas, Work Order, and Transportation modules. We have a lot of

> reporting, interfaces, and polishing to complete. Succubus is very pleased with the Candygram System, we cannot afford to let up now. Our implementation team will be ensuring that Candygram System meets their needs and will work with the development staff through December and January to fix any glitches that may exist. I would like to have another installation of the Candygram System for Friday of this week.
>
> Fourth, planning the end of November Blitz event. Originally we were planning a Penguins game or the like. Some of you mentioned that you would rather have meats and cheeses delivered to the office. The seven of you can vote on what the event should be (of course I have final approval). Please let me know the consensus as soon as possible.
>
> Once again thank you, and Great Job!
>
> No animals were harmed in making this message and only two exclamation points were used.

We not only worked hard, we played hard. We parlayed the end-of-Blitz event into a company-funded party at my house to coincide with the AFC/NFC championship games. We had gourmet food from all across the Internet, enough top-shelf booze to kill W.C. Fields, with the guest of honor being a 15 lb. USDA prime rib roast, flown in from Chicago.

The celebration turned out to be a bit premature. Against the odds, we met our customer's deadline, or so we thought. What we didn't realize is that while we were toiling away, the customer was also busy moving the goalposts.

Our Invite to the Number 6 Dance, or "What Is It That's Not Exactly Water and It Ain't Exactly Earth?"

Christopher Hawkins, founder and principal developer of a custom software development firm, posted a piece titled "11 Clients You Need To Fire Right Now."[*] In the piece, Hawkins describes 11 client/customer behaviors that he considers abusive; any one of which he feels is sufficient reason for terminating a business relationship. By my count, Succubus engaged in at least seven of these behaviors on a regular basis during the more than three years of its relationship with Rock Ridge:

> THE SOMETHING-FOR-NOTHING consistently increases the scope of the project but refuses to pay for the additional work.
>
> THE BLACKMAILER consistently refuses to pay an invoice until you perform additional work at no charge…a special subset of the something for nothing…Blackmail is always win-lose, and anyone who believes in win-lose in a business relationship needs to be cut off.
>
> THE SLOW PAY consistently pays invoices late.

[*] Christopher Hawkins. "11 Clients You Need To Fire Right Now," *http://www.christopherhawkins.com/06-13-2005.htm*.

> THE FLAKE consistently is late meeting responsibilities, but still holds you to the original schedule.
>
> THE LIAR consistently lies to you.
>
> THE CLINGER consistently makes unreasonable demands regarding your availability.
>
> THE MONEY PIT consistently is unprofitable…they take up far more time and effort than the fees you are able to charge them are worth...this can be a client who demands cut-rate prices, extra unpaid support, or who repeatedly does things that require you to work harder.

Succubus had at least two previous failed CIS replacement projects before the Candygram project started, which should attest to some of the difficulties its business partners and suppliers faced. Also, as a long-established and regulated utility, it had a culture that had been warped by the long exposure to the perverse incentives resulting from the intersection of business, government, and labor. Standard operating procedures included adversarial negotiation, maximizing gains within existing legal agreements, and cost containment. The legal department had a great deal of influence within the company, and they were never hesitant to take a matter to court.

Their approach left a business like ours that operated informally and with small cash reserves at their mercy. Unfortunately, the lure of a big payoff at the end meant that ownership was willing to submit.

The abusive cycle started with THE SLOW PAY, which turned into THE BLACKMAILER scenario when payment became overdue. Multiple change orders containing substantial free work would be agreed to in exchange for prompt payment of outstanding invoices. This would be followed by THE SOMETHING-FOR-NOTHING angle, in which scope would be added as the acceptance criteria would be "clarified."

THE FLAKE maneuver was also a favorite tactic. Project specification negotiations would drag on, in one instance six weeks past the desired project start date. The only non-negotiable point was the delivery date, which did not change. It was also a common occurrence for key Succubus people to be consistently unavailable when they were required. Their delay was solely our problem.

I'm reluctant to imply that there was a regular pattern of duplicitous behavior. But, there was one notable example of THE LIAR behavior involving a high-ranking member of the project team. One might speculate that other similarly underhanded incidents occurred without detection. This particular incident involved the primary analyst/developer of the existing mainframe system; let's call him R. By most accounts, R was the most knowledgeable person in Succubus about the existing CIS system. Not just on merit, but also because R jealously hoarded this information for his personal gain. Even his employer was at his mercy. If they wanted features or logic added to their system, you had to make it worth R's time. R understood the threat of any new system, and took a key role on the project to neutralize this threat. His role made him the judge and jury over new Candygram functionality. Just how far he was willing to go was seen firsthand by our project manager, PButt, who was helping with testing on-site. That day, they were testing a fairly complicated financial calculation that could be controlled by several configurable parameters. R caused a great deal of commotion, pointing out that calculations were wrong when a particular configuration parameter was enabled. What he didn't know was that PButt, knowing that this calculation was a high-priority item, had tested the functionality himself before releasing it to Succubus. He demanded evidence of the problem from an on-the-spot test run. R ran the calculation and provided the damning evidence. After confirming it worked on his test system, PButt created a new test scenario in the production system. R again ran the test, and again produced data showing we remained in error, and pronounced the software a failure. On a hunch, PButt checked the system's auditing tables, which recorded configuration changes. These tables were created to aid our testing and support efforts, and were not part of the advertised system functionality. User and timestamp data showed that preceding each test run R had turned the config parameter OFF, reenabling it once his evidence had been produced. Confronted with the audit tables, R impishly admitted, "Oh yeah, I guess I was doing that." A fistfight was narrowly averted, but untold damage had already been done. PButt was later able to recount this tale during R's lawsuit claiming wrongful termination.

THE CLINGER behavior became more and more obvious as the "go live" date asymptotically approached. Near the end, roughly 40% of our company personnel were working on-site full-time. We didn't protest too much, as they were technically billable hours, but the payment games being played meant this much-needed revenue was never seen.

There can be little doubt that Succubus was a classic MONEY PIT customer. Without the reserves to absorb the abuses, we were forced to the brink of bankruptcy twice during the project, each time being forced to lay off nearly half of the work force.

> Date: 11/20/2001 2:31PM
>
> From: Hedley Lamarr *hlamarr@rockridge.com*
>
> To: Personnel
>
> Subject: Candygram System Enhancement Project for Succubus
>
> …As a company, we have an incentive to deliver prior to January 25th in the form of a cash bonus…
>
> I believe that if we meet the December 7th deadline with a product that is defect-free, we stand a very good chance of actually receiving some of that incentive bonus."

It was even obvious to Hedley that the payment was not something to count on, especially considering the impossibly high hurdle of "defect-free" software. Still, we limped on.

In late July 2004, having failed to land a deal for the largest natural gas company in Pakistan (a fanciful reach by even the most optimistic standards) we were facing our most dire cash crunch. The triumvirate (Hedley, PButt, and a reluctant C$) agreed to a two-pronged approach to the problem: 1) immediately initiate yet another layoff, and 2) a proposal to sell the source code to Succubus *and* to waive the employment contracts of any remaining Rock Ridge employees identified as necessary to continue the project internally at Succubus. Those employees selected for the layoff revealed Hedley's thinking.

They included the only employee devoting significant time to quality assurance testing, and Stan, the client-side developer with arguably the best understanding of the system, and who in six years had unarguably logged the most overtime. Adding insult to injury, his reprieve came from Succubus, which expressed interest in signing him. Those who were kept included two employees hired in the previous six months. They lacked knowledge of the system or of our existing customers, but they had the superficial qualities of the kind of employee Hedley wanted to hire. S, an implementation analyst, looked and talked like a businessperson. He dressed in dress slacks and long-sleeved name-brand shirts. More importantly, he sounded right to Hedley. He used the sort of buzzwords that were en vogue at the time. He did have a considerable CV, but lacking the ability to generate short-term revenue, his potential was irrelevant. The other employee was of even more demonstrably poor value. Although Pong claimed a right to the title "senior developer," what little code he did produce needed to be reworked or scrapped. Worse, in the course of his efforts, he was a productivity leech, relying on a revolving selection of team members for easily sourced information. What he did have was an ability to unflinchingly spout the world-class bulls_ _t Hedley was desperate to hear. Hedley had had his fill of reality.

Some of Pong's finest work can be seen in Rock Ridge's Quality Assurance procedures contained in a system RFP. The reality was that the minimal QA procedures we did have were now the sole domain of a part-time employee who had no formal training. But in Pong's contribution to the proposal, the truth is stretched to imply that we were clearly at the forefront of our industry, with enough weasel words to stop short of outright lying. This was something Hedley could relate to.

RFP excerpt:

> The foundation of Rock Ridge's quality assurance begins with nearly all of our technical staff having an excellent foundation in Computer Science and/or Software Engineering. There is also a significant influence from Carnegie Mellon University and the Software Engineering Institute, as a number of our staff are Carnegie Mellon graduates. The significance is the nearly universal awareness through out the technical portion of the organization of the Software Capability Maturity Model and metric based repeatable software development processes derived from it.

Translated:

> Three members of the technical team had ties to Carnegie Mellon. One left after posting a cumulative GPA < 1 in a non-CS major, but before being formally asked to leave. The second was formally asked to leave, but later returned, barely graduating, again in a non-CS major, while the third was married to someone who worked for the SEI, but had left the company a few years later. Additionally, several of our staff understands the

> CMM well enough to know how laughably bad our practices really are, by almost any metric, with one being so inspired by the disparity as to write a book on software project management.

By the end of summer 2004, the deal for the code and employees was nearly finalized. Hedley requested a meeting with each developer. The meeting's goal depended on your fate. If Hedley hoped you would remain a Rock Ridge employee, the meeting was to sell you on his vision for the newly reinvigorated company. If you were on Succubus's list, the meeting was somewhat more complicated. The deal was conditional on at least two of the named chattel to accept an offer of employment from Succubus. He desperately needed to convince those on the list to agree. But the years of dealing with Succubus left a bitter taste in his mouth. He made the pitch, but not without suggesting in a roundabout and hopefully legally defensible way that you might also abandon Succubus as soon as you were able. Never seeing a back he didn't feel like stabbing, he had already provided, without any consent, all relevant HR records (including salary), effectively destroying any bargaining power those employees might have had.

Having the luck of being one of the first people hired meant I started with a choice assignment: building the Candygram client framework. By completion, everyone was fully committed with project work, which meant I would be the only one available for the next choice assignment. Rarely having significant involvement in the business logic, I was off Succubus's radar. It also meant I had a hand, sometimes more, in nearly everything, including the mail and network infrastructure. So it wasn't much of a surprise, when I was the last to be scheduled, and when Hedley gave me his best sales pitch to stay. I was offered the position of CTO. In a second, maybe two, my emotions ran from joy, to pride, to doubt, to loathing, before settling on a mélange of despair and resentment. I was being offered the captain's hat on a visibly sinking ship. That's also when I realized that the SME mentioned in a footnote of the business plan was me.

> Rock Ridge will depute an SME to Gurgaon, India to carry out the knowledge transition. The duration for this is expected to be 3–4 weeks.

We were going to offshore development. One of our longest-running jokes involved our eventual Indian replacements. I wasn't offended by the prospect of my teammates being replaced by cheaper labor. I just couldn't comprehend how, after the lessons of the previous six years, he expected our salvation would be an unknown offshore team, billable on an hourly basis, who was not directly accountable to our company and who had no knowledge of, or loyalty to, our product.

My email after the meeting:

> Date: Tue, 14 Sep 2004 10:48AM
>
> From: Mark Denovich *mark@numbersix.com*
>
> To: Stan Granite <stangranite@cablecompany.net>, Tubman <tubman@tubman.com>, BeatUntilCreamy *buc@barestearns.com*

Subject: re: I'm meeting with Hedley in AM

F__k me.

--Mark

At least I merited 30 minutes of his time for an individual meeting. Realizing that Hedley seemed to be having a hard time making room for their individual meetings (his three-week vacation in Europe having something to do with it) Stan, TMS, and Tubman proposed a group meeting. He agreed, and it meant that they would have the unique opportunity to hear both pitches. Hedley first gave the stay pitch. "TMS, you've worked for me for nearly a decade. We've stood together with you for that long, and we're not going to stop now. I want you to know that you'll always have a place at Rock Ridge as long as I'm running the company." He then turned to Tubman. "Tubman, I really appreciate what you've done for the company. The Cash Drawer project has really been a big help to our bottom line, and I want you to know that if the Succubus deal falls through, you'll be a part of any Plan B that might come about." Finally, Hedley appeared ready to give the same pitch to Stan Granite. With the Succubus deal still unconsummated, Hedley got right to the point: "Stan, you'll be off the payroll August 31st." Without a moment's hesitation, he then broke into his standard "The future looks bright, the sales pipeline has never been stronger, and if we pull together as a team" speech that he'd given a thousand times before.

And thus ended an era.

Epilogue, or "Nowhere Special…I Always Wanted to Go There"

Honestly, the end had come a few months earlier at a fateful lunch at Fat Head's. The team had already suffered a few high-profile losses by this point. Someone had the bright idea that we should all get together for lunch.

It was just like old times, like back at the SDC. The conversation was fast and furious. The witty comebacks, putdowns, and general filth still had the same crisp timing and delivery. Our lunch hour stretched into two because no one wanted to leave. But soon the table was cleaned, and the last drinks were emptied, and we reluctantly headed for the door. Outside the weather was perfect, the sun shining and the air crisp as we exchanged a few goodbyes. I stopped almost mid-stride on the way back to my car. It hit me, like I was shot—shot with a diamond bullet, a diamond bullet right through my forehead. "*My god, I'm going back to work*." BeatUntilCreamy, a friend I had only recently brought into the company in a desperate attempt to help us address process and quality issues, spotted the change the very moment it happened. It took the sharp contrast of the lunch and the prospect of another day at what was left of Rock Ridge to drive it home. What was keeping us going was a memory. The office wasn't fun anymore, and it probably stopped being fun a few years earlier. We just didn't notice it. Once we got back, we lingered long enough to confirm we all had similar realizations. We took off early. The next few months we'd just be going through the motions.

Some of us still work for our big client—lodged deep inside their former tormentor, making sure the Candygram System continues to kick ass. A few of us have regrouped to work at a very differently run company (most importantly, a profitable one). And surprising to me, at least, some part of Rock Ridge soldiers on. I expect its pipeline is still packed. Hedley, however, was forced by financial circumstance to sell the company. He is reportedly doing well.

Andrew: Stan, I understand that you left Rock Ridge and stayed away from Candygram for a year and a half, but now you're back working with C$ for Succubus. Are you a glutton for punishment? Is it like an abusive relationship, where you know you should get out but he just keeps sweet-talking you back? How did you end up back in the fourth ring of hell, so to speak? Start out by telling me about what you guys ended up with at the end of the project.

Stan: It's easiest if I start talking about where we are now. Believe it or not, while we are working at Succubus, C$ and I don't actually have anything to do with Candygram anymore. At the end, Rock Ridge's code ended up being sold to Succubus, and obviously they originally brought us in—me and C$—to be the caretakers of Candygram. I guess it was just the way we worked at Rock Ridge, but C$ and I didn't try to horde our knowledge of the system.

Andrew: Even though that would obviously be a good way to ensure your own job security.

Stan: Right. We tried to give people an opportunity to know what we knew. And it turned out that they had no idea how to develop software there at all. So we tried to institute better source control, better processes generally. We wanted to help them improve their careers by learning the stuff that we'd developed at Rock Ridge through trial and error over all of our projects.

Eventually, I think we were successful enough at that, that I left to join Mark at the company that he'd left Rock Ridge for. One other Rock Ridge person, Tubman, was there, too. I was there for a little bit over a year and a half.

C$ got moved out of the Candygram group. Since both of us had done a number of projects that were successful, they wanted to move C$, and then later, me, when they hired me back, into the central IT organization so that we could do projects for the rest of Succubus. And that's the position we're in now.

Andrew: So you and C$ are basically taking some of the better practices you developed—mostly under fire, to cope with the insane obstacles you faced at Rock Ridge—and *teaching them to the people at the same company that was the source of some of those very obstacles.*

Stan: Exactly. I mean, we still do occasional projects with the Candygram team. But Succubus has the least amount of IT resources and expertise in other areas that are at the core of their business. So that's where we are now. Now, ironically, now that we're not there at Candygram, they brought in a major outside consulting company for an engagement where they're evaluating all of the processes around Candygram: whether they're spending enough money on maintenance.

They're trying to cut costs, and the management was under the impression that Candygram was expensive. Well, it turns out that the consulting firm told them that they're actually spending less on the system than their competitors do on theirs. And there's other people that know it now.

Andrew: It sounds like Candygram has had a real impact on the way Succubus runs their business.

Stan: Before, when they were on the mainframe system, they had no visibility into that part of the business. Now, with Candygram, they have a data warehouse, they have tons of reports and data extract, and they actually have a whole team of business analysts that can get the data they need about their operations to do something about it, which is something they didn't have before.

Andrew: And that's all based on the stuff you guys developed over the few years at Rock Ridge?

Stan: Yep.