One of my previous employers published an IT newsletter that was waggishly titled “Random Tips From Maxine”—or “RTFM.” My name isn’t Maxine. Nevertheless, this article is an attempt to capture and share a few of the IT career tips that I’ve gathered from bosses, advisors, and colleagues, along with some of the more practical lessons I’ve learned so far. There is no manual or help documentation that will tell you exactly what to do at every stage of your career, but my hope is that the points and examples I raise here will at least help you figure out what you want and what will make you happy. Higher education information technology can be a highly rewarding career, and you can succeed in it on your own terms.
Early Career

For those of you who are still fairly new to the world of work, I will begin by concentrating on some general advice that is not limited to IT careers. Skip ahead to the next section if you've been in the workforce for a few years already.

How did you end up in a college/university IT environment? For many of us, we landed in a campus IT organization as a continuation of a part-time job we held as students—as help-desk workers, repair-shop technicians, or maybe intern software developers. At every IT organization in which I've worked, there have been several college/university alumni who simply moved from part-time to full-time status after graduation. This can be an entirely logical step: you have knowledge about both the institution and its technical systems, and information technology can be a relatively lucrative career. Still, if this describes you, you owe it to yourself to take stock at some point. After a year, or maybe five, sit down and evaluate whether you are staying because you truly love this particular job and the environment or whether you are staying mainly because everything is familiar and comfortable. These are not necessarily wrong reasons to stay, but you deserve to choose your career rather than fall into it. Heed the advice of Ferris Bueller: “Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.”

Fans of the TV show Futurama know that in the show's imagined future, we will each be assessed by a computer and will have, installed in our hands, a computer chip that decides our job. Until then, however, we’ll need to understand our options and take action. Richard Nelson Bolles devotes a whole chapter to the concept of informational interviewing in his classic 1970 book What Color Is Your Parachute? As what our college career center euphemistically labeled an “unfocused senior,” I found this to be the single most helpful thing I did to determine what I wanted out of a career.

To begin the informational interviewing process, make a list of every job you can think of (either within the IT realm or not) that sounds even remotely interesting to you. Next, reach out to people who hold those jobs—your alumni association may be able to help you find such people. Ask them about the realities of their work: What education and experience did they need to obtain their job? What are the challenges and opportunities of the job and field? You may find, for example, that what an information security officer or museum curator does on a day-to-day basis is a far cry from how Hollywood depicts those roles. You may also find that the jobs you thought might be glamorous do not pay enough to allow you to manage both your household and your student loans. Once you have talked to about half a dozen people, you should start to learn what types of jobs would or would not be appealing to you.

After you have completed each informational interview, it’s always nice to send a thank-you note; some people enclose a small token of appreciation, such as a lottery ticket or a Starbucks card. I will note one caveat: don’t conclude the interview by asking for a job. This makes it seem as though you tried to bluff your way into

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a job interview. It is perfectly fine to say something like: “After I determine what job I want, if I decide that your campus or department sounds like a good fit, how would I find out about openings here?” Interviewees generally want to be helpful to neophytes interested in their field, so a positive interview experience may cause them to remember and contact you when future opportunities arise.

Although informational interviewing should help you determine what you want and what you don’t want out of a work experience, you’ll also need to spend some time figuring out where you already have skills and how those might affect your career decision making. You may have taken a variety of aptitude or skills inventory tests in high school or college; if not, this is a good time to take the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), StrengthsFinder, or similar assessment. These tests are not definitive, but they can clue you in to the fact that if your MBTI type is, say, INTJ, you might not thrive in a commission–based hardware sales position, or that if your top strengths include “Relator” and “Woo,” you may not flourish in a position where you are coding alone in a cubicle all day.

If you feel clueless about handling personal finances and managing your money, sites such as NerdWallet, Mint, and The Motley Fool can help you get your house in order (my officemate at my first job called this a “grown-up lesson”). Beyond this, it’s important to understand how IT salaries vary by position, location, and scope of responsibility. A great place to start researching these aspects is the EDUCAUSE “IT Salaries in Higher Education” report.1

Be aware that location affects salary; that is, salaries tend to be tied to cost of living in different areas. A software developer in the midwestern United States might earn $50,000, but he/she might earn twice that or more in the Northeast or in California. However, the Midwesterner will be able to buy a four-bedroom house for $120,000, whereas someone living in California might be looking at ten times that much.

Do your homework about salaries in various areas (Glassdoor is a good resource), because the hiring process is pretty much the only time you can haggle over your compensation. Also ask about raises and bonuses. At some campuses, pay-for-performance is the law of the land, and there’s a structured annual review process leading to a modest annual raise. At other campuses, employees may receive a standard cost-of-living raise, particularly if they are part of a collective bargaining unit. Some institutions have bonuses and incentives as standard practice, whereas others reserve such incentives only for work on high-profile strategic projects.

When you are finally starting that new job, you may be thinking that you need to prove your worth publicly as soon as you can. Resist this temptation. As the retired astronaut Colonel Chris Hadfield describes in his memoir An Astronaut’s Guide to Life on Earth, you should aim to be a “zero” instead of a “+1” right out of the gate. That is, just show up and be competent rather than show off. Don’t use your first staff meeting to critique the placement of the wireless access points, the current code review process, or the choice of LMS. Recognize that things are the way they are for certain reasons and that your initial task is to listen and figure out why. It may be that you were hired to effect change, but you need to understand the status quo before you can do that. You’ll have time to show you’re a “+1” soon enough; until then, absorb everything and show others that you can be quietly proficient as well as appreciative of the current IT issues on campus.

You’ll also want to make an effort to get to know your colleagues both inside and outside the IT organization. Show interest in what your colleagues do, or perhaps ask them to have coffee with you before they show you around their offices and introduce you to their teams. In a 2007 EDUCAUSE Review article, Gregory A. Jackson, then Vice President and CIO at the University of Chicago, described this as “The Strategic Role of Lunch.”2 The more quickly you get to know your colleagues and what they do, the more effective you can be when it comes time to dive into departmental projects.

Similarly, get to know the campus and its culture. Are staff encouraged to attend sporting or arts events? What are the popular majors or concentrations? Who are the students, and where do they come from? Understanding your campus will allow you to be a more effective advocate for its technology services.

**Midcareer**

So, you’ve been happily ensconced in a campus IT role for five, ten, or maybe fifteen years. You like your job, but at the same time you’ve noticed that some of your colleagues have moved up or moved on or have completed additional degrees or certifications. Even though you are content, you can’t help but feel a few pangs of envy. This is the time to recognize that ambition and risk-tolerance are highly personal. If you did your homework early in your career and have chosen a position that you enjoy, that uses your talents, that pays you adequately, and that is a good match for your personality and work-life balance, then acknowledge that you’ve done well for yourself! Assuming you are keeping your skills current and are receiving good reviews, you’ll be able to look forward to an annual raise and the satisfaction of doing something you like in an environment that suits you.
You may, though, feel a stirring for more. Maybe you’ve developed strong opinions on how your department should be run; maybe you have an interest in organizational development and leadership; or maybe your growing family means you are hoping for a sizeable salary bump. How do you approach rising through the ranks? First off, make it known that you want more responsibility. Hopefully you work within an IT organization that emphasizes professional development and you work for a manager who is eager to give you opportunities to grow. Don’t assume, however, that leaders know what you want. Use your midyear or annual review to ask how you could take on additional duties or become a candidate for a management role. A good boss will not be threatened by your career aspirations. Your department may not have immediate open slots, and it may be difficult if not impossible to create brand-new positions (especially in the middle of the fiscal year), but initiating the conversation gives your management chain a heads-up that you’d like to do more. You can help your case by establishing a track record of taking on additional work or volunteering to lead complex projects. You should also be aware that even the most nurturing of bosses might have a difficult time seeing you outside of the role you currently occupy. If you are a quiet but effective help-desk consultant who applies for a vacant relationship-manager position, your boss might not at first see that as the right fit. However, if you have consistently and politely made your aspirations known and have volunteered to supervise the student staff and to help with the ServiceNow migration, for example, your boss will likely have an easier time imagining you in the more senior role.

Your tolerance for risk can also determine how your career progresses. I have met a surprising number of people who stay in jobs they don’t enjoy because they are afraid to go on job interviews or to face rejection. If you’re the type of blackjack player who “sticks” at 15, you won’t win as often. You’ll never know what you might be able to do unless you try.

This next advice may be hard to hear, but I have seen it to be consistently true: the higher you want to go, the more likely it is that you have to move. Perhaps you are an instructional technologist who is earning an MBA at night and would love to transition into management. Your department is run by a manager who is supportive of your ambition but who is not about to leave. Another possible scenario is that your boss does move on and several of your colleagues join you in applying for the job. The CIO may not want to take a chance on someone who has never managed before or may think it better to bring in someone from outside instead of choosing one of you to supervise the other former peers. What do you do? Your options might include staying put, asking to manage a team of part-time student employees, applying for a management role over in administrative computing (and leaving instructional technology), or pulling up stakes and moving on to a promotion at another college or university. The conventional wisdom is that the last option is the best way to move up quickly, but what if you don’t want to or can’t move?

A corollary to the above situation is that the higher you go, the shorter your tenure is likely to be. According to the 2014 Study of the Higher Education Chief Information Officer Roles and Effectiveness, the tenure for a college/university CIO is 6.5 years. This means that unless your first and only CIO role is your last stop before retirement, you’ll likely be picking up and moving again in several years.

This is where you need to revisit what is important to you and your family. If you think your future lies within your current institution, follow some of the above advice and keep asking how you can be most helpful to the department. If that’s not panning out and you need to stay in the area, perhaps there are other pursuits that would help you continue to grow without achieving a management role—activities such as taking an online course or mentoring a startup or a youth technical club. Finally, campus IT organizations are full of couples who successfully manage long-distance or weekend-commuter relationships. It can be done, if that’s your priority.

Later Career
In this scenario, you’ve accomplished a great deal in your twenty-plus years in the IT field. You set out long ago to become, say, the director of network operations, and you worked your way up to attain that role at a college or university that you like very much. You are still toying with the idea of becoming a CIO one day. The techniques that you used earlier can still help. Talk to CIOs and ask them what the role is like—it can differ quite widely from campus to campus. Reach out to your peer senior leadership team members to be sure that you understand what they do and what their big challenges are. Help them understand you. Show on your CV or LinkedIn page that you have experience in directing a large, institution-wide initiative so that recruiters will take notice. Look into leadership courses through EDUCAUSE, such as the Leading Change Institute (http://www.leadingchangeinstitute.org/) or the NGLC Breakthrough Models Academy (http://www.educause.edu/events/breakthrough-models-academy).

As you gain experience, you may also want to consider what sort of “legacy” you want to leave. Would you have regrets if you didn’t at least try your hand at a director or CIO position? Do you want to be remembered as the person who spearheaded campus efforts around a particular innovative technology or big strategic project? Have you always wanted to experience living and working in another country or in a new-to-you geographical area of the United States? Do you see yourself as eventually retiring fully, or would you prefer working part-time as long as you’re able?

At All Stages
No matter your career stage, certain tips always apply:

1. Establish a professional support network. Having a circle of colleagues and friends to lean on is critically important. Back in 2007, I belonged to a career-support group of staff working in academic technology at different Boston-area higher education
institutions. We began meeting monthly to share experiences, ask advice on dealing with difficult situations, find leads on new positions, and generally just be supportive of one another. Eight years later, we’re still going strong and have developed close friendships. Whenever one of us is struggling with a work issue, we know we can call or e-mail and get the perspective of someone in a similar area. In addition, my institution has a robust “IT Partners” type of organization for staff who support technology both within and outside of the central IT unit. There are subgroups too—Mobile, Linux, Women in Technology, Multimedia, and many more—and these are great places to learn, network, swap stories, and schmooze.

2. Find a formal or informal mentor. Your campus may have formal leadership mentoring programs sponsored through the human resources department. If it doesn’t, you can try approaching a leader you admire and ask whether he/she would be willing to mentor you. Some leaders may be a little taken aback by this and may worry either about not knowing what to do or about not having time. You could ask if the leader can simply meet for lunch or coffee once a month or so while you ask questions. You may not even need to let your mentors know they are mentoring you! If you are in regular meetings with leaders you admire, pay close attention to how they act, how they treat others, and how they respond to feedback and criticism. Chances are you will learn a lot without even having to ask.

3. Focus on the challenge, not the grade level. I considered jokingly calling this section “The Lateral Move Is Not a Failure” because I’ve seen so many people worry about moving elsewhere to take a position that is equivalent to their current one. If you love working in library technology services but you’ve been at your alma mater for fifteen years and need a change of scenery, why not go for the similar role at another university? The fresh perspective could be just what you need. You don’t have to go into management—indeed, not everyone should. It’s your career, and you should do what makes you happy. Just do your research, and own the choices you make.

4. Cultivate a positive attitude. Sometimes working in information technology can cause us to lose our normal positivity. The server is down, a faculty member is angry, the dean’s e-mail was hacked—quick, go fix it! Over the years I have been amazed at the professionalism, good nature, and equanimity that so many of my colleagues have shown in the face of network meltdowns and screaming instructors. And let’s face it: we all like colleagues who are nice to us and who make us feel good. Dale Carnegie wrote about this in his 1936 book How to Win Friends and Influence People, and it still holds true today. Positivity is not in every person’s nature, but it can be learned. Does your Myers-Briggs type start with IN? Is your greatest StrengthsFinder attribute “Analytical”? Are you a “recovering shy person”? You may need a little help. If you have sought out a mentor, ask what he/she does in these situations, or ask a trusted colleague for feedback on how others perceive you. You might see whether your HR department offers 360 degree reviews on request. Scared of public speaking? Find out if there’s a Toastmasters group on campus. If you truly struggle with these issues, you might even investigate cognitive behavioral therapy exercises to help you take some baby steps.

Beyond mere introversion, if you’re known as the person who critiques every plan, snarks through every staff meeting and social gathering, and vocally derides everyone and everything, you’re going to find yourself increasingly isolated, not to mention passed over for promotion. The Stoic philosopher Seneca said it best: “If you really want to escape the things that harass you, what you’re needing is not to be in a different place but to be a different person.” This is not to say that you have to be a Pollyanna or as gung-ho as Ed Harris playing the astronaut John Glenn in the movie The Right Stuff. You are still allowed to exercise your judgment and offer constructive feedback. You just need to make sure that you’re doing so in a way that is seen as being for the benefit of the department. Don’t bash other people or engage in prolonged whining over a decision that has already been made. To paraphrase Carnegie, colleagues won’t necessarily remember your ideas, but they’ll remember how you made them feel.

In Summary

The field of higher education information technology can be a great place to work. There are opportunities to provide key support for the teaching, learning, research, and administrative activities of a college or university and to interact with colleagues who value employment in an academic environment. The range and scope of careers within higher education information technology is wider than you might imagine, so you owe it to yourself to take an active role in building the career that is right for you. To close, I offer another quotation—one first attributed to Seneca, later credited to Carnegie, and most recently interpreted and popularized by the songstress Sheryl Crow: “Success is getting what you want. Happiness is wanting what you get.”

Notes


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