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IT CAREER EXPERT
When is it time to get out of tech?
Jon Boroshok
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They've put in the 60-hour weeks, logged in from home, and subscribed to the American overwork ethic. They've moved up to management, and they've been on the cutting edge. Then they walked away. As more IT professionals leave tech by choice or due to economic conditions, they're finding new ways to pay the mortgage.

From Java to tea
Jessie Jacobs was a successful business analyst and user interface designer. He was doing usability testing and interface designs on many Fortune 500 projects as part of a large wireless platform company. He was enjoying "a wild, tech-centric ride."

Then Jacobs had an epiphany while working on a project and living the traveling tech life of hotels and cube farms. "One rainy day in Seattle in February, I decided that this was not going to be the next 40 years," said

Jacobs. He gave up a good salary and stock options and began working his business analysis skills and knowledge to research his next career.

"In tech, you create massive systems, but you don't physically experience it," explained Jacobs. He wanted a physical experience, something refined and elegant. Jacobs practices healthy living and drinks a lot of tea. He decided that an experience founded on tea was his calling.

Jacobs relied on his previous tech expertise to help perform a case study analysis and set up the Samovar Tea Lounge in San Francisco (www.samovartea.com). The business opened in June 2003. His old tech methodology even caused Jacobs to document every detail of the process and "user interface" of the lounge in hopes of eventually franchising.

Today, the Samovar Tea Lounge has a steady revenue stream and is poised for growth. While built around the concept of relaxation, it does offer Wi-Fi access from 9:00 a.m. until noon on weekdays but never on Saturday nights. This techie has found a way to profit from downtime.

Techies often make the transition from cube dweller to business owner.
According to Roberta Chinsky Matuson, founder and principal of Human Resource Solutions in Northampton, Mass. (www.yourhrexperts.com), "People who enjoy a fast paced environment and not knowing what to expect next have traits that transfer easily, especially into entrepreneurial endeavors."

Tech burnout doesn't surprise Matuson either. "It's time to get out when you're not having fun anymore," she said, noting that many people were originally caught up in the wave and excitement of working for a tech company.

Some experienced techies have developed skills -- such as working on teams -- that will serve them well in other fields. She advises IT professionals looking to leave technology to develop a functional resume to show transferable skills rather than titles. The bygone dot-com boom has made employers wary of them and over-inflated salaries.

From Perl to pearls
Yvonne Shortt spent ten years programming in C++ and Java and managing the Web team for financial companies such as JP Morgan. She was making great money and working long hours -- a typical tech life for midtown Manhattan.

Shortt saw the writing on the wall when her friends and, "People with resumes better than mine began losing jobs. Ph.D.s and MBAs -- all out of work."

Shortt had started making jewelry as a way to occupy time when she couldn't sleep while pregnant and decided to turn the hobby into a business. She realized that she lacked sales and marketing skills, and felt that by learning them in her own business, she would eventually be more marketable in technology.

Her jewelry business required a low investment, as she worked with sterling silver, not precious stones or gold. She was also doing her own production, so her tech skills of risk analysis were put to work as she started Waddevah, Inc. (www.waddevah.com) in New York City.

She's still relying on her Web savvy to manage her company's Web site, where much of their sales come from. Shortt says she's constantly measuring and tracking results, deciding between pay-per-click or paid keywords, and managing direct mail and print advertising. She's also managing other folks who help with manufacturing.

Even with her new skills, she isn't about to go back to being a tech employee. Running her own business allows Shortt to see her children during the day. She still puts in lots of time, but has far more flexible hours, doing much of her work at night.

While Jacobs and Shortt knew when it was time to change careers, the decision is not always easy. Karyl Innis, CEO of TheInnisCompany in Dallas (www.inniscompany.com) suggests that if you're looking for a job, but can't or won't relocate or when you can't or won't suffer non-techies, it may be time to get out of tech. A performance evaluation in the bottom 25%, being skipped for a raise when others received one, or rarely being selected for special task forces are also warning signs.

As a provider of outplacement services, Innis has observed that IT professionals have certain skills sets that transfer well to the non-tech world, such as the ability to set plans and solve problems, focusing on facts and detail. There is a weakness too. "Most techies don't have a soft side," says Innis. "In business, the human side is as much of the equation as the fact set."

Getting out of tech altogether isn't right for everybody. People need to evaluate what they like and dislike about their job. Innis advises drawing a three-ring graph, with one ring representing skills, one for interests, and one for current market conditions. The intersection of the three rings is where a new job or career might be found.

"People leave people, not companies," said Innis. It's a common mistake to talk about leaving the profession instead of the situation. Sometimes a change of environment is what's really needed. "Don't leave tech if you're good at it."

Jon Boroshok is an accomplished strategist and freelance writer in Groton, Mass. His articles and columns have appeared in The Boston Globe, The Christian Science Monitor, Crain Communications, ZDNet, CMP Publications, and TechLiving magazine.

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