



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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How to Reinvigorate Your Career in Technology

by John West Hadley

If I want to have an outstanding career path in technology, then obviously I should work hard to keep myself up-to-date in all the latest technology areas, shouldn't I?

Not necessarily.

The absolutely most important skill you can work on to reinvigorate your career is your ability to express your accomplishments in a concise, compelling, results-oriented manner. I'm not saying that technology skills aren't important, but they will only get you so far. It's your ability to communicate what you offer that will make you stand head and shoulders above others.

Case in point: I finished out my traditional actuarial career as Chief Actuary, a role to which I never really aspired. I knew I was ready for a change, and set out to carve out a systems role for myself. My first step wasn't to secure my PMP, or to take a course in JAVA, or to become an expert in Web design and search engine optimization, or to seek any of the myriad of systems certifications. I set out to:

- 1. Examine my past accomplishments and roles, and get really clear on what I had done, what challenges I had overcome, and the results I had achieved** for my employers. (Naturally, systems-related work was particularly critical to emphasize.)
- 2. Turn that into a compelling marketing message** I could present that would get conversations started.

- 3. Sit down (by phone or in person) with everyone I used to work with, knew from SOA and actuarial club meetings, had socialized with, etc. to make sure they had a clear picture of what I could do for my target employer.**

Within six months, I had a systems consulting practice well into six figures.

Here's the difficulty:

Most people, especially very technical-oriented professionals like actuaries and systems professionals, find it very difficult to market themselves. In fact, they often think of marketing as a dirty word, something they shouldn't have to do. On top of that, our profession tends to attract relatively introverted people, so that effective networking generally doesn't come naturally.

So how do you develop this ability? Look at your achievements, and ask yourself these questions about each one:

- Why did I or why was I asked to take on this project?
 - o Why me and not someone else?
 - o Why was it even necessary for ANYONE to take it on?
 - o What were the expected benefits, or the significant problems to be solved?
- What challenges did I have to overcome along the way?
- What actions did I take to overcome those?

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- What specifically did I do to bring the project to its conclusion?

- What was the result of my efforts?
 - o Did I complete the project more quickly than usual, freeing up resources for other critical tasks?
 - o Was I able to take a project that was behind schedule, and put it back on target?
 - o Are some of the techniques I employed going to serve as templates that will improve efficiency on future projects?
 - o Will successful completion of the project lead to increased productivity, lower expenses, higher profitability, etc.?

Watch out for this trap: While you want to get really clear in your own mind about the actions you took, you don't necessarily want to relate all of those to others unless they specifically ask. What will really grab people's attention are the challenges

solved and the results achieved. Actions taken should be left at the high level, like this:

"I took three primary steps to put the project back on track. First, I interviewed every key player to uncover any obstacles in the critical path. Second, I negotiated with senior management to prioritize the project into Day 1 vs. Day 2 objectives. Third, I instituted a new incentive program that re-energized the team members and ensured that they all gave 110 percent effort."

Your goal is to keep the listener engaged, wanting to know more, not to tell them all the details of what you did. When they show sufficient interest to ask how, for example, you developed and implemented the incentive program, then you can go into more detail.

Now let's look at a concrete example of how to do this, in the context of a résumé, where you

need to boil the entire story down to concise, compelling bullet points.

Here's the information "Jim" and I started with:

"Responsible for all data discrepancies resolution in equity research universe and communication with individual analysts. Created and propagated efficient communication, reporting and process changing network between sell-side analysts, research data vendors, and institutional buy-side/sell-side clients aimed at resolution of data issues."

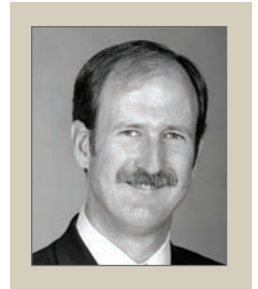
One quick observation: Never use words like responsible for. This is very passive and boring, and it's totally unnecessary. The first sentence is substantially improved with just this simple revision:

"Resolved all data discrepancies in equity research universe and communicated results to individual analysts."

I interviewed Jim on what he had accomplished in this job, using some of the questions I outlined above. Here are just two of the resulting bullets we came up with:

- Executed account management and customer service functions for 20 percent of the world's sell-side analysts in 15 research houses internationally, contributing to 100 percent renewal rate and four-fold increase in sales over two years.
- Effected improvements in delivery of financial information from brokers to data vendors by instituting data quality control routines. This reduced the error rate from 10- to 20-percent to below 1 percent.

By the way, once Jim started presenting his accomplishments effectively, he secured a job offer that increased his salary 30 percent, which his current company then agreed to match. 📄



John West Hadley is a career search counselor. He can be reached at John@JHACareers.com or 908.725.2437. His free Career Tips newsletter and other career resources are available at www.JHACareers.com.