

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

NYU Me

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NYU Me

The IBM internship was just for the summer. With no more than a few months of entry-level experience would I be able to find a real job? Not a problem with a cousin like Ron, who introduced me to his friend Larry who promptly hired me. I was his first staff member for the newly created Computing Support department . . . at NYU's Graduate School of Business Administration. Sound like a good job? It was seriously better than good. How's this? Decent salary plus full benefits for a twenty-eight hour workweek. Plus *unlimited* free tuition.

Our job was providing computer assistance for the graduate students, faculty, and deans. Eventually, I worked on three NYU computers, one at GBA, the other two at the Washington Square campus. I had the freedom to arrange my work day on various projects using these three machines. I had office space at all three installations. But most importantly, Larry showed me what I needed to learn about computing. Regardless of the job, I would have been marginal at best, without his direction.

And it gets better. With Larry's help I quickly moved beyond beginner in many aspects of computing. When hired in September of 1964, I had less than ninety days of computing experience. By the end of the school year, June of 1965, I had a broad overview of computing, was a

member of the professional computing society, the ACM (Association of Computing Machinery), and had studied theories underlying computing. The most varied practical experience anyone could pack into nine months. And that's not all. Larry did more than transform his apprentice into a budding master of the computer universe. He gave me the unprecedented opportunity of designing a financial data processing language.

Initially, we called it FinLang. While much of the work was done in my first New York (actually Brooklyn Heights) apartment, I didn't do it alone. With the help of a lot of polishing by Larry, FinLang became a detailed proposal. And more. Larry wrote a descriptive paper, presented it as one of five papers delivered as GBA's Investment Workshop. (Official title: "A Proposed Financial Data Processing Language.")

THE INVESTMENTS WORKSHOP

of

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY'S
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

The Applications of Computers to Security Analysis

The Marcus Nadler Reading Room

March 2, 1965

Larry explained the Workshop to me. Presenters from GBA elucidated leading edge theory. This was a yearly event presented to industry representatives . . . for a fee. The seats in the room went for \$10,000 a pop. An ordinary-sized classroom, it was more than half-full. I sat as Larry delivered the paper. A few people talked to us after the presentation, with what might be called subdued skeptical

enthusiasm. But it was enough to justify my time attempting an implementation that summer. Again, not alone. There was a surprising amount of help from Mike, a bright high school intern. By September we had a working prototype.

Computing, for those millions of novices and billions of uninitiated out there, is the most complex thing ever invented by the mind of man. (I use man in the generic sense of course. One of my great privileges in computing was to be in the immediate presence of Admiral Grace Hopper, a true pioneer and the creator of the most successful computer language.) Without Larry's guidance, I could have easily fallen on my face. Without his advice, I could have quickly become overwhelmed and thereby discouraged. Faced with the breadth and depth of computing, there's always a temptation to become superficial or develop tunnel vision.

Back in my second Boy Scout camp, we were shooting our still-sweet-smelling bull and asking each other what we were going to be. After a number of doctors, lawyers, and rocketmen, I began to list the things I wanted to do. Before I finished, one of my less sanguine buddies interrupted with, "Jack-of-all-trades, master of none." I replied by asking, as I had since I could talk, "Why?" Where, I wanted to know, was this homily written as law? Folk wisdom, I pointed out, is not a) always true, or b) necessarily true, or c) nothing more than a generalization, and d) is therefore not immune to exception. "Why," I asked, "could I not be the exception?" As usual, my divergent opinion was met with derision. As usual, I was right and somewhat ahead of my time. The academic world had yet to acknowledge the need for the interdisciplinary approach —the generalist I was becoming.

Thanks to Larry's exposing me to computer salesmen (in the sixties, they were only men), I learned how important it was to provide the right level of hardware. Then, as now, most customers are new to the game. It's a cinch to seduce the buyer with more than he or she really needs. Oversold customers eventually learn you've saddled them with superfluous silicon. Don't expect to see them again. Why oversell, when it's easier to keep customers simply by selling them the right stuff? Fifteen years later, I saw personal computer salespeople making this same mistake. And now, after another twenty years, many still do. Beware.

However, it's also true we need to be kind to computer salespeople. Nothing changes as fast, or as often, as computer products. I'm sure they feel they're tap-dancing on quicksand. I remember the time at GBA I told the salesman his punched cards were headed for oblivion. I thought I was merely stating the obvious, doing no more than repeating what I saw written on the walls. Since this was his livelihood, his denial was vehement. As green as I was, I could still see how quickly things were, and would continue to be, changing. When I told him this simple truth, I was reminded how few people relish change.

I learned many things in my first year at GBA. I was introduced to other computer languages, including assembler. I learned computing theory when Larry's entrée got me into a class on Finite State Automata. I also had access to Larry's extensive (for its time) computer library. And I was reading various publications of the ACM. Sponge as a description doesn't come close. Sponges, for one thing, don't learn from interaction and I had plenty. In guiding graduate students to the solution of their elementary computer problems, I learned how to quickly

get to the heart of those problems. In helping faculty with their research, I was introduced to university politics. In helping the deans with their projects, I learned how to serve without being subservient. Again, I need to emphasize I'd been working in computing for only a year. Was there ever a better opportunity?

No, but there were other things I learned at GBA. Our fledgling Computer Support Group was attached to GBA's Department of Management. This was the late sixties and the Management faculty included arguably the two greatest management names of the century, Peter Drucker and W. Edwards Deming. My cubby hole was no more than thirty feet from these superstars of management consulting. And the sign on my door carried my name in letters exactly like theirs. (Only the title was Mr., not Dr. or Prof.)

A little story from my next year there goes like this. I was dating the departmental secretary, Fran, at the time she happened to be typing the manuscript for Drucker's *The Effective Executive*. I read sections while waiting for her to get ready. I realized what the rest of the world already knew: This guy really knew what he was talking about. Since then, not only have I continued to read Drucker but many others in this field. I guess being attached to Management rubbed off, because I'm still learning and applying what I read.

I should point out at the time, although Drucker was the acknowledged superstar, Deming was a prophet as yet without honor. His expertise was admittedly of the highest, but we in this country thought his lessons lacked sophistication. It took a few decades, but in the eighties he became a God in Japan. They had used his "elemental" methods and whipped our sophisticated butts, but good. Then, and only then, did we give him the recognition he deserved. He even made the "Tonight Show."

GBA had a lot to do with learning to live in New York. My first apartment was a fifth floor walkup on Henry Street in Brooklyn Heights. Five floors not counting the three-quarters of a flight from the street to the front door. I chose Brooklyn Heights because, in those day, it was the closest affordable neighborhood to my workplace.

NYU's Graduate School of Business Administration was—and still is, I believe—located on lower Trinity, directly northwest of historical Trinity Church, the western terminus of Wall Street. In the mid-late sixties, the Management Department and its Computer Support appendage were in a separate building, an overflow space, above the Horn and Hardart Cafeteria directly behind the Church. As a kid, my few visits to New York had included the special treat of eating at the Automat. Here I was, working upstairs from one.

This Automat was a stop for morning coffee and the no-other-option lunch. It was also where Larry invited me to join his coffee-break set, which included Professor Timothy Costello. The next year, Tim became deputy major under John Lindsay. One day as I was wandering in the GBA halls, a nearby elevator opened and there was Hisonner, the Mayor. I'm sure there were many other important people visiting our various famous professors, but they were not the visible celebrity John Lindsay was.

Living in New York and owning two cars (I assume you've been keeping track) in New Jersey was a problem. I parked the Fiat at a gas station near my parent's home and sold it in a week or two. The Alfa I sold back to the dealer. New York and cars—I need to say for those few hundred million Americans who've never lived there—don't mix. Two illustrations. Back in the sixties, I knew people who spent more each month for their parking garage than for their apartments. In the seventies, I visited friends who lived way up on the Upper West Side, in the hundreds. They owned an aging BMW which they re-parked every single morning. Every day they would

get up at seven (or was it six?) and move the car to the other—the legal for that day—side of the street. New York is the land of “Alternate Side Of The Street” parking. You can’t park on any one side of the street two days in a row; you have to alternate sides every day.

Having sold my cars was I without transportation? Not if you count the New York Subway System. Which I did. Count on. Every day. Many times every day. Eventually, I mastered the subway. Well, at least those lines and stops for my small slice of New York. I not only knew trains and frequencies, but which end of the train to ride so as to be close to a needed transfer point or platform exit. And which end to ride late at night when they closed some exits. Regardless of how safe the subway is in any given decade, you don’t want to walk the length of the platform late at night to reach an exit. Now, that knowledge is gone. In recent decades, I drive into the city and park as close to my destination as New York possible.

I had other, part-time, transportation. My brother Robert wanted a motorbike to take back and forth to college. Rutgers in New Brunswick was a little over twenty miles from Union. We split the cost of the bike. I took this minuscule 50 cc. Honda into New York a few times. I recall it proved quite stimulating to a date from the nether regions of Brooklyn. She kept asking to go around the block one more time. There were a few trips with the bike from my parent’s house to Kearny to visit the old après-Army bar haunts. The freedom of this little bike was the perfect antidote to the constraints of the subway.

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