



(Un)Glamorous Jobs

Cleaning up technology doesn't mean moping at your mop

by Eric Butterman

Certain technological jobs are all about cleaning up the messes other people make—and making sure new messes never occur. These behind the scenes lifesavers are often referred to as “computer janitors.” Not the most glamorous title, however, the services they provide are vital to ensuring smooth-running computer systems. From system administrators who fix personal computer problems at corporations to business technology managers who decide what software will lead to the fewest company problems to waste management engineers who keep track of the city’s garbage—these are the men and women who make our companies and even cities run smoothly and efficiently. And while being a computer janitor may *sound* unglamorous, it’s hardly a thankless—or boring—job. Read on to discover just how interesting this career can be.

More Than Just Tech Support

Cecil Trevathan was like a lot of people in their twenties—unsure of what he really wanted to do with the rest of his life. He had been everything from a carpenter to an apartment building manager and was looking for a career that could inspire him and provide a strong future.

In 1998 a position in computer customer support at UCLA Medical Center opened up. Trevathan jumped at the opportunity to help those who were not as computer savvy as he was, however, he was quickly surprised by just how little many of his customers knew about computers.

“I couldn’t believe the questions I was getting,” he says. “Half of the answers were simple: ‘Try turning your computer off and on.’”

But once Trevathan got past the mundane aspects of his job, he quickly saw how rewarding it could be. “[At first] I didn’t know if I could do this for the long haul,” Trevathan admits, “but then I saw how good people felt when I taught them basic computer concepts that enabled them to solve their own problems the next time. The job became more about teaching than tech support.”

The most important skills those in tech support need to have is not vast knowledge of computer systems, Trevathan believes, rather it’s patience and knowing how to work well with people. In fact, he estimates that 60% of his job is based solely on people skills. “On the job I’m definitely part mother and part psychiatrist,” he says. “You have to be able to tell people what they did wrong without making them feel like an idiot for their mistake.”

Playing the Game of IT Management

Steven Bridges’ career actually started out by leaving UCLA—or at least its computer store. Working as a salesperson there in 1995, Bridges answered the phone to find the person on the line wanted to buy *him* rather than software. BBDO, one of the world’s largest advertising firms, needed a computer tech for their Los Angeles office and they offered him a position. Bridges was floored by the opportunity and even more surprised that his computer skills were so rare.

"I thought everyone knew what I knew about computers," he laughs. "It was hard to believe not everyone understood what a SCSI drive was."

From there Bridges' career took off—from systems administrator to support for an independent computer company to IT manager at La Agencia, a Los Angeles-based Spanish-speaking advertising firm, where he's been for the last three years. His present job has offered Bridges a chance to create a "technological philosophy" for La Agencia.

"A corporation's success hinges on whether or not it's technologically sound," Bridges believes. "Whether to go with Macs or PCs or to run Novell or a TCP/IP operating system suddenly becomes an extremely important decision when the company needs to have a project done in an hour and the system is not responding."

What sort of background does one need to succeed in such a critical job? According to Bridges, the quickest way to success in his field is a willingness to play games—computer games. "I can't tell you how many people ended up as IT managers by learning from software in games," he says. "If your game has a glitch you have to find a way to fix it; this job is just the corporate version of that."

It is also important for IT managers to constantly update their skills and to stay on top of the latest innovations in the industry, Bridges advises. He suggests reading trade magazines like *PC World*, *PC Computing* and *Networking Magazine*. "A good IT manager is constantly learning."

Managing Information

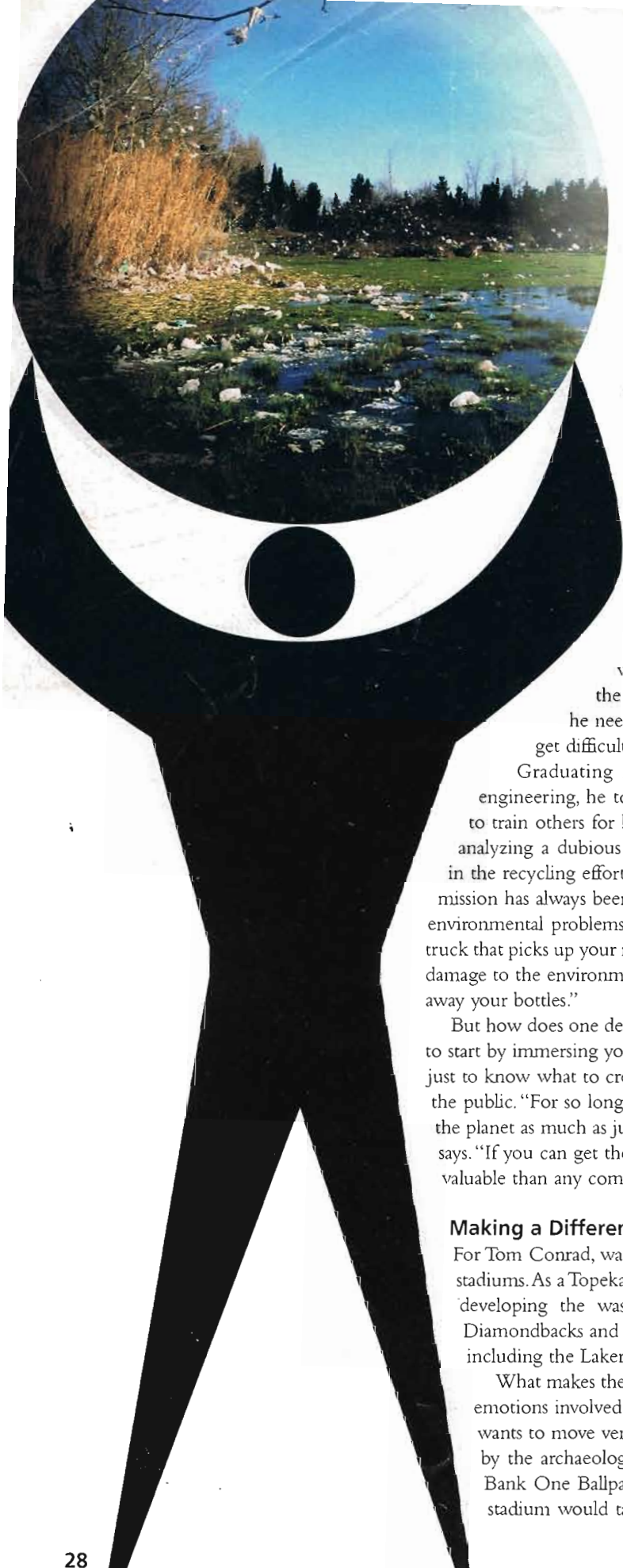
As the cost of a bachelor's degree skyrocketed in the mid 1980s, Rob Testa was looking for a less expensive alternative. He opted for an associate's degree in data processing and computer programming from Post College in 1986, but little did he know that would just be the beginning of his computer education. Today, Testa is the business area manager of information technology for Unilever, a Westport, Conn.-based corporation with \$4 billion in revenue last year.

Quite a leap for someone who started as an entry-level programmer. "In my job people tell me about their previous technological problems, and my team and I create new solutions," Testa explains. The latest solution he and his team produced involved implementing a reporting system for Unilever—not an easy task when you consider nearly 2,000 invoices get processed a day by the company and that 20-30 gigs of data have to be accounted for in order to stay ahead of the game.

"On paper the job may not sound glamorous," Testa admits, "but when you realize how much money can be saved by efficiency—by making weekly, monthly and annual reports specific to each person's title and contribution—what I'm doing is as important as it gets."

But when it comes down to it, Testa's job is still about cleaning up messes. "There are constant 'trouble calls' on computer systems, which takes me back to my programming days," he says. "So much of the time the trouble ends up being that the user does not understand the program, so you can never stop teaching."





Or learning new fields, Testa says the best way to succeed is to actually step outside of the computer-centric mindset. "Project management and accounting courses are key," he says. "It's not about just coming up with programs that are easy to use but those that are relevant as well. What better way to help the businessperson than to become more business savvy?"

Problem Solving for the Environment

While running technology for a corporation may feel like having the world on your shoulders, Ron Mersky actually does. As a civil engineer consultant, Mersky is called upon to find the most efficient ways to solve environmental problems while dealing with the communities that might not like to find the solution in their backyard. "When I have to tell a mayor that he needs to add a solid waste facility near a park," Mersky says, "it can get difficult."

Graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with a Ph.D. in civil engineering, he took a professorship at Widener University, which allowed him to train others for his field while remaining at the forefront of the industry. From analyzing a dubious waste stream at Philadelphia International Airport to assisting in the recycling effort of the Cayman Islands Department of Environment, Mersky's mission has always been the same: problem solving. "In many ways the answers to our environmental problems are now problems themselves," Mersky says. "If the recycling truck that picks up your refuse has to haul it 160 miles away, then it's actually caused more damage to the environment through its emitted fumes than the good it's done in taking away your bottles."

But how does one develop the critical mindset to conquer such problems? "You have to start by immersing yourself in technological learning," he advises. But it's not enough just to know what to create—you also have to develop the people skills to explain it to the public. "For so long we've tried to explain that a month of recycling will not help the planet as much as just taking public transportation to work once a month," Mersky says. "If you can get the average American to listen to you, then you have a skill more valuable than any compost machine you could ever create."

Making a Difference

For Tom Conrad, waste engineering has taken him into a whole new arena—sports stadiums. As a Topeka, Kan.-based civil engineer for SCS Engineering, he worked on developing the waste cleanup for Bank One Ballpark, home of the Arizona Diamondbacks and the Staples Center, home of several Southern California teams, including the Lakers and the Clippers.

What makes the combination of waste engineering and sports so unique are the emotions involved, Conrad believes. "When it comes to sports stadiums, everyone wants to move very quickly," he says. "But what happens when things are held up by the archaeological rights of Indian tribes?" That could have been the case at Bank One Ballpark, where American Indians were concerned that building the stadium would tamper with soil important to their ancestry. "It took sensitivity