Chapter XXI

John Zarb
Libbey

My name is **John A. Zarb**. Until recently, I was the chief information officer at Libbey.

Personal History

I was born in Highland Park, Michigan, which is right by Detroit. After high school, I joined the military. Because I expected to end up there anyway, I joined. I thought I could get a trade, grow up a bit, and see the world. All that happened and more! Because I had joined I was given 15 minutes to convince someone where I should be assigned. I had worked part time during high school at a grocery store with two young men who were studying computers. So, during my 15 minutes I said I really wanted to be a computer guy and that I thought I had the aptitude. Well, instead of being assigned to Fort Polk, Louisiana, and shipped off to Vietnam, I was sent to the computer department at Fort McArthur, California.

In September, 1969, I met Sally Nowinski. Her first comment was, "John Zarb, how wonderful to see you. We have been waiting for the experienced computer operator to show up." After a tour of the facility I said, "Sally, I have never seen any of this stuff before. In fact, I have never seen a computer before." She looked at me with tremendous disappointment. I was thinking about where I would be shipped. So, I told Sally I was a quick learner and asked for 2 weeks before she made a decision about me. It all worked out and I was there for 4 months. Today, 36 years later, we are still very dear friends.

My next assignment was at CINCPAC in Hawaii. This is where all the logistics and planning was coordinated for Vietnam. It was also the headquarters for all activity in the Pacific region. I was stationed here for 2 years in a state-of-the-art computer centre working with what was considered at the time very modern computers. Also, during this time I was taking programming courses at Chaminade University in Hawaii. Before I finished, I was shipped home and released from my military service.

So, I returned to Detroit, 20 years old, with a great resume, including 2 solid years of computer experience. As any young Detroiter would want to do, I set out to work for an auto company. I got my $18 sports coat and my $6 pair of pants and headed out to Ford with my resume in hand. In the personnel department, I was promptly told they would not even consider me because I did not have a 4-year university degree. I was heartbroken. But I was not going to give up. I finally got a contract programming position with Computer Services Corporation. My first contract was at Ford! A few months later they offered me a position.

I found myself working with state-of-the-art computers again. At the time Ford had the largest nongovernment data centre in the country. In the evenings I was working on my degree, first at community colleges and later at Eastern Michigan University. I graduated in 1977 and had 8 years experience by then in computing. I remember a conversation I had with my boss at the time. While I was enjoying programming, I wanted more. I wanted to get into the factories and I wanted to see our operations in the rest of the world. My boss thought I was crazy. He told me that if I played my cards right I would have his job, programming manager, in 15 years. It did not take me long to figure out that as one of 2000 information technology professionals at Ford, this was not going to fit into my long term plans. Ford is an institution in Detroit and few people leave. But, I started nosing around a little bit.

I started reading Fortune, Wall Street Journal, and Business Week to search out companies that I would like to work for. This is where I found Bill Agee, who was, at 36, the chairman of Bendix, a supplier to the automotive industry for brakes, filters, and spark plugs. I was drawn to the company and was lucky to get an interview and job offer in September 1978 to join their management development program.

I started at Bendix in the audit department. Because a lot of the accounting systems were now automated, the auditors needed a way to look into the computer files of payables and receivables. So, the plan was to form an EDP audit department. The timing really worked in my favor. Within 2 years, I was leading this department.

Bendix was purchased by Allied Chemical in 1983 after a lot of takeover activity. I was given the assignment as the director of information planning for Allied Automotive. So, I was back in the mainstream of information technology. I started to get more operational, office systems, and planning experience. I was learning the business at a managerial level. I worked with vendor contracts and procurement of services. I also had the chance to explore an "intrapreneurialship," where the company invested in a high tech consulting company, and I co-managed the Detroit

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