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**CIO looks beyond the trees to technology**Mar 13, 2002 | [Bob Weinstein](#) | [E-Mail](#) | [Archive](#)Rating: 4.2 / 5 | [Rate this article](#)No discussion exists | [click here to start it](#)

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John Bryer, who once toiled as an engineer at the Strasburg Railroad Company and who now serves as CIO for Parkway Corporation, is the first to admit there's no rhyme or reason behind his career path. Bryer wasn't thinking about a technology career while he was working toward bachelor's degrees in forest products business and forest resources at the University of Idaho. His eventual fascination with technology, and decision to build a career around IT, was "serendipitous," he says. His change in career tracks had nothing to do with boredom with engineering but everything to do with a growing technology passion.

Forestry was the initial path

The 47-year-old's first serious job, at the Strasburg Railroad Company in Pennsylvania, was great fun, he recalls.

"It was every kid's dream, as it is the oldest short-line railroad in the United States," he says. And besides being fun, the job also paid for his college tuition. His first gig for the railroad was as a railroad fireman—shoveling five tons of coal a day.

"They needed guys with weak minds and strong backs," he says. While he clearly didn't fit the "weak mind" qualification, he did have a strong back and needed the money. Life got better the second year on the job, however, when he was promoted to engineer.

Bryer's smooth advancement at the Strasburg Railroad set a career pattern. He says he had "a knack" for cold-calling employers when looking for work, and for getting jobs without any connections. A self-confident and articulate communicator, Bryer has utilized his interpersonal skills throughout his career.

As Bryer recalls, he had every intention of becoming a forestry professional when he enrolled in college, as he enjoyed working outside and was fascinated by the process of growing trees.

"When most people think of forestry, they think of Smokey the Bear and sitting up in a tower looking for forest fires," he says. "But, growing trees requires higher-order skills and an understanding of economics, civil engineering, and computer simulation." And don't forget the patience factor—it can take more than 80 years to grow a tree—even the most complex technology project doesn't take that long.



Name: John Bryer

Age: 47

First IT job: Programmer on research staff at University of Maine

Other career aspirations: Writer, woodworker

Favorite CIO resource site: [TechRepublic](http://TechRepublic.com), www.webopedia.com

Favorite personal/non-work site: www.refdesk.com

Best career advice ever received: "Be tough on the problem, not the people."

(Claire Annechini, ex-boss and CIO)

Worst career advice ever received: "Don't work so hard. They'll expect you to get it done that fast every time."

Favorite movie: *Raising Arizona*

Favorite book: *Confederacy of Dunces* (John Kennedy Toole)

Regrets: Not having my four children sooner

Computers in home: 2

Favorite hobby/recreation: Fly fishing, studying history, Webmaster for township

(www.ebrandywine.org)

A fascination with technology

It was during his forestry work, when he began applying technology to his job, that he discovered he was fascinated more by computers than by trees.

"I realized that if I stayed with forestry, I'd wind up as an academic, and I didn't want to do that," he explains. So he began taking classes in computer programming in the early 1980s, at a time when there was a nationwide demand for programmers.

His initial tech gig was at Princeton University, doing FORTRAN programming and working as a programmer/project manager to support the university's nuclear fusion research program.

"It was a break from forestry, but it was also consistent with my growing passion for computers, especially on the application side," he explains.

Three years later, in 1985, Bryer took a job as a senior programmer/analyst at General Electric's Space Systems Division in Valley Forge, PA. This time, his programming responsibilities included developing real-time satellite telemetry processing and orbital station-keeping software for a Department of Defense project.

At that point, says Bryer, he had found his true passion, and while he realized it would take some time to accomplish his tech-career aspirations, he knew he was on the right track.

"Despite what is commonly believed, the application of technology is more of an art than a science," he says.

When GE was terminated as a government subcontractor, Bryer honed his software development skills over the next decade at Intracorp, a healthcare management company in Philadelphia. He started out as an applications programmer, rapidly moved up to project manager and finally to the director level, working in the database and application environments.

Career satisfaction means averting boredom

When Parkway Corporation, a Philadelphia real estate development and parking operations company, hired him as CIO, he was completely ready for the role. Earlier jobs helped him prepare to take the helm at the 900-person family-owned company, Bryer says, and it's a technology perch that he's completely satisfied with.

"I like having the responsibility for the breadth of IT activities," he says. "I also like the opportunity to build a strong IT team, to mentor them, and to help them learn what I've learned along the way."

Bryer's current challenges are a long way from shoveling the right amount of coal into locomotive engines. The priority, he says, is harnessing technology to realize business goals.

"My greatest gratification is applying technology to help make a business successful," says Bryer. "The biggest mistake anyone can make is seeing technology as an end in and of itself rather than being a means to an end."

When queried on his next career-track destination, Bryer says he can envision himself possibly moving into a larger company in a completely different industry, as he says he embraces change and learns from it. Boredom, he says, is his archenemy.



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