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Education is Key to Overcoming Fears and Developing Careers

Success means different things to different people. In the case of Paul Cronin, SVP of business development and partner at Atrion, it often centers around helping others to gain the skills needed to thrive in the IT industry. That goes beyond honing employees’ technical proficiencies – it involves teaching them how to lead and communicate effectively. Why does he consider that approach a recipe for his own success? Cronin provides the answer in this month’s CompTIA Spotlight on Success.

CompTIA: What was your first paying job?

Paul: I delivered newspapers. That’s where I developed a fear for dogs because I was bitten several times fulfilling my obligations.

CompTIA: When you were in high school, what career did you envision for yourself?

Paul: I really wanted to open a day care business. It was 1977 and they were just starting out. There were all kinds of articles about how child day care was going to be the future, and I had this vision that I was going to open one up since I really loved working with kids.

CompTIA: What changed your mind?

Paul: My grandmother had left me money in a college trust and I asked my aunt, who was the executor, if I could use the money to rent a building and buy a van to start up a day care business. She held firm, saying no, that I needed to go to college to learn about life and other career options, so off I went.

My college education was cut short. While I have a great memory for conversations and concepts, my ability to remember facts and figures didn’t suit itself for testing. I faced a learning disability since elementary school and it forced me to learn differently. I am very thankful to my aunt for her advice since college was where I met my wife and that is one test I have received a perfect score on for 37 years.

I found myself out on my own and got accepted to the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act training program and ended up as an animal control officer, which, based on my history with dogs, was rather ironic. Part of my work was to take care of the dogs running wild in town, snipping at people or attacking them. That taught me a real lesson about facing my fears head on, and I did.

CompTIA: What was your first job in IT?

Paul: After completing a 1,000-hour technology training program, which basically taught me everything from Ohm’s Law to how to troubleshoot chips, I was prepared to be a computer
technician. We had a great instructor and the course was taught to my strengths with a lot of team learning. The program gave me the same opportunity that the Creating IT Futures Foundation gives to others today.

I was tested on my abstract thinking and problem solving skills, which has always been a strength of mine, and learned to apply that to building computer boards and troubleshooting. When I completed the course, they gave me a certificate and a course syllabus and suggested some companies to apply to for a job.

My first computer role was at Digital Equipment Corporation, doing something very different than what I trained for – a field engineer. Somehow I lucked out, maybe because I had some college experience, but I got to wear a suit and tie every day and travel to meet customers and fix their computers.

CompTIA: What did Digital Equipment Corporation teach you about the industry?

Paul: Basically, I learned how to work with and collaborate with others. I found out that the business was not just about fixing computers, it was about engaging with customers and other employees, and the way I present myself and communicate. Those were the things that made me successful.

Just a year later, they invited me to join their management training program. The branch manager had some problems he was trying to deal with and asked everyone for their ideas for solving them. My suggestions may have been a little too direct and challenged the company’s thinking, but it earned me a one-on-one conversation with him, and my wife was convinced I would be fired. But I wasn't. He made me go back and work with a team of employees to flush out my thoughts and ideas. We ended up implementing the strategy and that’s why, I believe, he asked me to join their management training program.

That experience taught me that I am a good problem troubleshooter but not a really great technician. Fixing chip problems and other things never really interested me and that realization forced me to find another way to stay in the industry. That’s what people should know. There are many opportunities in the IT industry. If you’re interested in tech or management (or whatever), you can find your way.

CompTIA: Why did you leave?

Paul: That's what many asked me. I had a company car, stock and so many great benefits, but I felt like everything was too easy. I wasn't feeling challenged, so I went to a startup company that fixed any type of computer (not just DEC equipment) as a team leader for technicians.

CompTIA: Who influenced your career decisions?

Paul: Gus Pappas at Data Comm Systems, the owners of the third company I worked for, though our relationship was not as formal as the mentorship programs we have today. He was the grandfather I didn't have, a man with the experience and knowledge I listened to.

And he was tough on me. He gave it to you direct and when you got a pat on the back, it meant a lot. I started out as his service manager with a number of technicians reporting to me. He taught me about watching costs and the importance of getting the little things right, as well
as the value of honesty and integrity in business.

**CompTIA**: At that point in your career, what had you learned from your work experiences?

**Paul**: My first three IT jobs helped me shift from computer troubleshooting to troubleshooting problems and enabling others to act. What I didn't realize at the time was I was learning about creating highly successful teams. It was about engagement, looking at employees' issues based on my own inner struggles (my time as an animal enforcement officer). I learned how to identify with others so I could collaborate and help others.

Maybe I became a little soft on that idea, but I started an apprenticeship at Data Comm in 1991 and began hiring people with little or no technical skills. We would team them up with experienced staff who had grown up the same way and help them develop into specific roles over time.

In fact, I went into a restaurant and hired the waiter, who became one of the best engineers I ever had. His interpersonal skills were that good. He had just graduated with an anthropology degree and had no technical background, but it was in his DNA (his parents both worked at HP). His interests were in people and culture, so we hired him as an entry level field services representative.

That was my mode, find the talent. It was what we needed, and that strategy is what business and successful teams are all about. I believed that I could hire anyone to fix the technology and I still believe that today. There are so many resources to help fix technical problems, but not as many to help you engage, communicate and collaborate with other employees and customers. Those are the things that businesses really need in their employees and what we were looking for.

We put 21 entry-level employees through the program over the next three years, with orientation training upfront and more formal instruction to give them the big picture. Then we teamed them up with someone who they spent the first year working closely with. They would go out with the sales team to learn the way we communicate with clients and, after about six months training, they would be billable. Atrion's CTO is an example of the success of the Data Comm program.

**CompTIA**: When did you start working with Atrion?

**Paul**: Over my tenure I earned my way from service manager for Data Comm to having an ownership piece. We sold the company to Dimension Data in 1999 and I became VP of North America.

I spent two years flying around the country as we acquired five more companies. After being gone 13 days for one trip, my wife just looked at me. The kids had just gone off to college and she said “So this is what selling our business was all about?” Every month I was travelling somewhere and she was left home alone a lot. The next day I went in and gave my six-month notice.

I talked to a number of other VARs and ended up choosing Atrion, which had 19 employees and about $9 million in revenue at the time (2002). They didn't have a full managed services
offering and asked me to build out their services organization which I had done before several times, so I did.

Atrion does approximately $130 million in revenue today with 267 employees. We are being acquired by Carousel Industries, a $375 million company with over 1000 employees in 26 cities.

**CompTIA:** Did your passion for training carry over to Atrion?

**Paul:** It did. About six years ago, we started our formal apprenticeship program. It involves two to three months in a classroom and then six months in a field development role (or whatever designation they are going to be, including engineer, technician, help desk). It involves a fair amount of team learning, with our own instructors performing the bulk of the training, and participants come away with three certifications (VM Ware, Cisco and Microsoft). We also encourage our employees to get CompTIA certifications, with the Network+ to start off with. After the first three months, they go into a highly-mentored field role and receive communications skills and social styles training and most of the new recruits go into our managed service center or in the field. Atrion was recognized as having the only formal technology apprenticeship program in the state of Rhode Island and I have shared many of our processes with CompTIA and the Creating IT Careers Foundation.

**CompTIA:** What would you say is the one thing that has helped you most in your IT career?

**Paul:** I'd say it was becoming a student of leadership. You pursue it through reading and practice, and through some formal training. And by helping others to do it. Six years ago, we sat around a board table and said “What’s the number one thing that will move us (Atrion) past the $50 million mark?” We came to the realization that the only real answer was our people. So we started a leadership challenge program. Tim, my partner, and I became master facilitators of The Leadership Challenge, a formal development workshop. We have run these sessions every single month since for our clients, employees, vendors and acquaintances. These workshops would cost $2,100 plus training and travel expenses, but we don't charge anything. Our purpose at Atrion is to positively impact the lives of others and we firmly demonstrate that.

I have run these Leadership Challenge workshops for IT Careers Course Graduates as far away as Minnesota. We have over 1,250 alumni so far. We need to continue to get better at leading. I needed to be able to practice it and to teach it at a different level. It may sound rather corny, but if you can help others lead in their own lives, whether in their families, communities, at work or in other activities, it all comes back in a positive way.

**CompTIA:** You've been actively involved in CompTIA over the years, such as co-chairing the Partner Advisory Council (PAC) and serving on the board of directors for CompTIA and the Creating IT Futures Foundation. What impact has your volunteer activities had on your life and career?

**Paul:** I get great personal satisfaction from giving back. It has had a very profound effect on me to be able to give back to an industry that has provided me so much opportunity. It fills my battery up every single time I can share my experiences. If you ever need a charge, go to a CompTIA event or get involved in a community or an advisory council and create something that will have a lasting impact.
I have been able to learn from my peers and collaboratively build programs and initiatives. CompTIA has given me the ability to contribute to something much bigger. It has a mission and a purpose that aligns with my own and, at the end of the day, I feel like my bucket is full. I give CompTIA my time and a high level of engagement, but that contribution has come back ten-fold to me personally, as well as to Atrion.

**CompTIA:** What advice do you have for others involved in the IT industry?

**Paul:** I think, as an industry, we’re missing the boat a little. We talk about fixing computers and working on remote help desk and other technical issues, but we need to turn that around. When I ask a kid in high school what he wants to be, he may say a firefighter. And when I ask him why, he will likely say he wants to save lives. At the end of the day, people want to feel like what they do actually has a positive impact on others’ lives. They don’t say they want to become a firefighter to climb ladders. Our industry’s message is too frequently about help desks and fixing computers.

The thing is, for as long as I’ve been involved in technology, it has been about changing the world. Our industry has impacted virtually every person’s life and over the next 10, 20 or 30 years, technology will transform at a faster rate than ever, and in ways we can’t even comprehend. And you have a chance to be that person in 30 years when they ask, “What did you do?” You can honestly say you had a chance to be a part of the biggest transformation the world has ever seen. You’re in technology. I believe that’s what our message has to be to attract more talent. Do you want to help transform the world?