

InfoWorld

Life after tech

Is your job shaky? Considering a career change? Then let these successful IT refugees provide inspiration

- By [Ephraim Schwartz](#)
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The constant drumbeat of bad economic news has everyone worried about their jobs. But as several InfoWorld articles have pointed out recently, many are finding the growing pressures of IT work intolerable. Would it be so bad to lose a job in an occupation you no longer take pleasure in?

Not if you can land a job in another line of work you'd enjoy a lot more.

That notion may sound reckless in these times, but you may be more employable outside the profession than you think. Kate Nasser, president and founder of [CAS](#), a company that helps people transition to new careers, says IT people typically have skills that will stand them in good stead no matter where they want to go professionally. "An IT person's ability to analyze and map out any type of process, even if it's not technical, is better than others'," she says.

Nasser advises that IT folks looking for a change should seek positions that require project management skills. If you can demonstrate that proficiency -- even by showing fluency with a common app like Microsoft Project -- and convince an employer you know how to be detail-oriented while keeping lots of balls in the air, then you are very marketable, says Nasser.

Not that you necessarily have to work for someone else. For those who nurture a secret desire for a new career -- or their own business -- we present the stories of five people who have already made the leap, lighting the way for those who wish to turn times of economic chaos into personal opportunity.

Peter Hail, CEO, Warehouse Cables

Peter Hail worked in IT since the 1980s as everything from a network administrator to an interface designer for Brown & Sharp, where he created an interface between the IBM PC and precision micrometers.

Hail says he left because he just got tired of IT being viewed in the negative. "IT is always viewed as a cost center rather than a profit center, and I didn't see it that way." Stuck in what Hail calls a "circle of thanklessness," he wanted to get out of his cube and do something in which he could receive the direct benefits of his own efforts.

Working with an engineering/contracting company designing and installing networks, Hail saw what Lucent, one of his biggest customers at the time, could do in the lab with fiber and copper cables. So he decided to strike out on his own by launching [Warehouse Cables](#).

Cables are recession-proof, says Hail. As it turns out, when big companies put big projects on hold, they tend to do their own upgrades -- and for that they need cables. "Instead of building a new datacenter, they are revamping the old datacenter," he says.

Based on his experience, Hail asserts that there are still plenty of opportunities to start e-commerce businesses on the Internet. And like almost all those interviewed, he talks about passion. "Find a product that you are passionate about," he says. After that, do the research, do the research, and figure out how to market what you're excited about. "There is a wealth of good marketing information and educational books about marketing."

Seth Mendelsohn, proprietor, Simply Boulder Foods

Seth Mendelsohn spent seven years creating clinical information systems for hospitals. At the end of his IT career, he was a senior analyst responsible for designing, developing, and building those systems, as well as the maintenance and training.

It was a good job, says Mendelsohn, but he burned out. The idea for a new career came from his avocation: He knew he always liked cooking and especially creating new sauces. "I knew that with my IT experience, I had the skills to start up a new business." That business is called [Simply Boulder Foods](#), a maker of culinary sauces.

Like most IT analysts, Mendelsohn had spent quite a bit of time working in Excel creating complex spreadsheets models, a skill that came in handy as he built his new company.

Working in IT also taught him the importance of meeting deadlines, dealing with interpersonal issues, staying on top of milestones, and facing logistical hurdles. Today, Mendelsohn works 50 to 60 hours per week, but the business is growing -- with contracts from a division of Kroger and a deal in the works with Whole Foods.

The advice Mendelsohn offers is as simple as the ingredients in his sauces: "Just follow your dream and do what you want to do."

Mark Stone, freelance writer and novelist

Mark Stone was an IT prodigy who, at 13 years old, started programming for his grandfather's business using fourth-generation languages and building relational databases. Later on, he worked for IBM, started a computer consulting business, and in the early years of the PC industry helped to transfer data from minis to PCs. Stone is also a Certified Information Systems Security Professional.

But fate had other things in store for Stone, who is now a full-time freelance writer and published novelist. It all started a few years ago when he began writing articles about computer security for his local newspaper in Kelowna, British Columbia. He quickly realized he enjoyed writing even more than working with computers.

"I discovered I had a passion for it," he says. After writing for the local paper, he moved up, getting articles published in Winnipeg's major newspaper.

But he still had his day job working for a large insurance company and was assigned the task of monitoring e-mail. That gave him the idea for his first novel, *Behind the Screen: Hacking Hollywood*, a thriller about an employee in a financial services company who reads an e-mail he shouldn't have read.

Stone self-published the novel on the Web, but it got enough buzz for a traditional publisher to pick it up. And he was on his way. Stone's advice? "Take a leap of faith -- and a leap for your pocketbook, too."

Doug Tripple, paramedic and firefighter, Des Moines Fire Department

Doug Tripple started his IT career in the Navy. When he got out, he opened a computer store with a Navy buddy. Eventually, he started installing custom systems and networks for banks in the Des Moines area. He sold that first shop and moved into the corporate world -- where he says you either change jobs every year "or they change you."

He was making great money, but the work was too mundane and monotonous for his liking. "The stuff never changes; they just move it around," he quips.

Tripple had no idea what he would do next, so he went to register at a local community college. The only course that had a slot left open was EMT Basic. He registered for the heck of it, but he wasn't in the class very long before he realized that working as a firefighter was what he was always meant to do.

"I needed a field where not everything is known and predictable." Not everyone would agree with that characterization of IT, but Tripple clearly wanted more excitement than, say, a network outage might provide. When he told his wife he wanted to be a firefighter -- a favorite career choice of 5-year-olds -- she was cheerfully supportive.

Tripple says he loves his new calling and advises those who want to get out of IT to pick something totally different, mainly because "no matter what else you do, they will find out if you know something about IT and ask for your help." Tripple should know: At the Des Moines Fire Department, when he's not putting out fires or rescuing people, he handles several of the department's IT tasks.

Thomas Wojcik, Jr., vice president for strategic accounts, Fidelitone Logistics

Thomas Wojcik, Jr. spent 17 years as a programmer for Sears, Xerox, Ryder, and ConAgrafoods. By and large, he liked working for those companies, but he wanted to move out of IT and on to the business side. Today, Wojcik is the

vice president for strategic accounts at Fidelitone Logistics. His responsibilities are business development and strategic account management.

Wojcik says he learned a long time ago that IT doesn't exist unless there's a business problem to solve. "I always had that thought in mind and used it to drive my development."

That perspective has helped Wojcik become a bridge between the propeller heads and business users -- vice presidents of distribution, for example, who don't care about RFID. They just know they need to ship out 20,000 orders.

"It's guys like me in the middle who can translate what the IT guys are saying and not get shined, and explain to the business guys the problems in technology to get something designed, tested, trained, and implemented," he says. "Many business users don't really understand why you have to measure twice and cut once."

If you're looking to change careers, says Wojcik, there are many companies like Fidelitone that recognize the need to solve customer problems with people, process, and technology. If you have the communications skills and understand business problems, there are opportunities out there.

"Fidelitone could get a smooth-talker sales guy, but that is not what we want," says Wojcik. "We are looking for people who can listen to our customers' problems, translate it to a need, and apply a need to a process and technology."

For IT people looking to transition to the business side, Wojcik's best advice is to talk with customers and learn what they do -- either in a sales position or as a business analyst. "That leap may cost you a level on an org chart or dollars and cents," he admits. "But I found that applying the IT knowledge I had and how that solves business processes is very valuable. And I don't know where I would be today if I stayed on an IS path."