

50th Storyworth: What Was The Best Job You Ever Had?

This one is easy and has been written about before. Prior to my working as a Sourcing Quality Engineer for GE Power Gen, my best job had been as the Engineering Manager with Shade Roller in Ogdensburg, NY, my first professional management role as an employee. That ultimately was also the second longest continuous stint, which was exceeded only by the unusual length of my work with GE at just under five years because I was an independent contractor, where more than two years contiguous are relatively rare.

At Shade Roller I also had my first consumer product development, which was very helpful for instilling in me a drive for lowest cost with simplest usability. I applied those concepts to every product I ever worked with subsequently, which proved to be a useful skill in all three of my patents, with Fastek and Gaylord. And, as noted in last week's diatribe, I applied those skills in every job possible thereafter, which culminated in the GE job. I had actually landed that job because I had worked with the hiring manager, Dick Coffin, while he was in their DSO group, and had needed a Project Manager to fill in for the departed prior one from an ongoing project with IBM to put RFID and barcoding into 13 distributed warehouses for inventory management. My success there led him to hire me when I called seeking his help to get another contract job with GE. He was then managing the global SQEs, whose roles involved inspecting and approving vendors and equipment for GE projects with Electrical Grids; pretty much soup to nuts. But the most interesting part of the job was the need for international travel, as the vendors were chosen often for proximity to the end user location.

As such, that was my first opportunity to travel on someone else's dime. Before then, we had traveled to Cancun, Brazil, Jamaica and Canada, and Lynne & Jess had been to Kenya with Jess' school. But they had merely had a stopover in Amsterdam enroute to Africa, rather than actually visiting Europe in any way. So GE allowed me to have my first exposure to Europe, as well as Mexico City, Japan, Taiwan, and a lot of places in the US and Canada, and I made the very best of the opportunities. One key requirement of the role was the ability to be able to fly out to wherever on the planet at almost a moment's notice, and to stay there for perhaps an indefinite time, but rarely to spend more than two days in any single place. So whatever luggage I took, which had to include my CPAP machine and means to communicate with GE, had to be carry-on because I could not be sure it would EVER catch up to me if the luggage got lost in transit. So I learned to maximize the usability of every CC and gram I carried.

The GE IT department wanted me to lug around their desktop sized "notebook" with all its bells and whistles. Instead, I bought a Thinkpad 240X which included everything I needed to do the job, and could use the power brick from my CPAP to save carrying one specific to the computer. Thankfully, because they were both rated for any from 100-240VAC, and Europe used simple two-pin adaptors to convert US spec plugs to fit their 220V outlets with 50Hz vs our 60Hz, the fact that it all became DC at operation was a blessing, and while it looked like a rat's nest of wiring because I made adaptive wire harnesses to connect everything with minimal volume, which today would be certain to have me trying to explain to TSA at EVERY airport, that pre-dated most of the changes of 9/11 so I was rarely hassled and it was compacted as much as possible.

The 240X was a wonderful machine; the size of an inch thick piece of letterhead, with a great screen and Ethernet connectivity, plus USB so I could have wifi adapters and use portable DVD drives to expand storage, and I swapped installed HDDs to get all the capacity I needed over its very long life. It had a few problems because of GE IT wanting to control all connectivity, but Dick was able to grease the skids on that once I showed him why my selection was so much better a tool for our needs. And it fit perfectly within the front pocket of my travel bag so it was able to be handled easily into overhead bins, but be readily obtained once we were airborne and allowed to turn on electronics, so I could watch movies or type correspondence or the like.

I would typically be in Schenectady about half the time, staying at a motel, or operating from home. Then I would use the train or car to get to the Syracuse Airport as my base of operations, which enabled me to get wherever I needed. A typical trip started by flying to Zurich by way of JFK in NYC, then secondary travel to wherever I needed in Europe, where I spent time in all of France, UK, Germany, Slovenia, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, the Czech Republic and Belgium, the latter only as a transit location between Zurich and Western Germany. There I had the pleasure of visits to Hanover, Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, Leipzig, and other cities, as well as the experience of driving the Autobahn flat out at 240kmh, or 150 real mph, perfectly legally, which was as fast as the rental BMW wagon would go. I felt right at home, just like at the Nurburgring some years later.

In Berlin I had the humbling experience of meeting a man who had been a child beneath the flight path to Templehoff during the Berlin Airlift, where a short time before those same pilots had been trying to kill him and his kin, but then dropped candy, which helped sustain them during the hard times under the Soviets' blockade, and for which the man could not possibly have respected me more, simply because I was an American. I inspected a battery plant there, and another in Slovenia, which had previously been making them for Russian submarines, but were making DIN standard units I convinced the GE Engineering guys to use instead of their sole sourced GE shell ones for their PEECCs UPS' which were causing a backlog with liquidated damages charges from delays, by quoting Mick Jagger; "You Can't Always Get What You Want, But If You Try Sometimes You Might Find You Get What You Need". In case you don't know, a PEECC looks like a mobile home without windows, and has switchgear inside to control all the turbine support equipment for a generating station, and a UPS is an Uninterruptible Power Supply, which is why they needed the cells, to keep cooling & lube pumps operating while the turbine spooled down in the case of loss of power, without damaging anything.

I also inspected UPS hardware in Italy where I got to drive through the Appenine Mountains with my bag slamming the inside walls of the rented Opel wagon, causing it to oversteer. A barrel of laughs! And I returned that car to the Firenze (Florence) Airport with the brakes smoking and the tires worn on the edges from cornering. A hoot! I knew better than to try to drive in the UK or Japan because they drive on the wrong side of the road, and I had some later experience in Australia where I almost head-on hit someone in a bank drive-thru because I let instinct take over, a BAD mistake behind the wheel when driving on the wrong side.

I was in Montreal on the morning of 9/11 inspecting and running off an ABB transformer at the Hydro-Quebec test facility there, and watched the second plane crash into The World Trade Towers, which set off a most interesting experience of trying to get back to my home and family in Liverpool NY when they stopped all airlines flight and border crossings, thankfully except for the one at the Mohawk Indian Reservation in NYS.

In Japan I learned about a whole different culture, like Tokyo where you can eat off the streets and personal respect is essential for getting anything accomplished. In Taipei, Taiwan, I met a couple from Australia who would subsequently host my daughter during her Exchange Student Semester, during which she decided to take a flight to Thailand but made no prior arrangements. On the plane she met a woman who invited her to stay at her palatial home. Jess had my travel luck, like the time I met some students from Australia who had no place to stay as they traveled by train across CNY, so visited with my family for two days, which was part of why Jess chose to take her semester there.

I might still have been working for GE in that job, I liked it so well, except 40% of their business was with Enron, which collapsed during 2002, I am sure in part because of the impact of 9/11. I really regret that because the GE SQE role was My Best Job EVER ;-)

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