

ROBERT G. FERRELL

## /dev/random



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**HUMAN EXISTENCE IS A SERIES OF** nested loops. The parent loop is the cycle of birth, death, and reincorporation of one's component parts into another generation via decomposition. (We'll ignore spirituality for now; I don't have that much space.) Tucked snugly within that master rotation are a plethora of secondary loops: Babies grow up to have babies; sports cars are purchased, wrapped around utility poles, and replaced; consumer electronics become obsolete before we get them home and must be upgraded; garbage cans are filled with packing peanuts, microwave popcorn containers, and blister-pack debris, dragged to the curb, and dragged back. For those of us in the IT industry, especially, there is another familiar iteration that I will call the "employment-go-round." Every three to five years the urge to change jobs/personnel seems to come over us/our employers, respectively. Various solutions for escaping from this carnival ride have been proposed, but I can personally testify that at least one of them does not function as advertised. Allow me to elaborate.

Back in 1996 I was working as a defense contractor in the systems department of a large Air Force hospital. It was a decent job, but the parent company kept getting bought out—to the extent that we had a betting pool on what corporate logo would be at the top of our checks the following pay period. With every buyout I ran the risk that I wouldn't be kept on by the new owners, although given my entrenched position in the organization and the insane profit margin they were making by keeping me there, in retrospect there wasn't any good reason for anxiety. Still, I eventually lost patience with the constant uncertainty and when a job offer as a senior UNIX systems administrator for the federal government came along, even though it entailed a move to the Washington, D.C., area, I jumped at the chance to provide myself and my family with some serious job security. Or so I thought.

I'd always heard that once you were a permanent federal employee the paperwork required to terminate you for anything short of gross misconduct

was too daunting for even the most seasoned bureaucrat to bother with. Incompetency wasn't so much a liability as a side-effect of employment, from management's point of view—especially since it was often that very trait that got the managers their own jobs. Federal employment might be boring and tedious at times, but it was a reliable dullness that paid relatively well until retirement.

Completely wrong. First of all, it wasn't at all boring or tedious. It was, if anything, at least as frenetic and challenging as any of my private sector positions, and that's pushing the frenzy/challenge envelope. Turns out the iron-clad job security part was also so much horse hockey, although admittedly it did take me almost nine years to make that dark discovery. There's a giant hole in the mythical federal job security blanket through which even a fairly hefty geek can slip like a well-greased melon. It's called "failure to accept a directed reassignment," and basically it means that if your federal employer decides to relocate your position to Perspiration, Nevada, and you don't want to move, you're fired. Period. Personally, I'd be a lot more amenable to simply being told, "We don't want you anymore: Go away!" but this way appears more politically correct, I suppose. Yeah, I could have appealed, but who really wants to work for someone who's being forced to accept you as an employee? Not exactly a cordial environment in which to spend nearly a third of your life. I must needs move on; the circle remains unbroken.

Of course, I'm still a career status federal (ex) employee with what's called "reinstatement eligibility," but that and \$4.50 will get you a double Latte Mocha Coconut Frappuccino Macchiato Valencia with extra cinnamon (provided you've got a half-off coupon). I've endured a dozen or so interviews both within and outside the federal government since hitting the streets, but none of them has led to what I would consider a firm job offer. My resume is too long, I guess, or maybe I'm using the wrong font. I've had lots of jobs in my life that are in no way connected with IT, including analytical chemist, enologist, cancer researcher, ornithologist, corporate security administrator, technical writer/editor, professional musician, and radiological safety officer, so I probably just confuse HR people or leave them with the impression that I'm a pathological liar. As a result, while many people pad their resumes, I'm considering stripping mine down (and hope that no one notices the considerable gaps between "conventional" jobs). Today's job hunting tip brought to you by Henry David Thoreau.

Long gone, apparently, are the days when job candidates with a wide breadth and depth of experience were considered valuable assets. The job market today is singularly myopic. It turns its monochrome visage your way only briefly, passing you over for the android standing next to you if you don't fall instantly through a well-worn slot. I have nearly 100 graduate semester hours in assorted disciplines of biology, but I'm never considered qualified as a biologist because that wasn't the title of the last job I held. Yet, whenever I interview for an IT position (in which field I've been working, on and off, since 1977), I invariably get some permutation of the question, "Why do you want a job in IT when your academic training is in biology?" I lower my gaze and reply in shame, "Because I've had a bad habit since childhood of wanting to eat occasionally and sleep relatively unaffected by passing meteorological phenomena." It probably goes without saying that most of these interviews are of the cursory variety.

When next you encounter a bureaucrat with a bad comb-over wringing his hands and whining about the lack of experienced information technologists willing to come work for the government, pull on your hip waders, 'cause it's gettin' deep. I'm here to tell you, that dog won't hunt: They don't even want the ones they have *now*.