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Eastwood, Stallone, and You: Are You a Typecast Developer?

by Donna Davis

Go ahead, make my day. Call me “the SUCCESS lady” one more time.

It doesn't help that “SUCCESS” really stands for Subsidized Child Care Eligibility System (which isn't nearly as cool as the sweet sound of SUCCESS—chalk another one up to the importance of the acronym). If I'm going to be stuck with an acronym, following me ever-after, at least I'm fortunate enough to have a positive-sounding one, like Eastwood's great Dirty Harry line and Stallone's Rocky theme.

Will there be life for me after SUCCESS? Will there be life after your current project? Many a weary developer has heaved a deep sigh while asking that same question.

As Gilligan's Island's Bob Denver and I Dream of Jeanie's Barbara Eden know, even a positive association can become tired after a while. Sure they were happy that their characters were loved, but wearing the same red shirt and white hat or transparent genie outfit is bound to get old after a while. Amazingly, Bob Denver kept his boyish figure, though not his hair color, almost indefinitely, and Barbara Eden continues to wink and work her magic, looking remarkably fit in that belly-baring costume. Would that applications could enjoy such longevity. (Even if they dared, the platforms on which they resided would spontaneously combust like a one-dimensional Hollywood set in flames of unsupported kindling.)

Things are even worse if the project was a major disappointment at the corporate office, engendering two-thumbs-down ratings. In that case an image makeover is particularly important for a developer. What could be worse than to have your name automatically associated with an epic flop, even if you weren't responsible for its failure?

We may not receive a lot of public recognition, but developers are a lot like actors or directors, our careers punctuated by each software smash. Most of us can't get away with being a “one-hit wonder” and manage to stay gainfully employed from project to project, but it's amazingly easy to fall into the typecasting trap.

Trap? Maybe “trap” is something of a misnomer. What about trademark? Was the Arnold Drummond character on *Different Strokes* a typeset trap for Gary Coleman, or the highlight of his career? Was Barney Fife on *Andy Griffith* an inescapable shadow for Don Knotts, or the stuff that beloved legends are made of?

Since programmers aren't as likely to rake in residuals or sell memorabilia at fan-supported conventions (what's the street value on an original project Gantt chart?), it behooves us to make sure that our “specialized niches” don't yield a flash of fame and a retirement plan standing in the unemployment line.

The thing is, actors rarely take a part knowing that it will forever label them—they just need the work.

We're a lot like that too, and if we aren't the free-agent-contracting sort, we typically don't get to pick and choose our projects. Yet, like actors, we can make a conscious choice to stretch ourselves, trying our hands at comedy (web development), even if we've always done drama (traditional client/server development). If you take the initiative, demonstrate ability, and make your interests known, most managers will accommodate eventually. After all, it's cheaper to keep you happy than replace you.

Does anyone even remember that Tom Hanks started his career in the cheesy, cross-dressing television sitcom *Bosom Buddies*? If you mention Tom Hanks's name today, you'll conjure up images of that Wilson volleyball from *Castaway*, or the box of chocolates from *Forest Gump*, or the tragedy of war depicted in *Saving Private Ryan*. Hanks reinvents himself.

What can you do to broaden your spectrum, silver screen or otherwise? You can learn when to bring closure and move on. Imagine making a million dollars per object you code, like a TV actor making a million per episode. Would you walk away from that? Apparently the cast of *Friends* has reached the conclusion that's in the best interest of their careers, ultimately, to do just that.

Often clients become so attached to a developer during the intensity of an active project that they have trouble letting go post implementation. The next thing you know, you're their “personal banker,” receiving direct phone calls relating to everything from how to do a mail merge in Word, to something's wrong with my home computer. Enhancement requests trickle in over time, and before long, you're on the road to the gold plating you were so careful to avoid during the development phase.

Sometimes you just need to enlist your manager's support in establishing a "settling in" or "cooling off" period, when no changes (other than necessary fixes) are made. Another strategy is to purposefully turn over support and enhancements to another developer, making the organization less dependent on you. The notion of willfully making oneself dispensable is so scary that many developers are reluctant to do it. Some shops adopt an organizational structure (separate development and support groups) to facilitate these very migrations, to ease the transition from one "starring role" to another.

But specialization is necessary—it's a good thing! Sure it is...

We can't all be experts at everything. But consider actors who weren't willing to change with the times: the silent film stars who claimed that "talkies" were just a passing whim or later that color just wasn't as artistic as black and white.

Take a long look at your list of credits. Does it show diversity and depth, or is one application a cookie-cutter replica of the other? If you have a solid base of experience, look for new and creative ways to channel or repackage your talents. Take risks. Accept unusual challenges.

Consider John Wayne's transition from the tough cowboy to the hard-hitting military man. Same type of macho character, but it breathed new life into his career. What about Jimmy Stewart's versatility, successfully appearing in westerns, romantic comedies, and mystery/thrillers? If you're a developer who can only wear red shirts and white hats (even if you wear them as well as Bob Denver), the opportunities are going to be limited.

Even though people still occasionally call me the SUCCESS lady, I just smile inwardly and have the last laugh because deep inside I know I'm not a typecast coder. I've worked on several failed projects since then!

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