Careers in the Digital Economy

What have Data Centres Ever Done for Me?

Case study:
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VIPA Digital
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Where did the last 30 years go?

Paul Cranfield career history (and other milestones) August 1986 to May 2018:

Being born at the very tail end of the Baby Boomer generation, and at the point where nationalised industries were going ‘out of fashion’, I was incredibly fortunate to have joined one of the last apprenticeship intakes with the British Airports Authority (BAA) in 1986.

Four years later my basic training was complete and armed with an HNC in Building Services Engineering I was ready to join the management team at Gatwick Airport as their first Energy Manager, with daily exposure to mission critical systems, before the term ‘Mission Critical Systems’ had even been invented. Operational runways, air traffic control, flight information systems, baggage handling and immigration security all underpinned moving business and leisure travellers towards their chosen destinations.

Dating from the 1950s, airport systems had remained largely manual, with basic interfaces between airport management, airlines, handling agents, passengers and retailers.
By the time I left BAA, ten years later, I had completed an Honours Degree in Energy Engineering, achieved Chartered Engineer status and was the Head of Utilities for the airports group. The Terminal 5 designs were in final version and included advanced building management systems, automated baggage infrastructure, integrated passenger/security solutions and a high speed rail link between Heathrow and Central London.

The next challenge came in the shape of Vodafone where cellular networks, mobile telephone exchanges and in-house data centres underpinned the excitement of mobile voice calls and SMS messaging. There was seemingly no end to the number of devices using on-board SIM cards for dynamic and remote communication. WiFi somewhat burst that bubble only a few years later. As the UK Operations Manager for Vodafone, network reliability and resilience was my #1 objective.

Next, UBS would stretch my capabilities Internationally and as Mission Critical Facilities (MCF) Global Engineering Lead responsible for data centre environments meeting the bank’s IT ambition in Europe, Asia Pacific and the Americas. Consolidation reduced the number of global facilities from 30+ to eight and enabled the adoption of infrastructure that would expand on-line customer products and services and the development of self-service banking ‘apps’.

As one of the largest data centre operators, Digital Realty was next on the career list, with organic growth and acquisition across its European portfolio set to swell customer numbers to over 700 and increasing capacity for existing users. With regional responsibility for compliance, supply chain, security and sustainability, there was never a dull moment. This was an era where the established (Facebook, Amazon, Google, Apple etc) and the emerging were setting new targets for expansion, with no suggestion of slowing.

VIPA Digital is my opportunity to give back to the sector, applying what I’ve learned over my 30 years to inform decisions for the future. Exponential growth is an understatement, with the appetite for data seemingly endless. Artificial Intelligence, machine learning, driverless cars, crypto-currency and all on top of ever evolving social media, search engine, on-line retailing. This, in an environment paranoid over the management of data, control frameworks, transformation of traditional businesses and development of products and services that we’ve not even thought of yet.

Whilst I’m not a qualified fortune teller, I’d bet my career on an environment where the data centre sector continues to grow in existing and emerging markets, where technical professions underpin innovation, where legacy facilities have a requirement for redevelopment and where the investment community is crying out for good advice and due diligence.

The current skills shortage in the sector is an obvious risk and whilst automation may go some way to supplementing warm bodies, it’s essential that the sector attracts, develops and retains new talent. Across the spectrum, Engineering was nerdy when I was training and today will be challenged to shake this stigma if the number of Engineering Graduates is to double by 2020, as required by current predicted demand.

Salaries may well motivate some into the sector, but it’s essential that data centres are positioned as interesting places to work, with great career development opportunities, offering appropriate work/life balance with adequate job security.

With a resurgence of technical trainee programs and apprenticeships, it’s refreshing to see that, just perhaps, there’s no need to ‘re-invent the wheel’ but provide structured vocational training for young professionals, leading to fulfilling roles in real companies?

Looking back on my career, it’s clear that this formula has worked and I’d be quick to recommend an apprenticeship to my 16-year-old self.