THERE *is no* I in IT

THE HUMAN GUIDE FOR WORKING IN I.T.

ERAN BOUDJNAH

Forewords by Fiodar Sazanavets & Sathpal Singh

There is no I in IT

The human guide for working in IT

Eran Boudjnah

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To Lea, my endlessly supportive wife without whom this book would not have been possible. If she had not spent hours upon hours reading and re-reading every chapter, providing priceless feedback, I am confident that the book would have been far less easy to read.

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Foreword by Fiodar Sazanavets

There are many books out there aimed at aspiring software developers that teach various technical skills. Some are good, while others aren't. However, while every aspiring developer needs to build technical skills, these skills are not sufficient to prepare a developer for a real career. This is where this book comes in.

Eran, the author of this book, is an accomplished Android app developer and an author of several technical books. This time, he decided to do something different and write a book about the human aspect of the IT career.

This book will prepare you for the things that you will almost certainly encounter in an IT organization. Some of these things are common sense while other things are not so obvious. While, as an IT professional, you do spend a lot of time working on a computer, you will ultimately have to work with other people. And this is what this book was designed to prepare you for.

It starts with explaining the diversity, but not the diversity you would hear about at a corporate HR seminar. It talks about how people are different in their personalities and preferred communication styles, so you can find a better way to communicate with everyone at your workplace.

As part of this, Eran explains how to deal with difficult people. This is a very important subject and I wish I had this information when I started my own career in software development. While you may be blessed to work with a good team, it's almost guaranteed that at some point you will encounter someone difficult to deal with.

For example, I was working for a small fintech firm as a program-

mer. One day, I received a call from one of the salespeople who asked me to help him out. He told me that they talked with a major global bank that they wanted to attract as a client and definitely didn't want to lose.

It all sounded good up to this point, but there was one major problem with it. They told the bank that our software had a feature that it didn't have. To make the situation worse, they agreed to demo this feature to the bank on Friday. The day they called me was Wednesday.

So, the favor that the salesperson asked me to do for him was to build just enough of the feature so it could be demoed to the bank. We would use the smoke and mirrors tactic, pretending that our product can do something it can't. And then, eventually, we would build the real thing.

I was totally unprepared for this situation and the only reaction I could experience was panic. I didn't know how to push back and wasn't confident enough to do so. So I did the only thing I could and tried to implement the feature, working many hours straight and sacrificing sleep in the process.

Needless to say, I failed to deliver the feature, as there was not enough time even for the basic smoke and mirrors functionality. In hindsight, I shouldn't have even attempted to do it in the first place. And if this book existed back then, I would have the information on how to deal with this situation properly.

Sometimes the difficult people you have to deal with come from your own team. On a different occasion, I was working for a company that had a developer who just loved to pick fights with everyone for no reason whatsoever. Even when the technical director saw it and moved this person to his own project, it didn't stop.

On one occasion, he rolled his chair over to my desk and asked me to show him what I was working on, claiming that it was "out of

curiosity". Once I did, he proceeded to tell me how everything I was doing was wrong.

Our whole development team, including myself, was ready to quit because of this person. Luckily, none of us had to because the director saw how argumentative this person was and fired him. But a book like this would have definitely prepared me for such a situation much better.

But this book isn't just about human psychology and conflict resolution. It doesn't focus on special cases that you may or may not encounter. It talks about the standard non-technical aspects of working in IT that exist in every IT organization. It covers a wide range of topics, including being onboarded into a new company, deriving the most value from meetings, and coordinating updates to the codebase.

After all, software products aren't built by lonely programmers. Software development is a team sport. This book will teach you how to play it.

— Fiodar Sazanavets
September 2024

Foreword by Sathpal Singh

I'm not an actor but when I started to read an early draft of this book, I imagined this is what it must feel like when a director sends you a great script.

Our conversation started when Eran approached me about helping to illustrate the book. I was interested but worried I wouldn't have the bandwidth given my various existing commitments and industry pursuits.

However, when we explored the aims and I'd read some of the early chapters and seen what was being proposed throughout, it was an unreserved yes.

In my own career journey in tech, of some 25 years now, I've put a lot of emphasis on the role that technology plays in helping to solve business problems and at the heart of this are people, always people.

Furthermore, the importance of technology professionals developing "soft skills" alongside their technical acumen cannot be overstated.

To me the "soft skills" is the hard stuff and for years we've talked about developing people skills. A term I feel is a little outdated but being good at developing meaningful professional relationships is crucial to project, product and business success.

This book does a great job of dissecting the various facets of this and guides us through the workplace lifecycle from joining a new organisation, navigating team dynamics, collaboration and culture right through to well-being and exiting a company.

I have previously worked with Eran, so I am familiar with his work and very familiar with his commitment to craftsmanship and mastery. Alongside his devotion to coaching and mentoring, we get a very helpful learning guide for those earlier on in their careers as well as for those seasoned professionals who may require the odd reminder from time-to-time.

All this is shared through entertaining anecdotes of real-world experience which also showcases Eran's humility as well as the path of self-discovery he has trodden himself.

So buckle up, and get ready to navigate the complex working world of the technology professional.

The quest for mastery never ends.

— Sathpal Singh
October 2024

Acknowledgement

Two and a half decades. This is how long I've been working in IT. Looking back at my life, it is fascinating to realize I've spent more time in the industry than out of it.

This book summarizes my experiences from all these years. I would have had none of these experiences if not for the many, many wonderful people I've had the opportunity to work with. I could cover a few pages by just listing all the impactful encounters I've had, from managers to colleagues, and employees - many of whom I now proudly call friends. I have all these people to thank. I met some difficult individuals, too. I owe them my gratitude as well, because they taught me lessons that were no less important.

Next, my thanks go to Sathpal Singh for the wonderful doodles that give these pages life. I was lucky enough to have worked with Sath before and had no doubt he would add a lot to the book. I'm sure I wasn't always the easiest of people to work with, and his patience and commitment to this project were admirable.

Finally, I owe a huge thanks to Lea, my amazing wife. I can't tell you how many times Lea read this book, providing me invaluable feedback. In the absence of an editor, having an English teacher reviewing my book improved it immeasurably. I can assure you it would not have been half as good if not for her massive efforts. Thank you, my love!

If you enjoy this book, which I sincerely hope you do, know that it's in no small part thanks to everyone I mentioned above.

I. Introduction to the Workplace

1. Introduction

What makes a software engineer successful? What would make a company want to keep you, invest in you, and eventually want to promote you? To succeed, you want to be great.

So how do you become an excellent software engineer? Do you master a specific technology? Do you learn as many programming languages as possible? Do you need to master all the tools of the trade, all the popular libraries?

All these things would help, certainly. And there are plenty of resources to help you achieve these goals. But the truth is, no matter how good you become, there is only so much a one-man (or woman) army can do. It does not scale.

And so, the secret to being a superb software engineer is to work well with others. This book was written to help you do that. In it,

I will share with you some of the good experiences I've had in my past two decades working in the industry. I will also share some of the not-so-good ones. We learn from these too, after all.

Some of the details will be altered to respect the privacy of individuals and confidentiality agreements I signed. But rest assured, all stories shared in this book are real.

If you are taking your first steps in the industry, this book will give you some insights into what you can expect. If you are a veteran, some of the stories may sound familiar.

Whatever your level, I hope my experience can help you become better than a good engineer. I hope it makes you great.

Who this book is for

This book was written with entry-level, junior, and mid-level engineers in mind. It is meant to help beginners set their expectations and help them along with the first steps of the organizational ladder. The main focus of the book is on teamwork and collaboration, but other work and office-related activities are also covered to some extent.

Having said that, most topics covered in this book may appeal to a wider audience. As a senior engineer, you may be reminded of challenges and experiences you have long forgotten. As a manager, you may be interested in getting a different perspective of the ground operations in your organization. As a contractor or non-engineering employee, you can find insights into working with your more technical colleagues.

My hope is that wherever you are in the organizational hierarchy, you will find some value in this book.

What this book covers

Working in an organizational environment is a very broad topic. This book aims to prepare you as much as possible to work in such an environment. To cover as many aspects of working in an organization as possible, this book is divided into six parts. Each part covers a particular aspect of this kind of work.

1. **Introduction to the Workplace** – this is the part you are reading right now. It introduces this book and prepares you for starting a new job.
2. **Workplace Culture and Diversity** – in this part, we discuss the different types of personalities and individuals you may come across in a diverse work environment.
3. **Team Dynamics and Communication** – working with people means the human connection is paramount. This part explores the different aspects of interactions within an organization.
4. **Work Practices** – this part focuses on actual day-to-day work as a software engineer. This is the most technical part of the book, and for the most part, will be interesting for software developers.
5. **Skills Development** – a book about collaboration in the workplace would not be complete without a part covering soft skills. In this part, we'll explore the aspects of work that aren't purely technical.
6. **Work-Life Balance and Global Collaboration** – to wrap this book up, this part focuses on the impact of work on our lives outside of work. It also covers different ways of working in the modern workplace.

By the end of this book, you should have clear expectations of your next workplace, whether it is your first job or simply a change of environment. If you already have some work experience, the book may give you some ideas for improving work within your team and organization. Let's start.

2. Welcome aboard
Or: Getting onboarded

Our first step when starting work for a new company is the introductory one. It's only natural to be a bit nervous and have plenty of questions. There's a lot to learn, from processes to social conventions, points of contact, and even physical locations of facilities.

One thing worth remembering is that every company, no matter how big or seemingly organized, is nothing but the sum of its people. It's a collective of individuals who are all hopefully doing their best to help establish a structured process to move forward.

It is my experience that quite often onboarding is a process that either does not exist or isn't well structured. Despite everyone's

best efforts, it's hard to cover everything a new joiner would need to know in a systematic fashion.

And so, two responsibilities fall on our shoulders: we must fill in the gaps in the process ourselves if there's a process at all. We should also help improve the process; document every missed bit of information, and see where the process could be optimized – generally, to help whoever comes after us have a smoother experience than we had.

So, what can we expect from the onboarding process? What can we do to make our experience better? And finally, how can we help streamline the process? These are the questions I will endeavor to tackle in this chapter. I will then look at onboarding from another angle: that of the old-timer. Finally, I will highlight a few aspects unique to remote working.

What to expect

Onboarding processes vary greatly from one company to another. The process depends on the maturity of the company, the team you'll be joining, and the priority they give to new joiners having a seamless experience.

Commonly, these are the items a great onboarding process will cover:

- Introduction to the team.
- Equipment preinstalled with everything you would need or a simple software setup process.
- Temporary credentials for all relevant systems.
- A tour of all relevant locations, physical or virtual.

- A walkthrough of the project and the codebase.
- A calendar of upcoming meetings.

The best onboarding journeys you can expect will help you slide straight into your role. All access permissions will be sorted prior to your first day. Someone will show you around and introduce you to all key people you should know, either online or physically. You will either have all the hardware you need waiting for you or a clear document for setting up your own equipment. You'll be attached to a person whose responsibility it will be to ensure you have everything you need to get started. Finally, you'll be presented with the product you'll be working on in great detail and be given the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. You may also be given a tour through the code as part of this presentation. If you are encouraged to ask questions, that's a great sign of a healthy company culture.

I've been fortunate enough to do work for a start-up that had an excellent process in place. On my first day, I was met at the entrance to the building by a colleague. He escorted me to my desk, where a laptop was waiting for me. A document with the initial required credentials was printed out and lay on my desk by the laptop. I was able to get set up and make my first contribution to the project on the first day. I must admit this felt great.

This wasn't my only positive experience. Some companies have a polished process that leaves very little room for anxiety or concern. These companies care about their people and understand how sensitive the early days of a new job are.

Unfortunately, a perfect onboarding is rarely the kind of onboarding you'll get. At best, you will go through most of these introductory steps. At worst, there'll be absolutely no process in place. It's easy to get completely lost when this happens.

One of my clients was a banking corporation. It took me over a week to get a laptop, and they would not grant me access to any

systems from my own laptop. I had to spend the week familiarizing myself with as many of the staff as I could and learning the requirements of the project. This required a lot of patience and initiative on my behalf. This is the other extreme, and it's not a nice place to be in.

Finally, you will likely be expected to join the regular team meetings. Common ones are daily stand-ups. In your first meetings, you will probably be asked to briefly introduce yourself, but will not be asked to do much more. The following few meetings are likely to also be quite undemanding for you, as you are expected to still be learning the ropes.

Improving your experience

If you are lucky enough to be joining a company with an established onboarding process, there is little you need to do but go with the flow. But what do you do when the process is flawed or non-existent?

The best you can do under such circumstances is gather all the information you need by yourself. Start by figuring out what you need. Is it access? An introduction to the project? Hardware? Here are my rules of thumb:

Stay organized. Create a checklist. You want to tick all the boxes on that list as quickly as you can.

Contact the right people. Try and find a person you feel comfortable communicating with and ask them to be your go-to person while you're learning the ropes. With their help, find all the key personnel who could help you resolve any early and ongoing issues. Find out who knows the project best from every aspect. Ask them

to make time for you. When you speak to them, take notes. See if any documentation can be printed out for you while you wait for your computer or access.

Don't be afraid to nudge. Sometimes, things get stuck in the pipeline. Nudge relevant individuals to make sure you aren't forgotten. You would be surprised how many times I found my ticket was simply forgotten as other tickets got prioritized. Do not assume that processes will go smoothly without a periodic probe from you. See if any of your onboarding-related tasks are blocked and try to find out if you could help unblock them.

In a recent contract, we had a new joiner. The onboarding process wasn't great, but he was very proactive. One thing he did which I found incredibly wise was to ask permission from the participants of every meeting to record it. This gave him plenty of resources to go back to when he was uncertain about any aspect of the project. Sometimes you simply have to come up with your own form of documentation.

Fixing the process

So, you went through the growing pains of getting onboarded. You were missing access permissions, equipment, documentation, and support. It was painful, but you made it through. Would the next new joiner have to go through the same trouble?

It doesn't have to be this way. As someone who has just gone through the process, the knowledge of what could have made the

process smoother is fresh in your memory. You probably know how to save some of the time and effort for the next hire. If some improvements were applied, your experience could have been much better.

As a courtesy to those coming after you, and as a contribution to the business you are working for, try to keep track of the challenges you face. Are there members of the team that should have been involved in welcoming you earlier on? Is there documentation that you'd have loved to have? Could the hardware have been obtained sooner? Try to organize a report and send it to your hiring manager or to the relevant department.

On top of this being a genuinely kind gesture, learning the ins and outs of the onboarding process is truly educational. You will no doubt find yourself involved in designing and improving onboarding experiences down the line. Your first-hand experience will prove priceless.

Onboarding others

Once you've worked at a company long enough, the opportunity to onboard a new employee may land on your lap. This is your chance to really make a difference. As we've established, the first few days of working in a new place are incredibly impactful for an individual. Try your best to make the person as comfortable as possible. The same points we covered earlier apply here. Let's briefly go over them again:

- Make sure they know they can come to you with every question or issue.

- Help them obtain all the equipment, software, and credentials they need.
- Show them around the office environment or relevant online equivalents.
- Introduce them to key people on the team and in the company.
- Present the project, relevant documentation, and the codebase to them.
- Inform them of any meetings they should attend.

In addition to these points, consider taking a few extra steps to make them feel welcome:

- Invite them to join you for lunch or a coffee.
- Introduce them to the team in the relevant forum.
- Check up on them periodically.

Remember to not be offended if a new joiner isn't keen on joining you for coffee or lunch. Some people aren't comfortable with socializing, so it's very possible that they have nothing against you. The important thing is to give them the opportunity to socialize if they want it.

Introduction to the team can usually be done in one of the team meetings or over the team chat app[1]. A light-hearted greeting followed by a brief summary of who the person is, and their new role would do.

Checking up on the new joiner periodically should be done as a courtesy. Be careful not to make them feel as if they're being watched or micromanaged. The purpose of the check-up is solely to help them with any challenges they've been faced with as part of onboarding.

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[1]Slack and Microsoft Teams{i: Teams, Microsoft} are popular ones at the time of writing.

Remote onboarding

While onboarding for a remote role is slightly different from onboarding on-site, there are more similarities than differences. Here are a few key differences:

- Your equipment may be delivered to you.
- Meetings may be happening over a video conference.
- Communication will be online, mainly via chats and calls.
- Some of your colleagues may be in a different time zone.

Some roles require that you use the company's equipment, or it may be your personal preference. In those cases, you have to wait for the equipment to be delivered to you. Delays in delivery are exceptionally painful in this scenario because there really is very little you can do without the equipment. Try to ensure delivery is prioritized.

Instead of meeting people face to face, you may find meetings are held over video conferences#video_app. People on some teams prefer to keep their video on, while others tend to keep it off. If you're comfortable with leaving it on, do that. Otherwise, you can keep it off until you see what others do. You can also ask your point of contact about team conventions in this regard.

Rather than approaching individuals to ask them for help, you'll likely be using online tools. Some companies are ticket-heavy, and most of your requests would go through a ticketing system. Others rely on emails to communicate. Yet others rely on chat apps and ad-hoc calls.

The greatest difference between working on-site and remotely may be the time difference. You may have colleagues that wake up right about the time in which you are wrapping up, or going to sleep right as you start your day. This introduces some challenges, but usually, the communication happens over mediums that are asynchronous

by nature. What this usually means is you want to make sure to cover everything you have to convey to an individual before you call it a day. Anything you forget or leave out may have to wait another day.

Remote work offers significant benefits when it comes to onboarding, too:

- You get to work from the comfort of your own environment. This lowers the stress level of your early days.
- You have a paper trail of most conversations that you can go back to.
- Most people you could need help from are only a message away.

Other than the above-mentioned differences, you should find that online onboarding is quite similar to onsite onboarding.

Conclusion

In some companies, onboarding could be a process so polished that you wouldn't even stop to think about it. Before you know it, you'll hit the ground running and become a productive member of the team. In others, you have to onboard yourself and it's an uphill struggle. To borrow a phrase from Forrest Gump, onboarding is like a box of chocolates – you never know what you're going to get. The best you can do is be prepared for the worst while you hope for the best. Hopefully, this chapter gave you an idea of what to expect.

Eventually, you will get everything you need to start working. It just might not be as quickly as you would like. Be comforted by the

knowledge that getting past that hurdle will be your first success at your new job.

When the time comes and you onboard someone else, remember how stressful onboarding was, and try to help them remember it as a pleasant experience.

Key takeaways

- Expect a rocky onboarding experience.
- Be proactive throughout the onboarding process.
- Keep track of and report ways in which the process could be improved.
- When onboarding others, remember your pain. Be empathetic.
- Remote onboarding shouldn't be significantly different than onsite onboarding.

This concludes the first part of this book. The chapters of the next part celebrate the different types of people out there. In the following chapter, we will explore the diverse range of personalities we will come across in the workplace and the ways in which we can optimize our collaboration with them.

II. Workplace Culture and Diversity

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3. We are all different Or: How personality and traits affect work

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Conclusion

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That's how we've always done it

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Yessir

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We've already come this far

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We promised the client

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I thought I could swallow the world

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Is the work necessary

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Are we doing the right thing

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9. Don’t keep it to yourself Or: Avoiding and breaking down silos

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It’s mine, all mine

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Follow the trailing comma

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Avoiding the clash

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Code style matters

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How to effectively review code changes

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Give credit where credit is due

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Adapt or die

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Get creative

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But why

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Stay organized

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Take responsibility

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Lead the way

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Who is driving

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I am out of here

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Surprise

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Cater to your audience

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Choosing a presenter

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VI. Work-Life Balance and Global Collaboration

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Getting to know each other

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Getting challenged

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Having fun

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Pick up, pick up, pick up

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Headphones on, do not disturb

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19. It's a small world after all
Or: Collaborating around the world

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That's all, folks

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