

Sunday, February 10, 2008

It was touch and go, but I survived my first week at the new job! Just kidding, I got through it just fine. But it was definitely a challenging week.

On Monday I started my "commute" a little after eight. It was a chilly morning, but once the blood got pumping I was comfortable. The walk from home to work is between 15 and 20 minutes, a little longer on the way back because it's uphill. Tomorrow I'm going to try biking it which should only take 5 minutes or so. When I got to the office I was surprised to find the front door locked, though I could see people inside. After a few minutes one of them noticed and let me in; apparently most employees come in the back door which requires a key code. I went up to the second floor where the software engineers sit and found my boss Jake, who showed me to my desk, complete with laptop and external monitor all set up and ready to go. He then handed me off to Ross, a fellow UI developer, who gave me the tour of the building and introduced me to pretty much everyone who was there, most of whose names I promptly forgot of course.

One in particular I remember very vividly though. I get a real kick out of this: as I was being introduced to the other developers one at a time, one of them turned around to say hello and we both immediately did a double-take. We couldn't figure out at first how we knew each other, but we knew we did. The reason that we were having trouble was that we had to bridge the gap between the two worlds of technology and music. After several seconds I finally figured it out: Darin and I both studied piano with Alvin Chow at CU at the same time, him finishing up his master's during my first year as an undergrad. Somehow we both managed to cross over into the technology world and ended up working at the same place, hired only a couple weeks apart! Very funny. We didn't have a whole lot of time to talk and catch up but we'll definitely do more of that as time goes on.

The Local Matters office is very nice, with lots of character; it's an old brick building, apparently originally a coffin factory, that has been renovated as office space. It has four stories, plus a basement which they're currently working on making into an employee lounge/recreation area. Each floor is completely open, and there's a basement-to-ceiling area in the middle with an elevator going up and a skylight at the top to let natural light filter down to every floor. The development area is set up bullpen-style, with no walls between workstations, which freaked me out a bit at first but I've quickly come to appreciate the feeling of openness and collaboration it facilitates.

After the tour we returned to my desk and I started setting up my machine with the necessary tools for development, most of which was nicely documented on

the department wiki. Thankfully all of the tools are ones I was already intimately familiar with: Java, Tomcat, Maven, etc., so the process went smoothly for me without any handholding.

Before I could finish setting up, though, Jake came and whisked me into a handoff meeting, which is their standard process for handing off a project iteration from the requirements/information architecture folks to development. Normally that's the forum where development asks the questions and gets all the information which they will need to perform the work, but of course I didn't have a clue what I was looking at so I wasn't any help. After the meeting I was told that I would not only be working on that project, but that I'd be the only UI engineer working on it and it would be due on Friday! Yikes! So I got busy right away, with lots of help from Ross and other colleagues, getting the project checked out and deployed locally and digging into the codebase to start familiarizing myself with how things work. It's an impressive system they have in place, with some really slick modularization/project inheritance structures so they can share a lot of functionality between products. (Maven automatically does overlaying of WAR dependencies? Wow, wish I'd known that before!) But it's also very big, which means I'd have a whole lot to learn in a very short time.

I'd say it wasn't until Wednesday that I finally had a strong enough grasp of all the working pieces to where I felt I could actually do useful work on the project. Fitting, then, that on Wednesday I was given work on a *different* project to be completed that day! Luckily, this one was really just another client implementation of the same core product, so I was able to get it checked out and deployed and start working on it without anyone helping. That much at least made me feel good. I managed to get the work done that day and released a build to QA the next morning, and then got back to the original project. Unfortunately the amount of work involved was just too much for me to finish by the end of the week, once all my ramp-up time and the time spent on the other project was factored in. It felt a bit disappointing to not be able to make the deadline and blow everyone away with being able to handle everything that was thrown at me like a magician, but I guess I have to be realistic. And everyone else seemed to be realistic about it too, so I don't feel like I let anyone's expectations down.

Friday afternoons the company has "Free Beer Friday", which is basically a company-sponsored and sanctioned happy hour where employees are encouraged to stop working at 3pm, grab a beer, and socialize as a way to wind down the week. The idea is to allow a sense of comraderie to grow naturally without forcing "team-building exercises" on people. It's totally voluntary, come and go as you please. Quite refreshing to tell the truth.

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A lot of things about the company are refreshing, in fact. The biggest thing for me, though, is that I get the overwhelming sense that each and every person I work with is every bit as smart as me, or more so. It's abundantly clear that they are very picky about the talent they hire, and not just for their technical skills but also as a cultural fit. In that sense I feel very lucky to have been hired, and it's a real treat to work in an environment where developers are so highly respected. I'm a firm believer that when you get great minds together and give them the freedom to innovate, great things can happen. Very exciting.

So that was my first week. I'm not sure I've completely recovered over the weekend, but it's back to it tomorrow. My prediction for this week is that as I get even more comfortable and settled, I'll enjoy it even more.

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