CompTIA

Spotlight on Success

Christopher Fabes

A Chance Interview Leads to a Rewarding Sales Leadership Career

Not everyone remembers that point when their aspirations and job prospects took a sudden turn, but Christopher Fabes, director of channel sales, Canada (east and west) for Lenovo, certainly does. That unexpected fork in the road came for Fabes during a job interview shortly after receiving his college degree in marketing. The decision he made that day not only lead to an exciting career in IT but created an opportunity that would later put him into a key channel position in a Fortune 500 company. Fabes humbly shares his story and some insightful advice for other aspiring IT professionals in this month's Spotlight on Success.

"

"Aspiring IT professionals should always be learning and pushing their limits."

CompTIA: Did you envision yourself as an IT industry professional when you were a kid?

Christopher: My original dream, surely like many other kids at the time, was to be a professional athlete and, at that point, my heart was set on basketball. After realizing I would never be good enough to make a professional team, I decided to coach and referee. That's where I started to realize that, even at a young age – I started refereeing around 11 years old – I could control the narrative. In fact, those roles allowed me to interact with and gain the respect of those who were my senior.

I quickly realized the teaching aspect of sports was a better path for me to pursue. My parents were both teachers and the apple never really falls too far from the tree. When I was old enough to coach [14], I started working with both the girls and boys teams, and, a few years later, I decided to manage a boys' division, ages 14 to 15, where I could play around with numbers and select teams, align coaches and hand down disciplinary actions. That's where I got my feet wet learning about organizational structure and the idiosyncrasies of management.

CompTIA: How did those skills help you transition into an IT career?

Christopher: I knew going into the university that I wanted to focus on business, but I didn't know exactly what part of it. My original thought was to pursue a career in computer programming, oddly enough, but sitting within four walls looking at a computer screen all day didn't motivate me. I needed to interact with people and had a strong interest in psychology. One of the reasons I decided to pursue a marketing degree was to be able to take that creative part of the psyche and apply it to business. After graduating from the John Molson School of Business at Concordia University in 2005, I worked [for] a while in the banking industry before deciding that was probably not going to be a long term career option. It was around that time when a parent of one of the kids I was refereeing every weekend told me her company was looking someone to join their marketing team. She worked for an IT firm in the Montreal area and since marketing was what I really wanted to do, I decided to give it a shot and was able to land an interview.

That was the actual turning point of my career. It was during my interview with their VP of sales, when he told me point-blank, "You're a sales guy, not a marketing guy, and I'm willing to hire you for that role if you're interested." My acceptance was the start of a career in sales in the IT industry.

CompTIA: Did you agree with his assessment of your skills?

Christopher: I was really taken aback with what he told me and absolutely disagreed with him at that point, but I accepted his opinion and took some time to digest it. In my mind, I was a marketing professional who was going to change the world with something creative. I may not have understood it at that time, but looking back on it now, it made sense. Everyone is selling something, either themselves or something more tangible and it's truly a great field to be in. You're always going to grow and get the opportunity to continually build new relationships.

So, while I may have disagreed then, I took a chance on a new opportunity and, a decade later, I can tell you a sales career is a rewarding and fantastic opportunity. It will open your eyes to plenty of new experiences, especially in the technology industry. It's forever changing and adapting, and challenges are typically met with new ideas. Boundaries are constantly being pushed. The continuous drive and persistence to be better and smarter is what is ultimately special about this space. I really do believe that everything happens for a reason, and being shocked and awed and disappointed in that meeting room turned out quite well for me.

CompTIA: How did you get from entry-level sales to a key channel role with Lenovo?

Christopher: In my first IT job, I was selling multi-head graphic solutions, which gave users the ability to use multiple monitors, which [was] really ahead of [its] time. I called on a number of vertical markets and quickly progressed from presales to field sales. But I didn't feel I could achieve the challenges or goals I set for myself and decided to look for new opportunities, and found one in a partner organization based in Montreal. I had applied for a tele-based sales rep position and while I was discussing expectations with the recruiter [I] realized it wasn't a good fit. But, based on our conversation, she suggested I consider a different role this reseller organization had an opening for – a Lenovo business development manager.

Being the person who always wants to do something that can make an impact, I accepted the position. And I really enjoyed the business development side. It allowed me to put together marketing campaigns and train and educate the sales force, as well as create incentives and set pricing. I was literally the jack of all trades at that company and it opened up my eyes to the multitenant nature of business.

In October 2008, I switched to an entry-level sales position supporting the channel as a Lenovo inside representative. From there, I moved up through a number of different roles with a variety of increasingly crucial responsibilities, and developed close relationships with many leaders in the business community. I assumed my current role a little more than a year ago – director of channel sales, Canada (east and west).

CompTIA: Do you find your coaching skills come in handy in a sales management role?

Christopher: In some ways, yes. I'm a firm believer that everyone has value and we should

recognize that value, no matter who you are. From the most basic role through the leadership team, everyone in an organization should all be treated the same way. That's how I coached. A kid who didn't know how to dribble a ball got the same amount of attention as a skilled player who would likely move on to more competitive divisions.

I look at coaching as a form of education and my goal is to help others, whether at work and at play. Ultimately, I want all my teams to succeed. I am always listening and I continually encourage employees to tell me what they need to succeed in both their professional and personal lives. And I will do my best to support them in those endeavors.

CompTIA: Have you had any mentors in your life?

Christopher: I had two. First I have to give credit to my parents. While growing up and throughout my education, there were many times they picked me up, nudged me and gave me unsolicited advice. Everything I have ever taken on, my parents told me to make sure I see it through to completion. They always had my best interest in mind.

On the professional side, I have to give Stefan Bockhop accolades for mentoring me. He has always trusted, believed in and empowered me, and let me be entrepreneurial. With more than twenty years of professional experience to tap into, he always offers insightful and trustworthy guidance.

CompTIA: What advice would you give to those coming into the IT industry?

Christopher: It really depends on the person and their individual goals, but I suggest they embrace change. You have to be able to adapt quickly and should always be looking ahead. I would equally suggest they become a glutton of knowledge. Realize that IT is more than just widgets; it's about finding problems and applying solutions through technology. Whether that involves helping a child with smart prosthetics, machine-to-machine learning, artificial intelligence, digitization of historical archives, distribution of social content or anything in between, the IT field offers a wide range of opportunities. There are few industries that evolve so quickly and so broadly impact almost everything we t ouch. It's challenging, scary, wonderful and exiting all at the same time.

Aspiring IT professionals should always be learning and pushing their limits. Dedicate yourself to things that drive you. Be able to wake up and look forward to your day. That may sound simple, but it's an important principle. Anyone looking for a career with many pivot points – a path that will never be the same as the day before – should consider IT. Those who have grown up in the Internet era have always had technology as a staple in their lives. I can only imagine the ideas that will come as we welcome more youth into the industry; those who will challenge the status quo and continually push the evolution of IT.