

Andrew Nussbaum

Accident and Choice

Andrew Nussbaum cringed as he listened to his coworker stumble over her words and give the client incorrect information over the computer help hotline. They had both been hired by Prentice Hall Publishing to answer the questions of lawyers and business people trying to navigate the new online database of tax law information and letter rulings—Andrew for his extensive knowledge on the emerging field of computer science, and his coworker, a recent law school graduate, to navigate and interpret the legal content. It was clear to Andrew, however, that she had no idea how to use the database, and thus often gave incorrect or incomplete answers to the clients.

To compensate, Andrew frequently took over her clients, using his ability to build search queries and narrow down information to figure out what the customer needed. While he found it frustrating, he rarely worried himself over it—until the day he realized she was making 50 percent more than he was. “I went to my boss, who was a good friend of mine, but he said his hands were tied. Given her background and law degree, he had to pay her that much,” Andrew recalls. “I told him he had two months to match my pay with hers, or I was leaving.”

Because the size of the raise he requested was essentially unheard of, his boss came to him a month later offering 12 percent more, but Andrew turned it down. Instead, he left the company for a job on Wall Street with Integrated Resources. “I loved that job at Prentice Hall. It was one of the best jobs I ever had, and the one I went to after was terrible, so I really learned the hard way that money should never be the priority,” he says. “I really believe it’s much better to enjoy what you’re doing rather than to focus on money. As it turns out, though, that career move led to my getting an MBA, bringing me to where I am today. I’m starting to realize that my career is the result of

many happy accidents, so while I regretted leaving Prentice Hall back then, I’m so grateful I did now, because I probably would have never left otherwise. If I hadn’t, I would have never met my wife, or started my own company.”

Today, at the tail end of many other fortunate accidents, Andrew is cofounder and Managing Partner of AAJ Interactive Technologies (AAJ), a full-service professional staffing and recruiting firm based in Washington, D.C. that specializes in technology and media services while also encompassing financial, professional, federal, and non-profit organization services. The company was started in 1997 when Andrew and several coworkers from Bell Atlantic broke off to actualize their vision of an ideal consulting firm. At first they focused on project-based software development for the media industry, but they quickly found a demand for staffing and recruiting, which fit in seamlessly with their business model.

While the company is constantly fluctuating in size and workload, it typically employs between 30 and 40 people at any given time, with an average length of engagement with a client lasting around six months. “I try to keep our clients local because I sincerely believe that our focus on the D.C. area is what makes us different and better than our competition,” Andrew affirms.

Andrew was born and raised in the Bronx. His mother was an employee for the state, while his stepfather did typesetting for stocks and bonds. While his parents did well in their careers, Andrew was always motivated to find creative ways to make money for himself. “When I was too young to work, I would go up and down the streets digging cars out of the snow after storms,” he recalls. “They had huge plow trucks that would push the snow from the street against the parked cars, so we would make a fortune helping people



get out in time for work.”

Growing up in the Bronx, Andrew had very little idea of what life outside of the city was like. “I had a hard time imagining a neighborhood that didn’t have three groceries, four bakeries, your school, and the subway all right down the street,” he laughs. He and his brother lived with their mother and stepfather on the second floor of a building with a broken elevator and only one small air conditioner, which was kept in the master bedroom. “On nights that it was just too unbearably hot, my brother and I would sleep on the floor of my mother’s bedroom under that little air conditioning unit. It was an interesting way to grow up.”

Andrew spent most of his childhood on the move. During school vacations, he would visit his father, an insurance broker in Long Island, and play as many sports as he could, including hockey and speedskating. When he turned ten, his mother began encouraging him to take piano. A teacher in Yonkers schooled him in the basics, and he then switched to a more contemporary teacher in junior high. “She taught me about music theory, and we began playing Simon and Garfunkel,” he recalls. “Really, she began teaching me how to fake it. If I knew the melody, I could intuitively create the chords and the rest just fell into place. I began thinking I’d probably become a musician one day.”

Because his musical talent was compelling, Andrew auditioned for the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. “When they tested you, they were less concerned with how good you were at a particular instrument and more interested in your potential,” he comments. “They had you tap out rhythms and sing back notes to get the full trajectory of what you were capable of.” While his grades had been less than perfect, he made it into the school thanks to his musical foundation, where he switched from the piano to the trombone so he could play in the orchestra. “I absolutely loved going to school there, but it was very eye opening to suddenly be in a high school full of students who were just as talented, if not more so, than I was,” he says. “I remember watching one girl tune her violin by ear and realizing that I’d never have the same drive for music that she did.”

With that realization, he decided to put aside his dream of being a musician and instead pursue a business degree. As he began interviewing with schools in 1980, he decided he

wanted to supplement his business degree with computer classes. “The PC had yet to come out, but computers were becoming more and more a staple in business, and I had the foresight to know they would quickly become the future,” he notes. When he visited the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, he asked the advisor how he could combine business and computers, which she thought would be difficult to do. “Back in those days, you could only take computer classes if you were a Computer Science major, because the school had a limited amount of computer time,” he says. “What really sold me on the school, however, was how quickly the advisor was willing to work out a solution for me. She looked over the schedule of classes and told me that I could enroll as a Computer Science major and Business minor so that I could get my computer classes in, and then switch to a Business major after a year or two.”

Thus, in the fall of 1981, he enrolled at Plattsburgh on the track she had advised him on; however, after two years of Computer Science classes, Andrew found he was too invested to switch majors. “1981 was when the PC came out and the real information age started. I was programming on huge box computers until they moved to terminals, but even then, we were limited to just an hour a day on the computer,” he laughs. “Today, the guys I work with are constantly compiling their work a thousand times a day, so it’s been fascinating to see how technology has evolved.”

Shortly after graduating from college, Andrew landed a job with Prentice Hall Publishing. “Finding a job was a little tricky at first because most companies didn’t understand what I did,” he recalls. “Computers were so new that I was one of the first to graduate with my type of degree. Previously, everyone in my line of study had electrical engineering degrees.” At the time, Prentice Hall was putting their tax law information and private letter rulings databases online so that customers could look up information on their PCs by using a modem to dial into the system, rather than having to search through stacks of books. It was an extremely innovative concept at the time, and Andrew was tasked with helping the attorneys and accountants figure out how to access the information over a hotline.

Not long after Andrew transitioned over to Wall Street to work as a database developer for

Integrated Resources, the stock market crashed, putting the company out of business. "I hadn't planned on going to graduate school, but I decided I wanted to work in a university setting, so I began applying for jobs at schools," he says.

Andrew landed an interview with Syracuse University, where the head of the Business Department made it clear they desperately wanted him for his computer knowledge; yet, because of his extensive experience, the university could not afford to hire him in the traditional sense. "The Dean decided to make a deal with me," Andrew recalls. "He said they would accept me into the MBA program and pay all my tuition, while also giving me a living stipend, if I agreed to work twenty hours a week under an assistantship status. I saw it as a huge win-win for both of us, so I enrolled at Syracuse that fall."

During his time there, Andrew found himself tapping into his intellect and leadership skills more than ever before, earning top grades and being elected President of the Graduate Student Business Association. While also working part time, he was constantly involved in school events and was given a Service and Academic Award from the Dean when he graduated. Almost immediately, he was hired to work at American Management Systems, where he was constantly traveling around the country throughout the week. During his time at AMS, he met his future wife, Terri, and began a semi-long distance relationship due to his constant traveling.

Andrew eventually found himself unable to travel every week after tearing his ACL during a skiing accident, and while he was disappointed to leave the company, he was relieved to finally be able to stay in D.C. and work on his budding relationship. He was quickly hired by Bell Atlantic Video Services (BVS) in 1993, where he joined a team of talented and bright individuals on a project to send video through wires to interactive televisions, since the Internet had yet to appear in the market. "We were aware from an engineering perspective how we could send video through telephone lines, but we hadn't yet figured out how we would track customers, bill them, and give them video support," he explains. To add to their list of complications, inefficiency was rampant in the consulting world, with companies outsourcing work to firms across the country that unnecessarily inflated prices.

Often, Andrew would find himself sharing a few beers with his coworkers, trying to imagine a better way to accomplish their goals. "We wanted to build a small, local consulting firm where no one had to travel, which would automatically cut 30 to 40 percent of costs," he explains now. "We also saw the flaws in the pyramid structure of big businesses, and decided we would keep it to just us and the people doing the work, so we could offer services to our clients for a lot less money."

After Andrew and his colleagues spent four years dreaming up their ideal consulting firm, Bell Atlantic closed down the organization running their project after realizing the essential piece they were missing was not the technology, but the video content. "Bell Atlantic was really just a pipe, and the people with the content, such as the movie guys out in LA, were the ones really controlling the whole operation," Andrew explains. "So the company gave us two options: we could find a new job back at the mother ship of Bell Atlantic, or they'd give us a chunk of money to start over with. We realized that if we were ever going to start the company we'd been dreaming about, now was the time."

Thus, in 1997, Andrew and several coworkers from Bell Atlantic took their money and created AAJ. The initial intent of the fledgling company was to do project-based software development for the media industry around D.C., so they targeted local companies like AOL, Discovery Channel, National Geographic, NPR and The Washington Post. By this point, the Internet was becoming a phenomenon, and since Andrew and his team were so well versed in it, they immediately found traction. "Pretty soon, clients started coming to me saying, 'We really liked that guy you sent us for the project. Now that it's over, can we borrow him for five or six months? What's his hourly rate?'" Andrew explains. "Suddenly, that line of the business took off. We never intended to build a staffing model, but clients wanted it, and I found it was actually a much more efficient way to bill the clients. Before, when I'd give a fixed price for a project, I often lost money going back in and doing constant revisions after it was completed, but with this model, we billed the client by the hour, so they got exactly what they wanted, and could see exactly how everything added up."

The model proved exceptionally successful, and today, the company is typically

hired to do staffing work for clients who are trying to accomplish something that does not require a full-time employee, or clients that experience a spike in workload that warrants a temporary extra set of hands. "We always try to find people who will be happy doing the work they are hired for, both technically and culturally. We never force a fit just to deliver people to the client," Andrew explains. "The biggest complaint we ever get is that we don't find enough candidates for the client, but that's because when we finally do deliver a staffer, we've found the perfect person for the job. I think this is where my computer science background comes into play the most, because I can test the people we hire for staffing, and I know who knows their stuff and who doesn't."

As the company continues to grow and thrive, Andrew readily affirms that his biggest goal for the company is to maintain its spotless reputation. "You'd be hard pressed to find anyone who has ever worked for or with us who has a single bad thing to say about the company," he says. "There are of course a few projects that may not have gone as planned, but we always try to do the right thing by everybody involved."

Throughout all the twists and turns his career has taken, Andrew credits his wife, Terri, for staying by his side and supporting him every step of the way. "We were married in 1996, just before we started AAJ, and sometimes I wonder if she still would have married me had she known how much debt we were about to jump into," he laughs. "But we pulled through that, just like we've pulled through everything else. We are similar in most ways, but complementary in the ways we differ, so we balance each other out."

Andrew and Terri have one daughter, Maxine, who is currently beginning to think about colleges and career paths. When offering advice for the next phase of her life, he encourages her to follow the career that will bring her the most joy,

rather than the one that will bring her the most money. Yet, while he recalls regretting having made a decision to the contrary early on in his career, he readily identifies magic in the mistakes.

"I didn't plan to do any of this," he says. "If someone told me 20 years ago that this is what I'd be doing now, I wouldn't have believed them. I always thought of my career as the result of going with the flow and accidentally stumbling into the right place at the right time, but my wife tells me it's more about the good decisions I've made along the way, and I think she's right. Deciding to go to Syracuse was a good choice. Making the decision to leave AMS to work for this great group of people at Bell Atlantic was a good choice. Marrying Terri was a good choice, and starting AAJ was a good choice." By flowing with steady purpose through life's twists and turns, embracing the accidents and making sound decisions along the way, waking up to realize you're exactly where you want to be is not so farfetched a fate.

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