

Norman Fortier

Acts of Doing

Cleaning bathrooms and sweeping floors is no dream job—especially if those floors are in the highly industrialized bulk mail center of the Postal Service, and especially if that sweeper is struggling with a painful and unsteady knee that makes standing for long hours all that much harder. But for Norm Fortier, it was a dream job—not for the usual reasons, like a hefty paycheck or a flashy reputation, but for the right reasons. It was one “act of doing” in a chain of such actions that, he hoped, would ultimately get Norm to where he wanted to be.

While taking classes full-time, his full-time job as a custodian allowed him to support himself and his young family. He had also grown up with a strong work ethic at the core of his being, recognizing that a job done right was a job well done regardless of the prestige attached. Small steps in the right direction make up the journey and no experience is insubstantial, no matter how trivial it seems in the present. “I tell my son now, if you can’t get one job that pays you what you want, get two jobs,” he explains, of his uncompromising willingness to work. “If you want it bad enough, you’ll do it. And I wanted it bad enough.”

Now the President, CEO, and founder of iSystems Group, Inc., Norm maintains his positive attitude and admirable work ethic by constantly keeping his hands in as many projects as possible. Last year, he developed strategic plans for the company, and in addition to working full-time, he also manages company benefits and human capital. In a remarkable team effort, his wife, Monica, works part time as the Facilities Security Officer in addition to her full time job as a program manager at a large company.

iSystems specializes in program and project management. As one of only eight hundred people in the world who possesses the

Project Management Institute’s PgMP credential, Norm’s goal is to help companies and government agencies realize the benefits of their IT solutions. “There are good companies with strong IT capabilities but no enterprise strategy above single projects to manage them as a portfolio or program,” he explains. “So I work with them to look across projects to find efficiencies through standardization, governance, and benefits management, helping them understand how to gain efficiencies and deliver that IT solution faster to the stakeholders.”



The birth of iSystems did not happen overnight, however; nor was it simply a product of Norm’s unimaginable willingness to work. Rather, he first launched iSystems in 1996 as Cyberworx Internet Services, essentially a small side project he started at a desk in a room above his garage. He began developing websites for local Memphis companies, such as Echo Records and High Stack Records, as part time work,

running off little more than the pure enjoyment of working with computers and meeting with clients. Although his side project gained momentum slowly but surely, his risk-averse nature kept the company always in the shadows of his full-time work. “My challenge was that I hesitate to take risks because I have a family to think about,” Norm explains. “I kept my business on the side, and my real career always did well.”

In 2000, he put Cyberworx completely on hold in order to focus on the changes happening in his career. After seventeen years of hard work and steady promotion in the United States Postal Service (USPS), advancing from custodian to Sr. Information Systems Specialist, he left to join a colleague in a startup company called Endicia, an internet-based electronic postage service that continues to thrive today. Norm contributed to the technical aspect, acting as an East Coast USPS

liaison for the West Coast based company. Working long hours from home, he built the financial interface and internet presence for the company and then left after eighteen months to pursue other opportunities.

“Over the next several years, I wore many hats,” he laughs. “I worked for several different companies and accumulated knowledge, building a name for myself in the industry while maintaining my long term dream of running my own company.” In 2003, Cyberworx was renamed to iSystems Group, Inc. in a strategic move to posture the company for additional capabilities as Norm’s vision solidified into what his business would eventually offer.

In 2006, after climbing the ranks through various executive roles in a variety of work environments, he decided it was at last time to return to iSystems. At the time, he was working as Associate Vice President at a local company; however, his tenure with them was short. “I was completely taken aback by the lack of ethics at this particular company, which ran in stark contrast to my core values,” he notes. “It ran so contrary to everything I believe in. I can still remember calling my wife, Monica, after my resignation meeting to tell her what happened. She laughed and didn’t believe me at first because she knows how risk-averse I am. When I convinced her I really had resigned, she asked what I would do, so I said it was time to start my own company. People always said I would do it, and people wanted to work for me. I said I’d give it six months. At the end of that time, if it didn’t work, I’d go find a job. She was incredibly nervous, but also incredibly supportive.” At last, after years of dreaming, planning, and hard work, Norm had actually jumped off the cliff.

During those six months, Norm supplemented his work on newly-renamed iSystems Group by working on a small project for a company called Buchanan & Edwards. Meanwhile, The Analysis Corporation (TAC), a company influential in the intelligence community but relatively unknown otherwise, reached out and offered him the position of Senior Program Manager. It was an offer he couldn’t turn down, but rather than shutting down iSystems Group, Norm continued to build it as he helped TAC flourish. During his eighteen-month stay with TAC, the company gained recognition and a reputation for its fine work, and Norm himself

received customer recognition for his strong leadership and unprecedented contract transition by the Department of Justice. He was ultimately promoted to Director for his efforts, but that wasn’t enough to keep him on his current trajectory. “I liked what I had done for TAC, and I felt I left them in a great position for future success,” he recalls. “But I wanted to get back to my own company, to build it and live the American Dream.”

Leaving TAC was not the only hard decision to be made in order to fully commit to his company. “It was, and still is, a great company,” he confirms. Around the same time, Norm was offered the position of Senior Manager at Deloitte—along with the highest salary he had ever been offered. Once again, Monica proved to be the greatest support in keeping him on track. “The offer from Deloitte required that we divest iSystems,” Norm explains. “To that, Monica said, ‘You can’t get rid of my company!’” What began as a solo endeavor above his garage was now a matter of deep importance to both of them, so he turned the offer down. “iSystems’s momentum was up, and things were starting to gel,” he affirms. “If I had accepted that offer, my heart wouldn’t have been in it. Even though it was a great company and a great job, I just couldn’t do it, and Monica’s comment was all the validation I needed.”

Along with her support, the success of iSystems can undoubtedly be attributed to Norm’s impermeable integrity and work ethic—traits that run deep through his entire family. Growing up in Chicopee, Massachusetts, his mother worked for and eventually retired from the Department of Motor Vehicles. His father, before his untimely death when Norm was four years old, was a factory worker. “Though I didn’t have much time with him, I knew my father was a hard worker and a handy man,” Norm avows. “He even built the house our family lived in.”

Norm’s mother supported him and his three older siblings by working full-time and with the unconditional support of his grandmother, who lived with the family. Everyone in the household was very busy with the same strong work ethic. His oldest brother began working when he was thirteen, setting the standard for the other three children to be self-sustaining. “We didn’t work because we thought we had to; in fact, my mother was so skilled at managing her money

that the family never felt in want," Norm remarks. "We worked because that's just what we knew. It wasn't a survival thing; it was just engrained in us to get jobs."

His first jobs, beginning when he turned fourteen, included working on a tobacco farm, a tomato farm, and in a grocery store, yet his dream was to become a pilot. Although his hopes were dashed when he realized he needed glasses, he enlisted in the Air Force straight out of high school, following in the footsteps of his older brother. His military career was cut short, however, when he hyper-extended his knee, requiring full reconstructive surgery and months of rehabilitation. Around that time, he moved to Florida, married his first wife, and began work in demolition construction, contrary to the medical advice from his physician, to support his family.

Growing up, there had been no influence to drive him to pursue college. Although his sister had gone on to become a Registered Nurse, the overall tone of the family was centered upon life experience in the workforce as opposed to academia. Even his uncle, whom he had always looked up to, had only gotten an eighth grade education, yet he had started his own extremely successful air conditioning and plumbing company. It was through construction work, however, that Norm realized he needed to find his direction in life. "They didn't have medical benefits, the weather was up to 104 degrees, and I realized I didn't want to do that for my entire life," he recalls. "It became my motivation to figure my life out."

Although apprehensive to return to school, he began taking classes at Northwest Florida State College to earn a two-year degree with the financial help of the VA. It was there that he took his first computer programming class and fell in love with it. Soon after, he relocated to New England.

Around this time, his older brother was working as a custodian for the Postal Service. With his sibling's encouragement, Norm joined at the lowest level, a PS-3—one grade lower than a mail carrier. A year later, when the Postal Service found out he was working on a college degree, he was promoted to be a computer operations worker in the Computer Operations Center. He graduated with a Bachelor's of Science in Computer Information Systems in 1985 from Western New England University. The accomplishment was

underscored by the method through which he achieved it, working full time at night and taking a full course load during the day. He slept as time allowed, usually in the late afternoons and early evenings.

Norm was again promoted a short time later to an Information Systems Coordinator in Windsor, CT, where he worked at the Facilities Service Center under Jack Neilsen, who became his mentor. There, he quickly moved up the ranks from EAS-14 to EAS-22, a feat not accomplished by many within the USPS. Headquarters approached him soon after, and he was promoted and relocated to Washington, D.C., where he worked for three more years helping to build the facilities management software used to track and manage all USPS facilities.

Norm committed himself to pursuing the American Dream, and the steady upward progression that defines his professional path has materialized that vision. Now the proud leader of a highly successful company, he strives to create the kind of workplace that promotes engagement and collaboration amongst employees. Much of his leadership philosophy was learned from his boss and mentor, Jack Neilsen, an outstanding professional who was never afraid to laugh at himself. "The key lesson I learned from Jack was to put yourself on the receiving end of what you're asking a person to do," he describes. "He taught me to make my objective clear and help my employees understand the bigger picture."

Jack also taught Norm the importance of genuine understanding when an employee experiences strife in personal life. When Norm's stepfather was struck with illness, Jack allowed him to visit the hospital every day, which made him late for work. When Norm asked his mentor why he permitted it, Jack replied, "Everyone will have a situation like this in his life. You need to know that so you can help someone out if it happens to them. Everyone will experience some type of situation during their life where they need special treatment or extra time off, just as you needed during your stepfather's illness." When Norm himself became a leader, he found himself saying the same thing to employees when they were faced with adversity.

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the business world today, Norm emphasizes the role perspective plays in whether an experience is positive or negative. "I try to tell my children that,

with everything you do in life, you have two choices," he advises. "You can choose to turn away from an opportunity if it doesn't look good, or you can look for the positive effect it has. Make every job, no matter how small or seemingly unimportant, an opportunity. Rather than taking on a project with the immediate insight of what it will do in the short term, strive to see how it works into the big picture, or how it builds a certain skill set. I believe everything I did in my past got me where I am today, and everything you do in life will play into who you are later on. It's not about perceived success; it's about who you are as an individual. Everything is an opportunity; you just have to choose to look at it that way."

Norm himself is living proof of this philosophy. Having started at the lowest level possible in the Postal Service and rising to nearly the highest, then going on to being founder and CEO of a successful company, he understands the value of patience, persistence, and optimism. He never lost his willingness to work hard, and though he tends to avoid risk, he also understands that jumping off the cliff of the unknown is sometimes what's needed to truly set your dreams in motion. "We get the best data for decision

making through the act of doing," he affirms. "By working hard, ascending through the ranks, and building your experience and knowledge base, you'll know when the right time to jump is. It's that final leap—that ultimate act of doing—that makes your cumulative work experience so worthwhile."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

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