Jason Bloomberg

The Adaptability Edge

While growing up, Jason Bloomberg's home life was anything but stable. He was only three when his parents divorced, and seven when he left his mother's home in Albuquerque to spend his second grade year under the care of his neglectful father and stepmother in San Francisco.

The experience was traumatic, but formative. "They didn't take care of me the way parents should a child that age," he recalls. "All I remember is feeling fear and anger—neglect at home, difficulty at school. But looking back on my

life, the trauma that I experienced in that year formed my personality, and has made me the resourceful, driven, independent person I am today."

Although both parents were clinical psychologists, they couldn't have been further apart. "They're two very different people with two very different lives and two very different ideas of what psychology meant in practice," Jason explains. His father became a "hippie shrink" who dived headfirst into the 1960s California drug scene, while his newly remarried

mother alienated his stepsiblings and filled their new Albuquerque home with discord. With little guidance from either of them, Jason relied on his stepfather as his primary adult role model during his teen years, even though he was aloof and distant due to being nearly deaf. Left to his own devices, Jason focused on school and excelled academically, travelled Europe alone in the summers, and developed the self-sufficiency and adaptability necessary to thrive in the ever-evolving tech world.

Today, Jason is something of a celebrity in that world, internationally recognized as an expert in the areas of Service-Oriented Architecture and Cloud Computing. "I do have groupies," he laughs. "Unfortunately, they're mostly middleaged men!" As President of ZapThink, a Dovel Technologies Company, he's constantly travelling in order to keep up with demand. Indeed, his

calendar is a catalogue of exhausting itineraries that include trips to Bangalore, Rome, London, Toronto, São Paolo, Sydney, and Estonia—not to mention plenty of commitments in the US.

ZapThink's core mission is to add value to parent company Dovel, a government contractor, by establishing the business as a thought leader in the tech industry and differentiating them from similar companies. To that end, Jason runs courses, authors articles, and writes books, but his well-known expertise is a double-edged sword.

"It's great because I have a strong personal brand that is global and well-recognized," he remarks. "But the downside is that even though ZapThink has a brand too, people know it's really just me! So it's hard to add a trainer, for example, because people want me to deliver each course personally."

Jason's renown in the field, while hardly surprising given his early academic successes, developed organically over decades of technological evolution. Given the

rate of change in the industry, he certainly never predicted where he'd end up as an introverted high school student with startling ability in mathematics. As early as eighth grade, his teachers allowed him to study independently; during spring break of his eighth grade year, he completed the 10th grade math He completed his high school's curriculum. advanced mathematics course of study in 10th grade, and for the following two years, he took college-level math and programming courses at the nearby University of New Mexico.

By the time he applied to colleges, he believed he wanted to pursue mathematics further, so he decided to attend the well-known math, science, and engineering school, Harvey Mudd College, in Southern California. After a couple of years in the program, however, Jason became disillusioned with the college and craved a more

diverse, liberal arts curriculum. He transferred to Pomona College, which shares a campus with Harvey Mudd and the three other Claremont Colleges, and developed a strong interest in analytical philosophy. During his two years at Pomona, he gradually transitioned away from math and science courses and began to favor philosophy above the other disciplines, and although he graduated with a degree in physics, he immediately began looking into advanced degrees in the History and Philosophy of Science—a program that seemed to combine all his major interests.

As he took a break after graduation to consider his options for graduate school, Jason naturally gravitated back toward his first love: high school math. He took a position teaching 10th to 12th grade students in California, working in that capacity for two years. He then packed up and left California for good, settling into the History and Philosophy of Science graduate program at the University of Pittsburgh.

While he enjoyed the philosophy curriculum, the history subject matter proved more of a challenge, as did the politics endemic in Academia. "Over the next four or five years, I became frustrated with the program," he recalls. "Many of the professors were alcoholics, and the history portion of the curriculum didn't have the appeal of the philosophy. It also became clear that the academic life centered on politics. As a result, my whole life plan got derailed. When grad school didn't work out, I found myself looking for a different career. Anything was possible."

When he began his PhD program in 1985, Jason had planned to go into academia, teaching philosophy at a university. By the time he left in 1989, he had earned two master's degrees—one in History and Philosophy of Science, and another in Mathematics—but no real idea how he would put either to use. For the next few years, he returned to teaching high school mathematics and computer courses and was quickly made head of a computer department at a K – 12 school in Pittsburgh.

Accustomed to teaching high school, Jason was out of his element when he was assigned to K through 8 children. "I found that I liked the computers more than the kids, which made me realize that teaching was the wrong career for me," Jason explains. In 1992, he left teaching to offer computer consulting until, in 1995, the web began to take off. "It's as though my career had been

waiting for that major turning point," Jason explains. He began building websites for businesses, and his services were soon in high demand. "I built dozens of websites," he recalls. As it turned out, he was perfectly positioned to ride the dot.com wave from 1995 through 2001. "I kept doubling my salary every couple of years, moving from one firm to the next, building my skills. The wild ride ended with a position as an industry analyst for IDC." During that time, he and his first wife moved from Pittsburgh to Atlanta to Massachusetts, and had two children along the way.

In 2000, Jason's soon-to-be business partner, Ron Schmelzer, founded the original ZapThink, which Jason joined in 2001, bringing his market research experience from his brief tenure at IDC. At the time, ZapThink was an industry analyst firm researching then-new XML technology. When Jason joined, this focus evolved into web services analysis, which in turn evolved into service-oriented architecture (SOA), an outgrowth of web services. By the middle of the decade, ZapThink was widely regarded as the leading web services and SOA analyst firm in the world, beating out other companies like IBM, Microsoft, HP, Motorola, British Telecom, Samsung, and the US Treasury, as well as dozens of tech startups among their hundreds of customers.

But then the market shifted. "We went through a complicated strategic shift from that point onward," Jason remarks. "Service-oriented architecture was more of a best practices approach than a product offering, and we decided in the middle of the last decade that, instead of continuing to focus on emerging market analysis, we would shift our focus to the enterprise enduser, principally the architect." Thus, in 2006, Jason and Ron reoriented ZapThink so that it became less of a market research and industry analyst firm, concentrating more on best practice advisory and training. They developed the Licensed ZapThink Architect training course that came to be regarded as the best vendorindependent SOA course and associated credential in the world, which led to the Dovel Technologies acquisition of ZapThink in 2011. Now, as the president of the ZapThink division of Dovel, Jason continues to run the LZA course as well as a newer Cloud Computing course.

Jason's trademark adaptability and

willingness to attack the most complex cutting edge technologies shuttled him from mathematics, to physics, to philosophy, to computers, to website building, and then beyond. Yet, when it comes to the longevity of this kind of work, his outlook is realistic. "So much of what I do is ephemeral," he "When I go back through my remarks. professional experiences, I built more than fifty websites between 1995 and 1997, and by 1999 they were all gone. All the work we did lost its value in the space of a few short years. The research we wrote during ZapThink's early years would also go out of date in a matter of months. And today, it's the same thing. Technology changes so fast our challenge is to create the best value we can for our clients in this moment by having our sights set on the horizon to stay aligned with what's next."

In today's fast-paced world, the only way to stay ahead of the curve is to always be learning while constantly deriving new insights from current trends—skills Jason learned at a young age and hopes to pass on to his own children. "My kids are my real legacy," he says proudly. "Both are very smart and computer oriented, which I've been supportive of as they've grown up. I know they'll go on to do great things." When it comes to self-discipline, it's clear that the apples don't fall far from the tree: Jason's 16-year-old daughter is completing independent home schooling in lieu of traditional high school, while his 20-year-old son recently finished basic training for the National Guard.

To other young people making their way into the professional world today, Jason cautions

against typical platitudes. "You may have a certain dream today, but in ten years, it's very likely you'll be doing something completely different—something that may be perfect for you, but that you couldn't have imagined. The world changes fast, and there are too many different routes to limit yourself to the visions you have today. Go with the flow! Be adaptable!" Indeed, as Jason's career demonstrates, in today's marketplace, success comes not so much from careful planning, which is often rendered irrelevant tomorrow, as it does from finding and riding one's own adaptability edge in the tumultuous yet exciting world in which we live.

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

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