

Jake Bittner

The Difference

Today, when Jake Bittner laughs and talks with his daughter, he hears his own father's voice speaking through him. Though he grew up in Cleveland and St. Louis with his mother while his father lived in Detroit, the two spoke all the time and were more like friends than father and son. They took epic road trips together to New Jersey, where they attended reunions at his father's alma mater, Princeton University. "I remember being on campus and realizing that an Ivy League education was attainable," Jake remembers. "It wasn't out of reach."

Meanwhile, Jake's mother, an incredibly hard worker who emphasized the importance of education and follow-through, was a manager in the motorsports department at a large PR firm in St. Louis. She often brought her son along when she traveled across the country on weekends, and thanks to this exposure to different cities and ways of living, the young boy was encouraged to dream even bigger. With airline miles racked up from business travel, she was able to take him on trips to Mexico, Puerto Rico, St. Martin, Hawaii and Spain. "I had seen a lot of the world, and I wanted to see more of it," he recounts. "Most of the kids who graduated from my high school stayed in St. Louis, but I had other aspirations."

Because of these influences during his formidable years, Jake prioritized his studies and was admitted to Yale University, which changed the course of his life, catapulting him into a higher echelon through his college years and inspiring in him the confidence to play at any level. After spending four years working with some of the brightest students in the country, learning both from and with them, Jake had the feeling he could attain anything in life, and now, as the cofounder and CEO of Qlarion, that sense of potential has made all the difference.

Qlarion was launched in 2010 as a spinoff

of Cadence Quest, a data analytics company that focused on the commercial space and retail analytics. It grew to fifty employees before its commercial piece was sold to Accenture in 2010. Jake, along with Adam Roy and Dendy Young, bought the government piece, which had been whittled down to four employees. They rebranded the business as Qlarion and grew it to a team of nearly forty employees, following a growth trajectory between 40 and 50 percent and finishing 2013 at around \$5 million in revenue.



Today, Qlarion helps public sector organizations leverage their data to operate more effectively, applying analytics and data management capabilities to augment the way they seek to achieve their missions. Through the complex world of analytics, the company helps organizations extract intelligence from their data sources. "The intellectual property and solutions we invest in are all about simplification," Jake explains. "We believe that, through simplification, we can proliferate the use of analytics and encourage more people to use data to make better decisions. By changing the way organizations operate and showing them that they can be more data-driven, making decisions based on real-time, historical, and predictive analyses, we believe we can have a major impact on mission achievement."

While roughly two-thirds of projects in the analytics market fail, Qlarion boasts a success rate of a hundred percent—in part because its entire focus is dedicated to analytics, and in part because it approaches such projects from a business perspective. The company understands that, when a business decouples from its technology, these two elements become misaligned, and time and money are misspent. "We've designed an approach and methodology that allows a customer to maintain its focus on the business outcomes it needs from the data," Jake affirms. "The world of

data is vast and full of red herrings, but by focusing on the mission at hand, we give our clients a chance at real success.”

These clients include the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the Department of Energy, Fannie Mae, the U.S. Postal Service, the Department of Defense, the IRS, and the City of Boston. From asset management, to staffing strategies, to predicting future trends, Qlarion is leading the charge in showing organizations that, for many of the questions they face, the solution is in the data. “More and more people are beginning to realize that, to increase efficiency and make smarter operational decisions, one of the best things you can do is invest in technology and analytics,” says Jake. “I’m passionate about this field because of the difference it makes. When I can help someone look at a problem in a different way—a way they’ve never been able to visualize before—and I see the lights go on in their head, that difference is palpable.”

In a way, Jake has been preparing for his role at the helm of Qlarion all his life, beginning from the time he was a young boy observing his father’s entrepreneurial ventures. He was born in Boston, but his family moved to Pittsburg and then Cleveland. His father was the head of marketing for the Cleveland Grand Prix, and when he vacated that position to move to Detroit and put on the Detroit Grand Prix, his mother took on the job. Their marriage dissolved when Jake was six, and when the company in charge of the Cleveland Grand Prix went under shortly thereafter, Jake’s mother found the job in St. Louis, where she was very successful.

Young Jake would travel alone frequently to see his father, and he gained an incredibly comfortable sense of independence. On these trips, he watched as his father launched a community recycling company to address the massive piles of tires that cluttered the city. “Dad had some good ideas, but he was more about shooting for the moon than about building steadily and solidly,” he recalls. “He didn’t make the right financial decisions, building out a big facility without having any customers to use it. In retrospect, I asked myself, what could I learn from his mistakes? Financial soundness became important to me, so I decided I wasn’t going to just run off, start a company, and see what happened. I would prepare myself financially, skill-wise, and knowledge-wise.”

Aside from some babysitting and yard work for neighbors, Jake earned his first paycheck working at a miniature golf course in town. He also worked as a camp counselor, but spent most of his time playing soccer, baseball, and basketball. His best sport, however, was football, and he worked incredibly hard through high school in the hopes of playing in college. As a freshman, he played tight end and was named the most valuable player of the year. As a sophomore, the varsity team needed an offensive guard, so that became his spot.

Jake was a junior in high school when he tore his ACL playing basketball, putting his entire athletic future in jeopardy. “When an orthopedic surgeon told me I would never play football again, I hit the lowest of the low,” he recounts. “I couldn’t go to the next basketball game because I was in surgery, and I couldn’t walk. People were telling me I didn’t have a future. I worked my ass off for so long to play football in college, and it looked as if it was all taken away in a heartbeat.”

Thankfully, Jake sought out a team doctor who took a look at the injury and saw a different future for him—one that involved a full recovery. From that moment on, he hit the gym three times a day for six months of rehabilitation. At one point, his determination even broke a workout machine. “The whole experience taught me to never give up,” he says.

Thanks to his tenacity, he did indeed go on to play football at Yale, where the sport served as a character-building force that still influences his life on a routine basis today in the business world. Though he was a straight-A student in high school, he often had to make value judgments as a college student that taught him how to quickly assess critical items on the table and make a decision. “The truth is, I learned how to prioritize what needs to get done in a certain amount of time, rather than aiming for perfection and taking forever to finish,” he says. “When resources are scarce, you have to be able to allocate them appropriately to get the maximum benefit. If studying for five hours meant I might get injured or let my team down, it often made more sense for me to get a B on a test instead of an A.” The experience of meeting his obligation to his teammates while balancing his personal obligations evolved in him unparalleled discipline, as well as an internal sense of time with which he can pinpoint exactly how long to spend on a given

task.

Jake majored in mechanical engineering and had already secured a post-graduation job at MicroStrategy, when tragedy struck during his senior year of college. His fun-loving, upbeat, optimistic father passed away suddenly from a heart attack, leaving Jake devastated. He focused on getting through graduation and then moved to D.C. in August to start his new job in a new city, with new people and a new life. The fresh start did him good, and as he found himself enjoying the world of technology, he settled into analytics. When he was 24, he moved into a sales position as part of a broad plan to achieve future success. Though he had always hated selling things when he was younger, he had his sights set on one day running his own company, and he knew that mastering sales would be a vital component of that achievement.

The sales job at MicroStrategy was a bit of a stretch for a recent college graduate, but the company decided to take a chance on him. This decision was in part due to the success he had already garnered, underscored by the fact that he had attended Yale, and by his boldness in stepping up and asked for the opportunity. Jake did well in this capacity, and after four years at MicroStrategy, he transitioned over to Informatica, where he worked in sales for another four years.

Though he was making good money, he eventually realized he had learned all he needed to learn in that capacity. It was now time for him to leave the larger corporate climate to experience a smaller company, so he found a position at a startup called Intensity. "It had incredible technology but was poorly run," Jake remembers. "I learned that small companies can drown in opportunity when the market loves what they do. At a small company, you have to be selective with your time and resources in terms of the opportunities you pursue."

From there, Jake went on to a startup group within a company called Business Objects. In that capacity, he was charged with selling a new product to their existing customer base, giving him a taste of entrepreneurship but with a safety net. He learned the value of a disciplined and formalized sales process, which helps to align an entire sales team, and which has been key in Qlarion's success. When Business Objects was acquired by Oracle, Jake felt he had built up enough knowledge and expertise to launch a

business successfully, so he brought the idea to the one person whose opinion could make or break the dream: his wife, Chandra.

Through their marriage, Chandra knew Jake was considering starting his own business, but neither of them had known for sure if he actually would. Jake had watched his father's poorly planned entrepreneurial ventures lead to two divorces, and he was resolved never to put his own family at risk. Chandra, in turn, knew her husband wouldn't take the leap if he wasn't sure he could do it, so when he said he was ready, she gave him her blessing. "Her confidence in me was a big source of support," he remembers. "When you've got a good thing going with a stable paycheck coming in each month, it's hard to pull away to take a risk and a step down in income, but we were ready."

Thus, after mastering sales and working with software companies of all sizes to observe what worked and what didn't, Jake joined forces with two former colleagues to acquire Cadence Quest and create Qlarion. Jake focused on new customer acquisition, seeing the big picture, and guiding the direction of the company. Adam Roy took responsibility for delivering to those customers, and all the company's consultants now report to him. Dendy Young, on the other hand, has a private equity investor company of his own that advises businesses like Qlarion, so his input has proven invaluable through its inception. "We're all about pushing and growing, but he reminds us that we have to be doing certain things today to get us where we want to be tomorrow," Jake explains. "We're all a great team of complementary strengths, and Qlarion is thriving because of it."

In advising young people entering the working world today, like his own half-brothers, Jake emphasizes the value of trying new things. For him, what began as an experiment in analytics just out of college evolved into a successful entrepreneurial venture that is changing the way businesses operate and problem-solve. "College can be like a cocoon, so put yourself in positions that expose you to the world, because you never know what you might find," he says. "It's also important to be able to adapt—a skill that becomes increasingly important in leadership positions." As a leader, Jake assesses the behavior that will be most effective depending on the people involved and the situation at hand. He maintains a set of

core principles and then adapts, depending on what each scenario calls for.

His life mission extends beyond the bounds of the company, as well. A member of MindShare, a forum for CEOs of emerging technology companies, Jake is also passionate about bringing the advantages of data analytics to charitable organizations, hoping to create a consortium of resources to help such organizations operate more effectively. He and Chandra are passionate about local issues, particularly those pertaining to children and hunger. "In life, I employ the same tenet we embrace at Qlarion," he says. "If it makes sense, do it. Chandra and I try to do the right thing for the community, just as the company strives to do the right thing for our customers. It's what the concept of analytics is all about. If we can be a more data-driven society, many problems of scarcity and discord naturally evaporate, and there's a sense of unity in rationale and purpose. That's the difference, and that's what

we're about."

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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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