

# Dick Fordham

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## The Next Opportunity

"I wouldn't change any decision I've made, for the simple reason that all of them have combined to get me where I am now," says Dick Fordham. "And I'd rather be where I am now than anywhere else. I'd rather be me than anybody else."

Who and where the 57-year-old UK native is today is Director of Marketing and Strategy for Recovery Point, the third largest provider of data backup, disaster recovery, and managed hosting services in the United States. This rise from modest means was hardly accidental. Throughout his life, Dick has shown a knack for recognizing, and taking, chances to grow. Instead of letting himself get comfortable in a position, he applied an "I'd like to try that" philosophy throughout his career to always keep the ball rolling and enable success he never imagined growing up along the docks of the River Thames, 12 miles east of central London.

Ending his formal education at age 16 when he went to work in a factory troubleshooting car radios as way to help support his family, Dick would never have predicted that seeking and staying open to new opportunities would eventually land him a range of technical, management and executive positions worldwide in a 30-year career with IBM or put him in the right spot at the right time to accept the unexpected offer that landed him at Recovery Point in 2008.

Though it would eventually prove effective, this philosophy was not fully understood by Dick's ever supportive yet strict father. When he'd ask Dick about what he planned to do with his life, Dick would reply ambiguously, "I'm just going to see what's out there," an answer which failed to satisfy the builder and former soldier. "In his world, I could become a builder, a plumber, an electrician, a train driver, a cop," Dick explains. "But I wasn't any of those things. I was constantly

looking around, feeling that things were great and wondering what I would do next!" Unlike many around him, he didn't look for a job to settle into for the long haul. Instead, every time he landed a new job, he kept looking for something more.

While Dick's father and factory-worker mother didn't fully understand their son's approach to employment, the self-reliance and discipline taught by the strict rules laid down in their home became skills that served Dick well as he began to work and save money. "The routine in the household never deviated," Dick recalls today. "Breakfast was at 5:30, lunch 12:30 and tea 5:30. If you missed them, you didn't eat. If you didn't finish your food, you got it for the next meal. And you kept getting it for the next meal until you finished it."

Dick was the youngest of four brothers, all of whom left school at a young age to begin supporting the family. Half of Dick's modest paycheck from his factory job went to the family's finances. "I don't think we were expecting to contribute quite as much as our mother expected us to contribute, because it was 50 percent of our first week's wage, and 50 percent every week after that!," he recalls. "I think I brought home 9 pounds the first week, and my mother took 5 straight away." All of the brothers were given the same deal, which thoroughly motivated them to save up and leave home. As a result, Dick found himself purchasing his own house at the young age of 19.

After the car radio job, he transitioned through several similar positions before landing a three-year apprenticeship at British Telecom and then serving as a technical officer at an old international exchange in London. Responding to an ad from IBM, he was hired as a typewriter Customer Service Engineer, which meant he was a typewriter repairman.

Just as he had searched around for



opportunities upon leaving school, he continued to look around at IBM. "They were superb to me," Dick remarks. "I kept saying, 'Oh that's interesting! Oh that's interesting!' and they would say, 'Oh, do you want to try it?'" That is how Dick rose through the ranks at IBM, moving from engineering, to sales and then to marketing, and bouncing from the UK to the US, to Paris and then back to the US again.

Success doesn't occur in a vacuum, and Dick is quick to credit his friend and mentor at IBM, Phillip Oliver, for providing guidance and for ultimately leading him toward marketing. "When you get into the world of corporate business, you're often competing with other people for your own position," Dick says. "It's very rare to get someone who helps you develop your own skills, potentially at the expense of their position." Phillip, already a king at IBM but also a king maker, did just that. As Director of Marketing at IBM Global Services EMEA, he sent Dick on his first international assignment and then brought him to Paris to manage marketing for IBM Global Services EMEA.

In his time as a typewriter engineer, Dick had become a team leader, and had hoped to move into management. However, he had trouble passing the company's management aptitude test, part of which involved sitting with a group and attempting to solve a problem in front of prominent executives. "At first I behaved the way I thought they wanted me to behave, as opposed to the way I would normally do it on my own," Dick recalls. This crisis of confidence held him back until Phillip gave him some life-changing advice. "You're trying too hard," he had said. "Just be yourself. Do the right thing and the right things will happen." Following Phillip's advice caused Dick's career to take off in ways he hadn't imagined.

When Dick moved from engineering to sales, he didn't feel a natural affinity for the role, so he began to look around for what he should do next. He enrolled in marketing courses, and, true to form, became so excited as he explored this new field that he felt a need to apply the lessons immediately. "They wanted me to get a degree, but I was so enamored with marketing that after taking the first four or five courses I knew I had to take it and run with it," he says. "So I ventured into the field with this limited amount of knowledge and started doing it." Dick had been

working with IBM's disaster recovery team in the UK and US offices, and before long, the company asked him to move across the Atlantic. With that, he became the Global Marketing Manager in the US in 1997.

In 2000, Dick again took an opportunity, although this time without the result he would have liked. Six months into his position in Paris running IBM Global Services Marketing for Europe, he spoke with astonishing candor in his first review, telling a superior "I think we should close the place down—not much gets done apart from meetings, PowerPoint presentations, and lots of discussion." Whether or not that suggestion helped produce this result, the office was indeed closed down a mere 18 months later, sending Dick back to the US, where he worked happily for IBM for six more years.

Then something unexpected happened. After nearly 30 years with the same company, Dick received another opportunity he couldn't bear to turn down from a business called Recovery Point.

Recovery Point had been founded by Marc Langer, who for the previous 17 years had successfully run its sister company, First Federal Corporation. Founded in 1982, First Federal provides secure off-storage of backup tapes for data systems. As Dick explains, companies back up their critical data to tapes, which are then taken by truck to an off-site storage location. Tapes are rotated in and out of storage and used to restore data — or the entire business — in the event of a system failure or disaster. First Federal had been a successful player in the storage field, but Marc wanted to compete at a higher level: providing a wider range of data backup, disaster recovery and business continuity services. Companies such as IBM, SunGard and HP were already well established in the field, but Marc wanted to take on that business as well.

Marc founded Recovery Point in 1999 to do just that, and the enterprise quickly grew. "First it was a series of additional workplaces for customers to go if they were displaced," Dick explains. "Then it evolved to provide mainframe systems and any other IT equipment a company might need to continue their business in the event of some kind of disaster." Today, Recovery Point is the third largest disaster recovery company vendor in the United States. But while the company continues to grow, it does not let growth interfere with the ability of any customer to receive its

contracted services. “We’re very careful to be under-subscribed,” says Dick, “because if you have a disaster that affects a regional area, you want to be sure you can serve all your customers. That’s why we’re very careful to be subscribed to the point where we can support all our customers if we need to.”

Dick’s involvement with Recovery Point was almost fateful. At IBM, he had been working with a small company where a man named Martin Husslage was the development manager. Shopping around at other companies, Martin had met Marc and was impressed with the business he’d built. He complimented the facilities and asked Marc what his next step would be. Marc responded that he needed marketing, and Martin immediately thought of Dick. “It just so happened that I had had an interesting discussion with my management team at IBM about how I wasn’t happy with what was going on in a particular acquisition,” Dick recalls. “The very next day, the phone rang. It was Martin calling to ask if I was interested in a possible job opportunity he had found for me. I was just frustrated enough at the time that I said, ‘You know what? I might be.’ It was kind of fate that it worked out the way it did.”

Dick hadn’t planned to leave IBM. He was comfortable where he was and had almost three decades under his belt. Nonetheless, he drove from New York to Maryland to see Marc’s facilities and was blown away. “I saw what he’d done and where his ambition and drive were leading him, and I told him to make me an offer,” says Dick. “He did, and I took the job on the spot. I actually resigned from IBM that day, two months shy of my 30 year mark.”

Apart from the tremendous potential he saw in Recovery Point, Dick’s decision to move was motivated by two other main factors. The first was his new family. He had married his new wife, Roberta, only a few months earlier and, at age 53, had become step-father to two college-age children and another son in the US military. That was in addition to his two UK-based daughters and four grandchildren. “I looked at where we wanted to be and what it would cost, and decided I needed the opportunity to earn more money,” he says. The second, equally important factor, was the freedom the position entailed. “Marc gave me a blank sheet of paper and said, ‘We have no marketing, no identity, no corporate mission. Go build it and take us to market.’ If you’re a

marketing guy, those words are a dream come true.” Once again, although he knew it would be a challenge like none he’d faced before, Dick leapt at the opportunity.

Today Dick isn’t just responsible for the marketing team at Recovery Point—he *is* the marketing team at Recovery Point. “I made a conscious decision not to hire internally,” he explains. “I found some extremely talented contractors for design, web, photography, and technical writing. With this strategy, I can turn things on and off as I need to. Sometimes I do run into situations where I need something and it’s not there because those contractors are busy doing other things, but I’ve learned so much in the last four years that I can fill many gaps myself. I now know how to build a website and optimize search engines. I know how to write press releases and build a social media marketing presence. I even know how to take good photographs. So even at my age, with all the things I’ve done, I’m learning new things as well, which is really kind of cool.”

Little surprise then, that in advising young people entering the business world today, Dick stresses the importance of recognizing opportunities when they arise. “Don’t be confused between a distraction and an opportunity,” he urges. “Don’t be afraid to try anything and everything. Even if your peers think it’s a bad idea or your parents don’t immediately see the value in something, don’t be afraid to try, because you never know where it’ll go.” Additionally, and perhaps of particular interest to a generation graduating with expensive college degrees to find themselves unemployed, Dick suggests learning a trade. “Why not?” he asks. “Learn a trade and use that to fall back on if times get rough. It’s good to have something practical under your belt.”

As Dick looks back on his career, he acknowledges that he wasn’t exactly “efficient” in his rise to the top. “It wasn’t like I had a plan to go from here to here in six months. I just had a sense that things get in the way of those kinds of plans,” he says. “Where there are no limits, one’s potential is limitless. New challenges, people, and interests come along. For me, it was much better not to have a plan—to remain flexible enough that, when that next opportunity came along, I was ready to spring.” That flexibility and willingness to put himself out there and try is what allowed Dick Fordham to find success by seizing one opportunity, and then the next, and then the next,

and then the next. And certainly, it will be what allows him to seize the next one waiting just around the corner, whatever it may be.

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*About Gordon J. Bernhardt*  
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*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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

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