

Should I Jump Back into a Career That I Took a Break From?

Shôn Ellerton, January 11, 2020

Having spent nearly two years away from telcos, an industry I spent over twenty years doing. Why do I feel the urge to go back into it again?



Have you ever worked in a career that you've been doing for years and years and tried very hard to get out of it for a much-needed change? And when the opportunity arises, you *do* manage to do something different only then to find later, that you might re-consider the old career again?

I have and I've been doing a bit of a re-think. In my case, it is the world of mobile wireless telecommunications; in short, I'll refer to it as simply, telcos.

To give you my story. Nearly two years ago back in March 2018, I left the world of telcos through redundancy when the project I was working on came to an end. That project started five years earlier during 2013, to roll out Optus 4G wireless sites nationally in Australia through a major turnkey contractor.

At the start of the project, there was all the thrill of starting a new major project. I was part of the PMO office, and having had a great deal of experience in the mobile wireless SAED (Site Acquisition Environment Design) space combined with my skills as a database modeller, I worked with the team to formulate a solution to translate the business processes into a system everyone could use to report on the project. For much of the start of the project, I burned the candle at both ends. I was often the first one in the office and nearly the last one out. I was away from home for the best part of six months and the company I worked for put me up in a nearby apartment in Sydney. Apart from getting tired and being away from the family, it wasn't too bad of an arrangement and I knew it

that it would only be temporary. Once the initial stages of the project gained traction, I was permitted to work from the Adelaide office but requested that I travel on demand if needed.

A year into the project, corporate politics got decisively more invasive and a slew of managers came in the door only to walk out again when the going got tough. ‘Change pundits’ in the IT space kept muddying the waters making traction of any system to be developed an impossible task. I threw together a crude but workable system which serviced nearly 500 employees much to the chagrin of the those positioned at the top of IT management. They had other designs up their sleeves. We had a functional, inexpensive, albeit inelegant system which serviced the project. Those in the IT corporate ‘ivory towers’ wanted to create the mother of all systems; a system able to service any project in the business. It was atrociously expensive. It was based using a third-party product called [ServiceNow](#). The team’s management simply had absolutely no direction where they were going. They were proficiently good, however, at bringing new people on a whim and then sacking them at a drop of a hat; the constantly spinning revolving door. Lots of talented people coming in and out with a succession of valuable IP being lost and vast amounts of resources in re-training new personnel. Not long ago, I spoke to an ex-colleague still involved with building this new supersystem and he said that, after many years of development, only a handful of pilot testers were using it on a minor telcos project based in New Zealand. Overall costs, he pointed out, inflated to not much less than \$100M, more than 50-fold more than was spent on the ‘inelegant’ system we used successfully on the Optus project. That’s an extraordinarily high amount.

During the next couple of years, I was becoming thoroughly disenfranchised with the whole atmosphere of working on that project. I was, for want of a better expression, the ‘piggy in the middle’. I was often working in isolation, not being really part of the rollout team but not part of the IT team either. It was a very lonely existence. Apart from the first and last managers I had during my tenure there, all others were, to say the least, ‘challenging’ to work with.

It was becoming clear that the corporate IT department considered me a roadblock in rolling out their new system, which, incidentally, would have never serviced the project because there was nothing to show for it. Nobody within the projects teams knew what the new system was. I put up my hand one

year into their new project to offer what we can do using the Optus project we were working on as a testbed for their new system.

Absolute silence.

The same applied to other representatives on other live projects within the company. We were all ignored. They were not interested, which, arguably, might have led to one of the reasons why the new system failed.

Towards the end of the project, they really wanted me out of the frame and made every effort to do so. I was flown out to Melbourne, told to 'hand over all the keys' (meaning my knowledge), with a view to ridding me once and for all. Doing my whole tenure at that company, I had not felt appreciated by senior management for my efforts, although, those at the 'coalface'; however, certainly did at least. My very supportive manager during this time tried his best to make the situation amenable but he was, himself, eventually shoved aside and eventually quit joining another outfit which has turned out to have given him a fresh breath of air.

Around during that time up to the point of being made redundant and beyond, I suffered from severe depression and anxiety. I still experience moments to this very day but keeping busy, whether it's working, writing or whatever, helps. Thankfully, there were very caring individuals who helped me during this period including some of my colleagues and my manager. This is the first time I've had the courage to openly declare this and don't wish to elaborate more on it at this stage, but after the events which I experienced, telcos left a rather rotten taste in my mouth.

I had some time off to recuperate and started contracting in the data management industry within the health, government and most recently, the judicial industries. I've worked with likeminded individuals in the data industry which gave me so much more knowledge than I could possibly get whilst working on the Optus project. During the Optus project, I was always the 'expert' others would come running to. I had no technical mentors apart from a great ex-colleague and friend of mine who still works in the Melbourne office, a fabulous boss with a humble and modest ego who loved to deep-dive into business intelligence reporting when he's not surfing, and of course, the Internet.

Now the other day, I got to chatting with another ex-colleague who still works in the telco industry but not within the build and delivery sector like the last telco company I was working for. The small team he works in, from what I gathered during our conversation, addresses strategies and conducts problem-solving for telco vendors and contractors. He seemed to be enjoying it as well recounting the dark days we both worked together a few years ago.

After the discussion, I reflected upon this. The time I worked in T-Mobile many years ago in the UK innovating new solutions for microcells, Wi-Fi municipal mesh zones, and 3G upgrade strategies seems a century ago and then spending the next several years in hardcore SAED and build rollout working amongst legions of Excel spreadsheet-pushers adhering to tighter and tighter targets with little or no room for innovation.

Frankly, I got very bored with telcos at that point but had forgotten about all the exciting and innovative work I was involved in outside the day-to-day project management of pushing out cell sites. Two years have now elapsed and technology advances, but do I have the knowledge and experience to get back into the 'space'? Maybe I do, maybe I don't. It really doesn't matter as long as your heart's in it and you're willing to learn. The basic principles of good teamwork, innovation, client relations and job satisfaction haven't changed, and this applies to all industries.

Perhaps the two-year hiatus out of telcos isn't a bad thing at all.

Maybe it's time to have a re-think.