



## So, Do You Feel Lucky, Punk?

*The start of my career at NASA was largely based on serendipity*

AS A GRADUATE STUDENT AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, one afternoon I decided to ask my advisor, Warner Burke, for help in finding an internship. I was aware of the connections Warner had with British Airways and Citibank, and I was hoping he could steer me towards one of them. As it turned out, he mentioned that NASA Headquarters was looking for a COOP student to work on a joint research project. Before I knew it, I was in Washington, D.C., working at NASA. All this without career planning, a resume, or an interview.

While at Headquarters, I was invited to the 1983 training officers' conference. I drove there with the Goddard Training Officer, and at the end of the three-hour ride, he indicated an interest in bringing me to Goddard should anything open up. Two years later I got a call and started working at Goddard in January of 1986. Once again, I wasn't sure how events played out, but I knew that luck and meeting the right people at the right time provided a major assist.

Several years later, opportunity knocked again when I was asked to apply for an agency position as assistant to the head of the Program Project Management Initiative (precursor to NASA APPL). The position represented a significant departure from my previous work, and it took me some time to decide to apply. Eventually, I decided that I wanted the job.

Once again, fate appeared to be on my side: I was selected for the job.

In all of these critical career events, the role of people, timing, circumstance, and serendipity superceded more formal career planning and development. People have always been there for me at the right time. I am, therefore, a big proponent of the power of the network.

So does it all come down to dumb luck, or blind fate?

It is simple to ascribe meeting the right people at the right time to luck. In each of the previous situations, however, I was prepared to take advantage of the opportunity presented to me.

In every situation I encountered, my academic background was an advantage. In addition, I have been fortunate that my work experiences have been both visible and valued. When visibility and value intersect, it creates opportunity and a halo effect.

As I ponder the role of luck in my professional progression, I am reminded of the line from *Dirty Harry*, when Clint Eastwood says, "You've got to ask yourself one question...Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya punk?" With twenty years of work to reflect on, I guess I do feel lucky.

But another quote comes to mind, as well—this one from the world of baseball. Branch Rickey once said, "Luck is the residue of design." The way I see it, luck is only as good as the preparation that goes into it. •

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