



TECH STAR



Joe Colopy: Finding Success on the Unbeaten Path

[By Akbar Ali]

As founder and CEO of Durham-based Bronto Software, Inc., Joe Colopy is a double threat: technology expert and innovative marketing guru. As the global marketplace moves toward increasingly digital modes of communication, Joe and Bronto are leading the way in email marketing software which connects retailers and companies with customers and clients. Whether it's e-marketing or data storage, Joe and his cohorts at Bronto are constantly developing, writing, and refining the most cutting-edge technology available.

Joe traces his passion for innovation back to his childhood, when technology and business were twin interests of his. "Becoming a technology CEO was a natural combination," he said. His initial foray into programming computers started at the age of 11, when he began writing games and sending them to magazines. Concurrently, he maintained an online bulletin board system or BBS (what we now call "websites"), where he connected to other computers across the nation with a modem, at a time when few were even aware such a concept.

"This was back in the early 80s, so it was fairly early on for the online world," he recalled.

Aside from an abiding interest in computer technology, Joe also displayed an innately entrepreneurial spirit, always having a job on the side or a new idea which he hoped would be a feasible money-maker. Just what were these ideas in young Joe's head? They ranged from the traditional to the outlandish, among them taking up a newspaper route, selling Christmas trees, and running a disco for his neighbors.

An accomplished student, he spent his undergraduate years at Harvard. He studied computer science with an emphasis in economics, which, he observed, "played well to my interest in technology and business." He participated in a number of activities while at school, but, like most

college students, his primary non-academic commitment was working to pay for his college expenses. His two main jobs were, naturally, technology-oriented: developing a front-end for a management software program and developing interactive software for the Harvard Business School.

Joe entered a decidedly different line of work after graduating: the Peace Corps. For two years he worked as a teacher in Africa's

Seychelles Islands. After completing his commitment he adventured through Africa for several months, eventually deciding he would continue to teach, this time at a school in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

"These were great experiences and provided incredible building blocks for starting and leading a company later in life," he said.

Upon returning back to the states he decided to move to Durham, North Carolina. The presiding factor in making this decision was the favorable combination of technology companies, graduate schools, and quality of life that Durham promised. It also didn't hurt that the climate there was quite like the equatorial conditions he had lived with while in the Peace Corps.

He chose to return to school to bolster his credentials, enrolling in the M.B.A. program at the University of North Carolina. He spent one summer during his graduate study fulfilling an internship with Dell Computers in Austin, Texas. At the time (the late 90s), Dell was enjoying an unprecedented run as one of the decade's top performing stocks. Unfortunately, this meant little to Joe, who found the environment stifling and fundamentally counter to his personal ambitions.

"It confirmed my suspicions that I had little interest in climbing up the ladder of a larger company and that I much preferred the

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. Most of my time outside of work is spent with my family. Recently we went fishing and had an adventure trying to catch and cook our small catch. Typically, we like to spend time hiking or camping. Also, I try to squeeze in running or working out when I can.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. I was last listening to a *Red Hot Chili Peppers* album. Typically, I am listening to Bob Marley, Jimmy Buffett or Van Halen.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. Last night I read a *National Geographic* that a neighbor gave me. I don't have any paid magazine subscriptions, but my wife and I always seem to receive [the latest] alumni magazines.



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online and software world versus that of hardware," he recalled.

Finding his way from graduate school and into a position in the technology industry that he actually wanted proved to be an elaborate undertaking for Joe, who was more than up to the challenge.

"In the final year of business school, I passed up my offer at Dell and opted to scour for a great startup experience," he said. "I learned about Red Hat Software, a still scrappy private company with a strong foothold in the Linux and Open Source space. It was the late 90s, and Linux was not widely known. So, I crafted a plan to meet [Red Hat's] CEO using an interesting tactic that included me FedEx-ing him a video of why I wanted to work at his company. The tape also contained a blooper reel that became a fairly big hit. I did get that job, and started at Red Hat before I graduated from business school. I started in marketing and focused first on channel programs and then on the online side, my true passion. A few months after I joined, Red Hat went public with a very big IPO in the height of the dot-com boom."

By the middle of 2000, Joe made the critical decision to branch off on his own and start his own company, which would later become Bronto Software. Despite its humble beginnings (Bronto was launched, like so many start-ups, out of Joe's bedroom), it has grown into a unique industry leader. His business partner Chaz Felix joined Bronto a year and half later, which soon led to the incorporation of the business. Since that time, Bronto has grown rapidly to accommodate over 700 customers and to reach annual revenues of almost \$3 million.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. Right now I am addicted to *Lost* and sadly find myself perusing the *Lost* fan boards to feed my addiction. I recently finished watching all seven seasons of *West Wing* and thoroughly enjoyed them.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. I do not have one role model — but respect aspects of many different people. I always try to follow people who deviate from the herd and try to be their own person.

Q. What makes you laugh?

A. Conversations with my 2-year old daughter are hilarious. What comes out of her mouth is fascinating and always makes me laugh. She enjoys hearing herself talk, so there's always a continuous play-by-play of what she's doing (or should not be doing!)

Despite his youth, Joe has amassed a wealth of experiences over the years, gleaning some important lessons from both past successes and difficulties, particularly his time with the Peace Corps and at Red Hat.

"My time teaching in the Peace Corps was extremely valuable. The experience honed my communication skills and taught me how to operate effectively in a completely foreign and unusual environment -- handy skills when launching a startup," he revealed.

He also added: "My stint at Red Hat was also useful. Red Hat was a high-flying startup that became an established company in a very short period of time. It was here that I learned how software companies are run

and managed. It gave me some great ideas of what to do and what not to do when growing Bronto Software."

Like many other successful industry pros who truly enjoy their life's work, Joe credits listening to his instincts and opting for the "road less traveled" as the best guarantor for success.

"Follow your own internal compass because ultimately you will only be successful if you are happy with what you are doing," Joe said. "When I graduated from business school, there was a massive herd mentality to run toward high-paying investment banking, management consulting, or brand management jobs. I opted to pursue a technology startup and to forgo a significant starting salary at other companies, but I ended up with an invaluable experience and found myself positioned much better for future endeavors like starting a company."

"I faced the same challenge when graduating from college. My job prospects were rich as a computer science graduate from a reputable school. I opted to join the Peace Corps. Although my salary was a fraction of my alternative opportunities, the value of experience was many fold more."

Of course, for Joe, his experience has translated what were once only dreams into *real* success.

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