



TECH STAR



Gordon Jackson: Virtualization Evangelist Extraordinaire

[By Akbar Ali]

With more than a decade of experience in the technology field as a systems engineer and solutions architect, Gordon Jackson now works under one of the industry's most uniquely specialized professional titles: virtualization evangelist. With everything from communications and education to shopping and entertainment going virtual, Jackson is taking charge of the way of the future in his position at DataSynapse, an application virtualization software provider, and converting skeptics and naysayers into disciples of application virtualization. His success in communicating the details and benefits of virtualization has garnered him a reputation as one of the field's topmost experts, earning him various speaking engagements at which he spreads the gospel behind his vision of products and solutions.

Jackson's pursuit of technology as a career was a natural extension of his lifelong interest in the mechanical and technical aspects of how things worked. Popular culture, of course, helped propel his imagination into what was possible for the future.

"As a kid growing up in the 70s, computers were these fantastic machines that could do, seemingly, anything. At that time they were mysterious boxes that existed only in the largest companies or in the government and were under the command of the brightest scientists. From watching the Apollo and Skylab missions on TV and movies like *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Colossus: The Forbin Project*, I had a sense very early on that I wanted to be scientist with access to these powerful machines."

Like many techies, Jackson spent much of his formative years trying to unlock the secrets behind object functionality, an endeavor which pushed him to develop his own early solutions in the coming era of digital media.

"I would hang out, like most teenagers, at the local mall, but my haunt was the Radio Shack, where I would spend hours fooling around with the floor model of the new TRS-80 personal computer. I wanted to understand as much as I could about that machine, so I started to read and learn about the Basic programming language. In

high school we actually had a computer lab equipped with a DEC PDP-11 and several

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. I love to cycle and try to get in as many miles as possible when the weather permits. I enjoy the sport of hockey: watching professionally, watching my sons play, and occasionally getting on the ice myself (although I am a bit of a hack!). I am also a big fan of the first-person-shooter — Halo and Quake being favorites — although I am growing less and less thrilled with my 10-year-old handing me my sorry carcass game after game. I guess I'm just from a different, slower, Pong generation.

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

A. CD player? Where have you guys been? How about "what's on your shuffle?" These days I am listening to The Beastie Boys' *The Mix Up*— wonderful instrumental album; Lilly Allen, Feist, the White Stripes, and the Killers are all in there too.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. *Wired*. Or maybe it was *Linux Journal*...

DECwriter terminals. A one-semester course in Basic programming was offered and I ate that up! My final project was a bit ambitious— I wrote a program that would allow the user to enter some words, like a name or slogan, and it would print it out in giant block letters. I got an A, and I'd still have the program today if only we had something a bit more durable than paper-tape on which to store code!"

Jackson attended Lowell University in Massachusetts, where he studied electrical engineering. His passion was computers, though given the nascent nature of the technology, computer science had yet to fully develop as an area of academic study. And so, he settled for the next best thing. This, however, was just the beginning of the challenges to come.

"Ironically, although I had an aptitude for logic and programming, I did not have the patience for all of the other electrical engineering-related courses (or maybe at 18 I just wasn't ready for college), and I failed out my first year! It wasn't until several years later, and [after] a considerable amount of life experience (poverty is a great motivator in your early 20s), that I ended up at UMass Boston in a real computer science program. Finally, I was right where I belonged."

The last two years of Jackson's undergraduate career were spent working on a number of projects and professional



TECH STAR

assignments dealing with Lisp, a collection of computer programming languages which proved nearly incomprehensible for Jackson.

“When I was first exposed to that language, it kicked my butt! I could not make heads or tails of it — no control statements, recursion, and all these parentheses! I was not doing well in the class at all, and then one night, after days of trying to get a program running, I had what can only be called an epiphany. The fog cleared, the veil was lifted, and all of a sudden I saw things in way that I had failed to up to that point. From that moment on my programs went from pages to a page or two at most, and I became convinced of two things: if God were a software engineer, she wrote in Lisp; and that’s what I was going to do for the rest of my life!

“Until, that is, I actually tried to find a job writing Lisp! There just wasn’t a huge need for Lisp developers, and instead I ended up in the software support organization for a company called Object Design. We had the most advanced object database on the market, and I spent a lot of my time doing core-dump analysis and source code debugging for customers. The product, while powerful, was also very challenging to developers — you really had to know what you were doing. My two years of supporting customers and seeing the good and bad things that developers can do with software taught me a great deal about software in general, and development in particular.”

From there, professional opportunities for Jackson appeared in abundance as the industry grew at an exponential rate and demand for tech experts skyrocketed. What he found along the way, however, was that he had a real knack for communicating with others and preferred to deal with groups rather than work in isolation.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. Sci-Fi Network’s *Battlestar Galactica*. Hands down the best TV going.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. Captain Kirk!

Q. What makes you laugh?

A. My five-year-old son Cooper — he is without a doubt the source of some of the best humor I’ve had in years.

“From Object Design I went on to Sun Microsystems and worked as a developer in the Java Software division. This was the late 90s and Java was cool, the bubble was big (still!), [and] so I left after a couple of years to do contract Java development. Then one day in December of ’99 I got a call from a former colleague at Object Design about an opportunity with a startup. The position was that of Systems Engineer, and I’d be working with him (he was a sales rep) out of their Chicago office. The position intrigued me because I still got to remain close to the technology, but I also got to speak to folks about the technology (oh yeah, and if we did well, there were bonuses as well).

“As much as I had enjoyed writing the code before this, I found that I equally (if not more) enjoyed talking to people about the value of the technology, why they did (or didn’t) need it, what they were doing today, and how it would change for them tomorrow through the use of new, or different, technologies. I still got to use, and occasionally implement, the software, but I was now hooked on understanding the broader impact that software technology has on the enterprise, and talking to people about it. All of my

experiences — support, development, and systems engineering — have combined, one upon the next, and led me to my current position as Virtualization Evangelist at DataSynapse.”

Looking back, Jackson believes that the most memorable accomplishment of his career was the difficult (but ultimately rewarding) phase he endured working with Lisp: “The inherent problem that I had was that I had conditioned myself to think in one way, in this case, procedurally. Until I started, or learned, to think differently, I was stuck.”

His success as both an engineer/architect and speaker can be credited not only to his innate capabilities, but to a series of mentors who guided him as an undergraduate through both breakthroughs and setbacks.

“This is a great opportunity to publicly acknowledge and thank Dr. Robert Morris, Dr. Ethan Bolker, and Dr. Richard Eckhouse — all mentors and educators in the Department of Computer Science, UMass Boston. Bob Morris taught me to think and to see the possibilities that lie just beyond grasp, and then to grasp them! Ethan Bolker taught me to find the joy in whatever I choose to do and then to go ahead and enjoy it. Dick Eckhouse taught me that the answer to most, if not all, questions is, ‘It depends.’ Again, think about the question or the problem at hand, consider it in different contexts, and always remember that your answer will always depend on more than just the question or problem itself.”

And Jackson’s advice to the next generation of technology experts? Be as thoughtful as possible in order to produce the largest number of possible solutions.

“I’ll use an oft-quoted phrase here: ‘Think outside the box!’ Or, more generally, ‘Think!’



TECH STAR

Don't limit yourself in the ways that you approach a problem — open yourself to myriad possibilities, regardless of how outré

they may be. Somewhere between your problem and the wackiest possible solution lies an answer. Find it. Do not accept

complacency, and always take on the hardest problems.”

EmploymentCrossing is the largest collection of active jobs in the world.

We continuously monitor the hiring needs of more than 250,000 employers, including virtually every corporation and organization in the United States. We do not charge employers to post their jobs and we aggressively contact and investigate thousands of employers each day to learn of new positions. No one works harder than EmploymentCrossing.

Let EmploymentCrossing go to work for you.