10 things you gotta have to succeed in IT

By Jack Wallen

I recently wrote a string of articles discussing various reasons to leave IT -- and various alternative careers for dissatisfied IT workers. I received an amazing amount of feedback from readers who have always wanted to express similar sentiments. But that leaves out a huge swath of people: those who desperately want a career in IT, as well as those who are caught somewhere in Limbo, trying to answer questions regarding their ability to remain in their chosen field.

So I thought I would go about this topic from another angle to help those people decide whether they're made up of the stuff necessary for a career in IT. I'm fairly confident everyone agrees it's a tough field. What everyone may not agree on is what it takes to be a successful IT worker. Let's see if this list of 10 things fits your qualifications.

1: Thick skin

Let's face it. Workers in the IT industry get hit hard, from every direction. If you're not getting your chops busted by someone insisting you get a job done yesterday, you're getting torn apart because the client's QuickBooks data file can't be recovered. It doesn't seem to matter how much skill you have. If you can't take the biting comments and accusations of clients, you won't make it. Thick skin also helps you get through those periods when you, or your boss, doubts those skills you have. You don't want to have to leave at the end of the day thinking you have failed at every job you've done, just because someone had it in for you that day.

2: Persistence

The IT industry is an ever-changing landscape, and every day a new problem makes itself known. In some cases, those problems don't ever seem to want to go away. Without the ability to grapple with an issue for extended periods of time, you might find this industry more of a challenge than you care to take on. Viruses will always be an issue. Updates that tank systems will happen with more consistency than you want to deal with. End users will never really understand how computers work. If you don't have the persistent, stubborn nature necessary to meet these challenges, get out now or you will be beat down daily.

3: Youth

Although I like to think IT is a field not affected by age discrimination, it really is best suited for the younger professionals. There are numerous reasons for this. First, there are the hours. IT often requires far more hours than the usual 9-t0-5 job. When a company goes down, the administrator must respond -- and this could easily mean any time of day, night, or week. Those hours add up and (generally speaking) only the younger workers can keep those types of hours up week after week. Add to that the energy required to keep systems and networks up, and it should be obvious the best IT workers tend to fall into that 25 to 45 age range. The good news? Even if you start at the age of 25, there's a 20-year career waiting for you.

4: Patience

Users and clients are endlessly frustrating. If you have little or no patience, those people will quickly drive you out of the field. And if they don't completely drive you away, they will at least drive away your joy for the human race. Without patience, you won't stand a chance in the IT field. But it's not only because of the people. Systems

will test your patience as well. We've all seen the video of the IT admin going ballistic on a PC. It happens. A persistent problem arises and it makes you want to ram your fist down the throat of the PC you're working on. With enough patience, you will save both your knuckles and your sanity.

5: Skills

This one should go without saying -- but I must mention it. Too many times, you see people hop into the field because they managed to get through the MSCE training. But those certified workers quickly realize their classes only prepared them how to walk through a GUI. In the real world, problems arise that require numerous skills to resolve. The skills necessary to work in the IT field don't end with the ability to properly configure a domain or Exchange server, they tend to be all inclusive. You never know what you're going to be required to do on a given day. Think about it this way. When you are seen as an IT administrator, you are not only a specialist in DB administration, you are also a walking help desk who will be asked any and all questions related to work and home computers. And if you don't have the answers for the right person (at the right time), you might find yourself at the back of the line watching someone else with the answers.

6: The ability to improvise

I mean this on many levels. Not only do you need to know how to improvise a conversation. Admit it -- there will be times when you'll have to convince someone that you know exactly what you are doing, even when you don't. But you will also run into situations where you have to improvise a solution. I have witnessed (and experienced) situations where the prescribed solution simply did not work. When that happens, the only way out is to come up with a solution on your own.

7: A good sense of PR

If you're a consultant, you have to be your own marketing firm. Most solo consultants do not have the budget to hire out their PR work, so they wind up doing it all on their own. This means social networking, building a Web site, writing and submitting advertisements, old-school networking, and much more. If you can't do this, your business will flounder. When you go into business for yourself, you must know the best routes for marketing in your area. Whether this is TV, radio, social networks, or flyers, you have to have the motivation and skills to handle that aspect of the business. Although word of mouth is the best PR you can get, it still has to begin somewhere.

8: Connections

This might seem a bit strange, but as a member of the IT field (especially if you're a solo consultant), you have to have connections in many related and nonrelated industries. For example, you will have customers who need rooms cabled, so you might need someone who can do drywall finishing. You might need to have an electrician in your back pocket. If you don't have specific skills, you need to know those in the industry who do. The last thing you want to tell a client is that you *can't* do something. Instead, you can tell them you will get it done and then subcontract that job. So long as the job gets done and the customer is happy, you will still look good. But if you can't job something out, and you have to tell the client *no*, the possibility of that client returning to you grows slimmer and slimmer.

9: Desire to learn

As I mentioned earlier, IT is an ever-changing industry. The minute a technology is released, it is out of date. So anyone wanting to tackle a career in IT must have a strong desire to learn. You will be challenged on a daily basis to learn something new. If you don't like learning (be it on your own, with another person, or in a classroom), you should forget about IT. Without the desire to learn, you will quickly fall behind the competition. And believe me, it's a competitive world out there, especially so with the economy still attempting to recover.

10: Passion

Passion for IT is an intrinsic need for every IT worker. If you don't love technology and solving problems, IT is not the right field for you. That passion is the intangible thing that will often get you through the day when everything else on this list fails. And a strong passion for IT will also drive most of the other points here far beyond what shear intelligence and business savvy can manage. After years of working in the field, passion will also help you get up every morning excited for the workday ahead. Without passion, the IT field can quickly become an empty, soulless place.

When it's right

I've been pretty hard on the IT industry over the past few months. But ultimately, it is an exciting field to work in. Where else can you play with technology all day, solve problems, and make sure businesses continue to exchange product for currency on a daily basis? But just because you know how to resolve Problem A with Solution X doesn't mean you are suited for the IT industry. It requires much more than what your local computer science program will teach you. On top of all those Windows, Linux, and Mac skills, you need life, business, and marketing skills (with the added benefit of youth). With all those qualities intact, you are sure to enjoy a long, successful career in the IT field.

Additional reading

- [10 reasons for quitting IT](#)
- [10 alternative careers for burned-out IT workers](#)
- [10 dirty little secrets you should know about working in IT](#)
- [Which of These IT Job Roles Is Right (or Wrong) for You?](#)
- [Ways IT consultants can combat burnout](#)