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Canada's Association of Information Technology (IT) Professionals

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Microsoft Canada**Career Tips/Lessons, from Michael Vax: Industry Leading Vice-President of Product Development at Blackboard**

This is the next interview in the [continuing series](#) of Computing Canada's (CC) [Blogged Down](#) (BD) feature which is highlighted here in the [Canadian IT Managers \(CIM\) forum](#).

This week we talk with industry leading development authority, Michael Vax, Vice-President of Product Development at Blackboard. In the first blog, we began the interview and profiled Michael's extensive background in development and leadership.

Today I put these questions to Michael:

Stephen: Briefly profile your past senior positions. Imagine you are providing guidance to IT managers who want to grow their career. Then describe your biggest career challenges and how you overcame them.

Michael) My first senior position was with Infonet Software Solutions. In 1997 I was hired as a project manager to work on an enterprise email application. A couple of months after I joined, the company started a new project - web-based email. This was very early in the Internet boom even before Hotmail was released. I saw this as an exciting new opportunity and volunteered to lead this project. With time the online email application was transferred to an online office suite for small businesses and became the lead product for the company. I was wearing multiple hats working as an architect and development lead and was promoted first to the development manager, then to CTO.

As the Internet boom ran out of steam I moved to WebCT first as Senior Director of Product Development, then as VP. Here the main challenge was to learn how to manage multiple projects across two locations and a much bigger team. At that time, (5 years ago), the company had just gone through the first merger; there was a lot of uncertainty and people felt insecure. We have developers in both offices, QA in Vancouver, a UI group in Boston, technical writers in Vancouver, product managers and architects scattered across both offices. My boss is located in Boston and I have people reporting to me in both locations.

My first goal was to make the two offices work well together, build trust and cooperation. We accomplished this by introducing a collaborative process, creating IT infrastructure that supports cross-office development, and making good use of teleconferencing, videoconferencing, and Net meeting. I made sure that people had an opportunity to visit the other office and meet at least once, face to face. We encouraged direct contacts between employees, made people from both offices work on the same projects, synchronized parties and celebrations. There was a lot of travel at the beginning but as we learned how to work together the need to travel reduced. We now do work as one efficient virtual team.

The best advice I can give to people who want to advance their career is to keep their eyes open for new opportunities. If you can recognize an opportunity, are ready to take an initiative and go the extra mile to prove yourself, success will come. Even if there is nothing new and exciting available right now, make sure to tell your manager what you are looking for. When something comes along they will know who to try.

Look for more of Michael's insights in this blog series. In the next blog, Michael will provide his prediction of the top future trend, its implications and business opportunities plus his top five recommended resources.

I also encourage you to share your thoughts here on these interviews or send me an e-mail at sibaraki@cips.ca.

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Thank you,
Stephen Ibaraki, FCIPS, I.S.P.

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