

My Life in the Search Engine

by Netizen X

We all came to the Internet because it was cool. Like moths to a bug lamp we swarmed around the exciting new technology, which allowed any average schmuck to get up and say his thing online. All you had to learn was some basic HTML and get a few pictures up there and then you could rant about anything you wanted to go off on. It was a level playing field and an open forum.

I moved to San Francisco to find out what multimedia was and get into it. Lots of fresh young college grads like me were learning some software and making a living on the Internet. It was emergent—it was uncharted territory and big corporations that didn't know exactly what was going on were throwing money at young people in the Bay Area to "create their online presence" and forge new territory in a new medium they did not yet understand. We were only happy to take their money.

First, I worked as a reviewer for a company called Netguide that aimed to be TV Guide of the Internet. They sent us out—brave collegians—to review hundreds of thousands of Web sites for their comprehensive online directory. They appeared to want to catalogue the entire Internet, because they had us reviewing entirely trivial sites, like the home pages of Pakistani grad students who had posted pictures of their cats. The World Wide Web seemed like a small place back then... entirely categorizable. We clattered away on the night shift, turning in review after review of sites great and small. They paid us well (for writers) and periodically threw open-bar parties where everybody got shitfaced. It was a good job for the slacker mentality, leaving plenty of room for games of Duke Nukem.

But it could not last. Eventually, the parent company in New York grew weary of shelling out cash on a company that showed no signs of profitability in the near future. They axed us in mass, but my friend Stuart and I just laughed. This gravy train had pulled into the station. What's funny is that, if the company had just stayed the course, they would have been miles ahead of all the subsequent companies trying to be the welcome mat to the Internet. The term du jour was "portal." All companies wanted to be the first stop on the Internet. All companies wanted to be Yahoo! Instead, they bailed and simply threw away their wads of venture capital. But who really cares anyway?

I went to work for CNET. They told me I was working on a top-secret project that would shake the foundation of the Internet with its originality. It would be the portal of

portals. All people would turn to it for guidance on the World Wide Web. They gave the project the code name "Gunsmoke" and they made us swear that we would not discuss it with friends or family. Eventually the project would be knighted "Snap!" to give it the same exclamatory immediacy of Yahoo!, I suppose. They implied that we would all have nice tasty slices of the pie for our extra time and energy. They cajoled us into working weekends and holidays, extolling the virtues of sacrifice and subtly threatening our job security for lack of enthusiasm.

It was the one time in my entire tour of the industry that employees discussed forming a union. One friend of mine, who, like so many of us, had hauled over from Netguide, called an impromptu meeting of producers to discuss the veiled threats of management. There was the snap! of discontent in the air—a collective feeling of disgust at the scare tactics of management forces. The time had come to put a foot down and declare that there is at least some bullshit that won't fly.

But, like so many worker kvetch-ins, it blew over. The employees at the meeting decided not to press the issue and the ardent sense of injustice fizzled. After it got wind of the meeting, management successfully completed a program of divide-and-conquer that eventually ran troublesome elements out of the company, to be replaced by those who would dance to their tune. They introduced some new benefits, like back massages, to caress that nagging feeling of exploitation away. Eventually, it was only the yes-men that remained.

I left the company on no particular terms with anyone. I had successfully made myself invisible in the office, coasting on my blind acceptance of mediocrity and voicing no adverse opinions. Eventually, my self-loathing and complete disregard for the project at hand forced me to quit, even though I had no other job to fall back on. At that point, I was numb to my desires, because they had no relation to what I did for a living. I had become a Dilbert.

In my final week in the company, they put up one of those scrolling LED displays to flash information down on us. The wiseass who installed it posted comical messages on it, like "Get back to work, slaves!" It was funny because, at that point, it simply acknowledged the actual situation. A rare bit of office honesty.

After a brief stint of trying to do my own thing, I reentered the Internet corporate world through the doors of LookSmart. This time I wore the hat of HTML coder, but, factually, I was little more than a glorified temp, commissioned to the most repetitive and mindless tasks. I justified it to myself, saying I needed the experience, eyeing the options, and taking

solace in the steady paycheck. The work was monotonous, to say the least, but the atmosphere was not overly oppressive. In the beginning...

After a few months, we were moved to a Soma building that had recently been converted from a sweat shop. Employees made jokes about how it had just become a different kind of sweat shop, but — all jokes aside—it was not pleasant. There was no air conditioning during the summer months and the whirring fans could do little more than stir hot air around. In order to get any ventilation, we had to keep the windows open on a construction site where a pneumatic pile driver would ceaselessly clang through the day. I recall one day in particular when a pipe in the middle of the room suddenly began hissing violently and half the office jumped out of their chairs and made for the door.

It is the sacrifice that a start-up expects of you. Employees have to suck it in for the good of the company and give their all and not complain about unreasonable working conditions because the big payoff is around the bend. There's no room for slackers or complainers here, only self-starter problem solvers. That was all well and good, except that LookSmart had been around for four years. I also hasten to point out that the offices of marketing and advertising were pleasant and cool.

I coded away through the year, keeping out of office politics and waiting for the ballyhooed Initial Public Offering. When the company went public, the stock price floated nicely and everyone let out a huzzah of success. Unfortunately, when the stock price was nice and high, many of us could not act on it because our options had not yet vested; by the time they had, the stock had dropped to around half its value and by the time the imposed holding period was over, it was already headed down the crapper. Today, the stock price hangs out at around \$2, which is less than what I paid for it. Many people suffered the same fate, in addition to facing severe tax liabilities for exercising their options when the price was high. The giddy intoxication of the IPO faded away into the sober reality of the Internet stock-market plummet.

After the IPO, LookSmart moved to shiny new offices on 2nd Street. We were moved to lovely new half-cubes in a converted SOMA warehouse and there was plenty of hot cocoa in the concession room. No longer did we hear the incessant

banging of the pile driver—just the occasional crowd roar from the newly renovated Pac Bell park. Now that it was a public company, LookSmart had to straighten its proverbial tie and institute certain corporate features to make sure it was reaching maximum productivity. All of sudden, there seemed to be four meetings a day about monetizing every page, maximizing dollar amounts on every ad-banner click-thru, and massaging the design needs of our many corporate partners. The business department was cutting affiliate deals and dumping work on the production team that we really couldn't handle. With each new step toward productivity, I felt more and more uncomfortable with my working environment. I felt shaggy and unkempt and increasingly irrelevant. I found myself in more and more meetings where I appeared to have absolutely no idea what was going



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on and could not bring myself to find out. I was doing the bare minimum to stay employed and had long since lost interest in creating the Internet's best Web portal. I could really give a rat's ass. Meanwhile, they put up a sign at the entry hall to the building with the company logo, peppered with inspirational descriptors that had presumably popped out of the mouths of satisfied LookSmartians. "Fun!" "Focused!" "Savvy!", etc. It was supposed to put a little spring in your step on the way to the grind, but I took it more as a sign that I needed to be leaving the company.

As I worked up the gumption to quit, my resolve solidified when the company instituted a "360 degrees" peer review system—a Byzantine process whereby colleagues give reviews of each other's performance. Assuredly, this is a state-of-the-art system for maximizing employee efficien-

cy, but it struck me as more of a way to instill fear by underscoring that any of your compatriots may be monitoring your performance—and your bad attitude or sloppy performance could come up in your next review. To my mind, it was a new twist on the panopticon... a way of isolating each individual and making any employee suspicious of his neighbor. I went to the little workshop they gave on how to give constructive feedback, laughed to myself, and gave notice that week.

I went on to another start-up that is now moribund and bears no mention. It was, in fact, a good job, insofar as I worked only part-time and nobody seemed to care that I didn't really give a shit. I was in the first round of layoffs, which was really no surprise, considering my status and attitude. Part-timers and contractors usually get the axe first. However, the market is now sputtering and there is very little work to be had. A year ago I could have bounced into my next job with a couple of well-placed e-mails. Instead, I've been out of work for two months now and nothing's on the horizon.

But there is very little sympathy for the belly-aching Dot Bomb casualties, and why should there be? The Internet workers, originally so hip and groovy, came to be seen as money-grubbing carpetbaggers with oversized cars and little imagination. They bought up artist spaces, co-ops and cafes and turned them into offices. They ran the rents up sky high and ran the poor people out of town. If I wasn't an SUV-driving yuppie, I was still digging for gold along with everybody else and came up with a fistful of empty promises. I got screwed, but can I ask you to cry for me? Does anybody want to hear my rendition of the "Dot Bomb Blues"? If I wasn't part of the solution, was I part of the problem?

You can bring it up at my next peer review...



Too painful t' go on--
TO BE CONTINUED.

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