



Stanford eCorner

Look for Opportunities to "Go Deep"

Tom Conrad, *Pandora*

April 28, 2010

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2442/Look-for-Opportunities-to-Go-Deep>

"Miles wide and a quarter-of-an-inch deep," recalls Tom Conrad, Pandora CTO, of the work experience that he had while working at Apple. Employees were expected to dabble in all areas, from engineering to product design. Conrad contrasts this with his experience at Berkeley Systems, where he had the opportunity to deepen his expertise in a single field. He found that this latter opportunity to focus and excel has served him better than being a corporate Renaissance man.



Transcript

Apple is a place that cherishes Renaissance thinkers, people that are good at lots of things. The people that are most celebrated in the company culture can write software and design user interfaces and have brilliant marketing insights and have a great eye for design. And so in the four years that I was at Apple, I wrote about 500 lines of code and dabbled in a million things. I was miles wide and about a quarter-of-an-inch deep when I finished my time at Apple and decided to move on to something else. I wasn't great at anything. And I went to Berkeley Systems and together there worked with a team that created this video game, *You Don't Know Jack*, which was a little bit of a phenomenon in the late '90s. It was kind of this irreverent quiz show-party game. And Berkeley Systems was completely different than Apple from the standpoint that everybody knew exactly what their job was, and your job was to be great at it. And in my case, it was to run the little development team that wrote all the software for *You Don't Know Jack*, so the sound mixers and the gameplay and the graphics engine. But it was not my job to design the gameplay or to design the look and feel of the game or to write the questions or to figure out what the packaging should be like or what to go to market.

I was welcome to occasionally chime in with a suggestion or a thought, but it was very, very clear that the thing that was going to make me successful at Berkeley Systems was being the best software engineer that I could possibly be and to lead that team really effectively. And so I really focused on that for my years there. And thank goodness, because I wouldn't have been a software engineer, not really, if it hadn't been for that experience. And so I think the lesson for me of that period is, it's really important to be great at something and to know what that thing is and to really invest in it. You're going to have all kinds of opportunities to go wide, but look for opportunities to go deep. At least for me, it made all the difference.