



The Road Less Traveled: From School Teacher to CTO

Joseph Williams, *Seattle Pacific University*

Warren Barkley seems like your typical CTO: 35-plus patents, a long resume of developing and shipping software and hardware products, and influential roles on industry boards. What is different about Barkley isn't his path to the C-suite; it's his path into any kind of tech career at all.

Now the CTO at SMART Technologies, a Canadian company that's a leading provider of collaboration technologies for schools and workplaces, Barkley actually started his career as a school teacher. Studying at two different universities in British Columbia, his background is in music and history. His early university days had little to do with technology, and it probably seemed like he was destined for a classroom role before eventually becoming a school principal.

During his time in the classroom, Barkley taught music and a variety of other subjects. He also started playing with Macs, built networks, and spent hours trying to figure out how IPX worked. Technology went from a hobby

to a passion. This led him to leave the classroom, move to Seattle, and start working in a tech startup.

Barkley is definitely a "gadget guy," and before long, the siren's song of technology drew him to Microsoft. Once there, he started down what most would recognize as the traditional CTO path: designing products, shipping products, managing products, and building a partner ecosystem for products. As he rose through the ranks at Microsoft, Barkley developed and then honed his technology skills to the point where he became a subject matter expert on Wi-Fi and numerous other communication technologies. Legend has it that Bill Gates even called on Barkley once to provide Wi-Fi support at the Microsoft CEO's home.

Barkley was at the top of his game at Microsoft when he was part of the engineering leadership team behind the release of Lync 2010, a category-making product that helped define the potential for enterprise unified communications. One of his roles on the Lync team was managing most of the

engineering relationships with partners, competitors, and standards bodies. This gave him a tremendous amount of industry exposure and a lot of calls from executive recruiters. Given his background in education and his roots, it isn't surprising that he jumped to SMART Technologies in 2012 as its CTO, and moved back to Canada.

What was it like for you personally when you were first made CTO?

Exciting and frightening all at the same time. I had lots of ideas of what the company could be and do, but before that happened we needed to get the company on a stable foundation.

What is the biggest personal challenge of your job as CTO?

Hiring. You are only as good as your best team members.

What is it like being the CTO for a company that is headquartered in Canada—any differences from the US?

I grew up here, so I understood the culture, but I was still surprised by a few things. Certainly

the talent market, particularly in high tech, is smaller, and the appetite for risk is less.

Where does “innovation” play in your role? Are you a catalyst? Innovation is at the heart of what I do, so I certainly hope I am. In addition to drawing on the insights of our organization, we have implemented companywide what the *Harvard Business Review* calls an “innovation mall.” It is a soapbox-like app that allows every employee to suggest new ideas and support the ideas of others, and we throw product questions and ideas up there to gather employee opinions.

Jerry Seinfeld had Newman. Sherlock Holmes had Professor Moriarity. Who is your nemesis? Father Time. There is never enough time to get everything done.

Apart from addressing the top and bottom lines, what are the major job challenges you face as CTO?

Focus. Making sure everyone is focusing on the right parts of the product or business to drive everything forward. Making the right bets; you can never be sure of the future, but the decision to invest in one thing over another is often unchangeable once made—so you better make the right call.

What is the one thing you need to delegate that you haven’t yet? Likely the running of the rhythm of the business.

How do you personally keep up with technology in general?

I spend time reading various sites each day. Techmeme and Ars Technica are two that I really like. I also often take time out to study technologies I’m not as familiar with to up my knowledge. For example, I am currently taking one of MIT’s

Warren Barkley: Interesting Tidbits



Best book recently read: *Element* by Ken Robinson.

Favorite industry publication: I love *Wired* because of the pure randomness of its content.

Last time you actually coded or configured: Configured this week. Coded about a year ago, when I wanted to figure out how good or bad our APIs were.

If you weren’t a tech company CTO, would you still be in the tech business? I would be running a bike business.

What mobile phone do you carry? Primary is an iPhone. I also have a Windows phone and Android I use on and off.

What other personal technology do you use? Everything you can think of, from complex fitness monitors to things that measure sleep and brain waves.

What is your college education? A music degree, an education degree, some post-graduate in psychology. I started computer science but did not finish.

online courses in a specialized type of mechanical engineering.

How do you personally keep up with the technical details of SMART’s product line?

I set them up, program to the APIs. Generally pull them apart. For me, I need to be in the middle of the product to understand it.

What part of your job as CTO gives you the most satisfaction?

Having the debate on product definition. What is in and what is out.

What are the most valuable lessons you’ve learned in your career?

Try to listen more than talk. As you are more senior, people want to hear from you. That needs to be checked as much as possible because your people often have better answers. Second, you never regret firing someone too early. I know it’s harsh. If they aren’t a fit, there is a better place for them,

and sometimes they will thank you for it.

What is your advice to aspiring IT professionals who wish to move up the ladder to the C-suite?

Get creative. Despite urban myth, this can be learned. Your job is about creating value and solving problems. To do that in new and novel ways, you need to be able to think and act creatively.

Second, be the customer. Pay very close attention to what their experiences are going to be. Are you living those experiences yourself and understanding them? People often say they are, but when was the last time you personally experienced the rack, stack, and operation of your product? For me, it was last Friday.

Is there a lot of structure to your day?

There is a lot of travel, so there is not much rhythm. Normally every day starts and ends with email.

LIFE IN THE C-SUITE

How many emails do you receive per hour?

Maybe 10. Varies widely.

What is lunch like, and do you take breaks?

Maybe I get a normal lunch once a week—but usually I am eating during meetings.

How much work do you do at home during your evenings?

I am always on call. I do a lot of dinners with customers.

How much work do you do at home during your weekends?

It depends on whether there is a milestone the team is struggling to hit. If so, I will work through the weekend. And business travel often takes me away from home.

Do you take vacations, and, if you do, are you plugged in?

Yes. We shut down over the winter break for two weeks. Of course I am still plugged in, but there is very little traffic.

How long do you think you can keep up this pace?

Not sure how to live without it.


How often do you see the CEO/CIO/CFO?

CIO works for me, so lots. CFO weekly. CEO every day. His office is right beside mine, and we talk about everything.

What is the best part of your day?

When I'm solving a tough business problem or spending time with my family.

What do you think might be your next job?

Completely focused on making this one successful. 

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