

## The Godfather, a First Google Employee, Steve Ballmer and Microsoft

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

A few years ago, I had dinner with one of Google's first employees. How he joined [Google](#) was a long and convoluted story that had more elements of luck than I can ever recount.

He'd been working in a midsized town in relative obscurity and at a fairly low level when, through a series of making the right choices and one random string of events after another, he was hired at Google.

Early, early Google.

He found himself sitting in a room with less than 15 people who were Google's first employees. They were using mismatched computers and working in a small suite in an office complex. He didn't know anything about computers or the Internet. Instead, he was just your run of the mill business sort of guy who was in the right place at the right time.

As I am sure you can imagine, he ended up becoming exceptionally rich. So rich, I'm not even going to get into it because it's ridiculous.

He'd been hired by [Google](#) before the company even had a business. They didn't have any advertising yet. They were doing small contracts with various vendors and investors and he was helping out with this stuff.

Why was he working for such a small and unorganized company? Because he couldn't find a better job. That's right. He couldn't get a job with a larger company and wasn't even that marketable. The best he could do was get a job in a room full of programmers who had some decent venture capital funding but no real business to speak of.

- He did not come up with the idea for Google or any of the businesses it would eventually start. He was not the sort of person who would have come up with the idea for Google.
- He did not invest his own money in Google. He was the sort of guy who would look at anyone extremely suspiciously if they asked him to invest money. He probably would have left Google if they weren't paying him enough money when he started or if he could have made more money at another company.

Because Google didn't even have any revenue, he figured he was just working for a small company on the West Coast. He was worried about whether or not he would get a paycheck each week. If another job came along that was better he would be out the door.

The best thing, of course, would have been if he had gotten a job at a bigger, well-known company that paid more and was more prestigious.

I don't think he really knew how good his fortune was. But his fortune had changed: he had managed to align himself and stay ingratiated with what would soon become one of the most significant companies of our time.

Had he not landed at [Google](#) by chance, I'm pretty confident he would have jumped around from one mediocre job to another for his career. There are a lot of people like this in Silicon Valley and throughout the United States and world. They want to work for the biggest and most prestigious company. They are concerned about benefits, salary, and so forth. They want the best possible job they can get.

A few years ago, MBA students from University of California, Los Angeles did a study on one of the companies I run. I spent a lot of time with them. All they could talk about was how they wanted to work for Google. They wouldn't have been talking about this when it was unknown. People from the best schools and with the best pedigrees always aim for the biggest and most prestigious employers. This is how it works.

The guy I met from Google was like this. He went to a good school and had been trying to [get jobs](#) with the biggest and best employers. It just hadn't worked out for him. I don't say that because there was anything wrong with him—I just say that because I could see how he thought about life, people, and business and I know that the success he experienced was simply a result of being at the right place at the right time. To me, it clearly was not about risk taking, following his heart, or anything along those lines.

In the book [The Godfather](#), Don Vito Corleone is incredibly respected and feared. His nickname, the Godfather, connotes his God-like powers to help people and also his patriarchal benevolence. Like a God, the Godfather is always concerned that he doesn't unfairly dispense justice.

The Godfather is always doing various things for people and helping everyone that he can. If someone has victimized you unfairly, or if you are downtrodden, you can approach the Godfather for help and he will generally give it. Because Don Corleone is always going out of his way to help people, they are all too willing to be loyal to him.

The Godfather's almost mystical power is due, in no small part, from the Almighty sort of help and generosity he can give people. If the Godfather couldn't help people and if he wasn't constantly helping people to a massive degree, he wouldn't be as revered. His power is even more revered because he can have people killed and has power over important life and death decisions in the community.

In my mind, understanding the Godfather can change your career:

*Your ability to help people and the degree of help you provide will in no small part determine the degree of success you have. The more powerful your help, the more "mystical" and life changing your help, the greater the reward you will receive.*

You should ask yourself:

- Whom do you help and influence?

- How many people do you help and influence?
- How much do you help and influence people?
- How effective is the help and influence you provide?

You need to ask these questions. The more you desire success, the more you need to answer these questions. You can know exactly where you are in your career trajectory by answering these questions.

*Imagine a band that starts out playing in a small bar. Their music is liked and soon they are playing in bigger venues. Pretty soon their songs are being played on the radio. Then their music videos are on MTV. Eventually, they are playing sold-out shows in a giant stadium.*

*As the band gets more and more popular, they are influencing more and more people. This is how it works with everything. As their career starts to stall, they will start playing in smaller venues, their songs won't be played as much on the radio and so forth. This is a career trajectory in action and it's generally based on how many people are being reached, influenced, and helped. The biggest stars have the largest reach—the smaller ones, a smaller reach.*

There are some people who are in the right place at the right time and become successful due to this. In these cases, their success won't necessarily be proportional to helping a lot of people—but in most cases, it is. For example, the guy who worked for Google became incredibly successful because he was working for a company (and got stock options in a company) that managed to help hundreds of millions of people. He was there and, through close proximity to this company's power, became incredibly rich.

Google's power, like the Godfather's, was almost almighty as the company took hold. For the first time in history, people could find almost any sort of information they wanted from the comfort of their own computers. The world was opened up and people's ability to communicate and share ideas took on a new meaning. People could find the information they wanted. The system Google created worked so well that it quickly took hold all over the planet. We have never seen anything like this and it was world changing.

It's because of Google's Godfather-like "mystical" powers and influence that so much wealth was created. It's why the two Founders of the company are now so well known and revered. It's why Google's first employees became obnoxiously rich.

I'm sure the man I met didn't know the company would be helping billions of people when he went to work for them—but it did. Because he was in the right place at the right time, he was able to get huge rewards.

In your career, if you are seeking the greatest prizes and success possible, you have what I believe are three choices:

First, you can try and be in the right place at the right time by joining organizations that appear to be onto something that will be transformational and enrich the lives of a countless number of people.

Second, you can learn how to "expand" your energies so you are helping the most people possible—the more transformational your efforts, the better.

Third, you can join an established organization and hope that the organization's current forward momentum takes you to great heights.

Right now, I'm writing this on an airplane. The airplane is staffed by two pilots and three flight attendants. Being a pilot or a flight attendant are good jobs. But there are only about 75 people on the airplane I'm on. The pilot and stewardess are always going to be limited in terms of their income and potential because there are only a limited number of people they can help in their **current position**. The people who fly on each flight are the "consumers" who ultimately control how much money and how much fame the pilot and stewardess can have.

What could the pilot or stewardess do if they decided they really wanted to increase their income, fame, or prestige? They would need to find ways to help more people and transform their lives. Some things they could do are:

- Write a book about being a pilot or stewardess.
- Create a training course about being a pilot or stewardess.
- Create a school training people to be a pilot or stewardess.
- Get promoted to be a manager of pilots or stewardesses.
- Start an airline.
- Create a new type of menu for airplanes that tastes better.
- Design a new type of airplane that uses less fuel, travels faster, or is safer.

When a pilot successfully lands a plane after an accident or emergency, the news networks often labels him a hero. Many of these pilots respond by writing a book. The book enables the pilot to influence more people. *Everything is about expanding your reach and impact.*

If a pilot or stewardess want to advance in their careers, they will generally need to get into a role with more supervisory responsibility before their income and prestige within the airline rises. By being in a supervisory role, the pilot or stewardess is able to influence more people.

The greatest career and life advancement comes when you're able to have a profound influence on the world at large. For example, a new type of airplane that doesn't use any fuel would be a "game changer" that would decrease transportation costs, be good for the environment and create thousands of jobs for the people manufacturing these airplanes. Someone who came up with an idea like this would potentially experience incredible success. The person who came up with a fuel-free airplane could be a stewardess or pilot.

Consider the case of Howard Schultz. At the age of 29, Schultz had been hired to do marketing work for a small coffee distributor with a few retail outfits called Starbucks. One of Schultz's responsibilities for Starbucks was to travel around the world buying coffee. In the city of Milan, Italy, he noticed that people seemed to really enjoy drinking coffee both before and after work and that coffee was something of cultural importance in Italy. Friends were meeting both before and after the work day for coffee. Unlike in the United States, coffee was a very important component of Italian social life.

Schultz believed that coffee could be something just as important to American culture as it was to Italian culture. Upon his return from Milan, he spoke with the owners of Starbucks about his idea and they weren't interested. They told him they were primarily a coffee wholesaler and they weren't in the retail coffee business beyond a few shops.

Schultz wouldn't accept no for an answer and decided to start his own company. He opened several coffee shops with his concept and a few years later he ended up buying Starbucks and naming all of his coffee shops Starbucks. As he stood behind his idea, Schultz expanded Starbucks to thousands of locations around the United States and the world. He influenced the lives of millions, and in the process, reaped the rewards in his career.

One of the rarest abilities out there is to come up, and follow through, with an idea that is a complete paradigm changer. Schultz succeeded with Starbucks because he had an idea that reached and influenced the lives of millions of people. He was just an ordinary employee in a small coffee wholesaler when he had the idea.

You could do something like Schultz did too.

Game changers are the sort of ideas that very few people ever have and follow through with:

- 30-minute pizza delivery (Domino's Pizza)
- Online auctions (eBay)
- Easy to use computers (Apple)
- Quality coffee shops (Starbucks)
- Low-priced superstores in rural areas (WalMart)
- Mass-produced inexpensive cars (Ford)
- Social networking (Facebook)
- Search engines (Google)

Paradigm-changing ideas are something that can and have made a huge difference in the world *and the fortunes of people associated with them*. These ideas are something that many people have had, but very few ever followed through and that makes a major difference in the lives of everyone associated with them.

In most cases, a paradigm changing idea simply involves a different way of looking at the world and the ability to follow through. Sometimes a paradigm changing idea involves seeing a problem that people have and coming up with an elegant solution.

*Most of us go through life seeing problems and having ideas about solutions--- but we never do anything about them. The most important possible thing you can do when you see issues, problems, and so forth is to ask yourself if there is something you can do with your idea that will enable you to help more people. The more people you touch, the better you will do.*

The guy I met from Google was in the right place at the right time. How can you be at the right place at the right time?

In order to be in the right place at the right time, you need to seek out and find employers that are likely to "change everything." An employer that positively affects an incredible number of people with an important new idea. In most cases, when you look at a company and what it does, you can tell if what they do is truly going to make a major difference in the world and positively affect a lot of people.

In a May 29, 2000 article in *The New Yorker*, "The New Boy Network: What Do Job Interviews Really Tell Us?", Malcolm Gladwell writes about Nolan Myers, a Harvard University senior graduating with a degree in computer science. According to Gladwell, Myers is a B/B+ student, likable, and makes an excellent impression:

I like Nolan Myers. He will, I am convinced, be very good at whatever career he chooses. I say those two things even though I have spent no more than ninety minutes in his presence. We met only once, on a sunny afternoon in April at the Au Bon Pain in Harvard Square. He was wearing sneakers and khakis and a polo shirt, in a dark-green pattern. He had a big backpack, which he plopped on the floor beneath the table. I bought him an orange juice. He fished around in his wallet and came up with a dollar to try and repay me, which I refused. We sat by the window. Previously, we had talked for perhaps three minutes on the phone, setting up the interview. Then I e-mailed him, asking him how I would recognize him at Au Bon Pain. He sent me the following message, with what I'm convinced—again, on the basis of almost no evidence—to be typical Myers panache: "22ish, five foot seven, straight brown hair, very good-looking. :)." I have never talked to his father, his mother, or his little brother, or any of his professors. I have never seen him ecstatic or angry or depressed. I know nothing of his personal habits, his tastes, or his quirks. I cannot even tell you why I feel the way I do about him. He's good-looking and smart and articulate and funny, but not so good-looking and smart and articulate and funny that there is some obvious explanation for the conclusions I've drawn about him. I just like him, and I'm impressed by him, and if I were an employer looking for bright young college graduates, I'd hire him in a heartbeat.

In fact, Myers came to Gladwell's attention because he is considered such a "catch" by one company pursuing him for a job—TellMe Networks--and they urged Gladwell to speak with him for his article about interviewing.

Gladwell learns that the CEO of Microsoft, Steve Ballmer, has been recruiting Myers by sending him emails, meeting with him personally and even spending 30 minutes on the phone discussing working at Microsoft with him. Keep in mind, we are talking about someone who is a B/B+ student at Harvard with nothing to distinguish him but good interview skills talking with the CEO of one of the most important companies in the world.

Gladwell's essay is largely about interviewing and why this student did so well in interviews, but what I found so interesting was the company that Myers chose: TellMe. After being heavily recruited by Ballmer, Myers chose a comparatively smaller, less successful company but one that had an interesting business idea that could be completely revolutionary.

The article didn't talk about any of this, but here is what I think:

For at least the last decade or so, Microsoft has been a follower.

- It came out with a search engine called "Bing" that lagged behind Google.
- It came out with a music player, Zune, that lagged behind the iPod.

Most things that Microsoft does these days are non-innovative. They are the exact sorts of things that companies do when they have begun to follow, opportunities are diminishing, and they are trying to hold onto what once was.

The more a company tries to hold on to "what once was," the fewer opportunities there generally are. Bureaucracy takes hold as companies grow and age and innovation has a hard time emerging. People who are "good at looking busy" were employed instead of "people who are really busy." Layoffs, restructurings, and so forth occur as the company tries to squeeze more and more profit and savings out of what is left after all the expansion has stopped and a slow retrenchment

begins.

What I saw is that Myers--whether consciously or not--had carefully evaluated his options and chose a company that was "new news" as opposed to "old news." In choosing TellMe, I believe he was trying to be part of the next big thing and join a company where he might have a career like the guy I met from Google, instead of your average airplane pilot or stewardess.

Gladwell references that the programmers at TellMe had cots in the offices because they often worked all night on various projects. It's hard to imagine this sort of atmosphere at Microsoft in this day and age. In short, TellMe was a place where people were excited about the work and something new and revolutionary seemed to be happening.

I have two important pieces of advice.

The first piece of advice is the most important, because it's the prescription for success for most of the human race: join and attempt to thrive in organizations that appear to be on the cusp of doing something transformational for the human race. Find the next Google, eBay, Microsoft, WalMart, Apple, or Starbucks. Join a company doing something new that you truly believe in. This is a way to success that works for tens of thousands of people each year and it can work for you, too.

You need to find a company or organization you believe is doing (or will be doing) something you think is incredibly important and will positively affect the lives of millions of people. You should search for a company like this and when you find it, do everything within your power to be part of that organization.

If you do this, you could be like the guy who was one of the first employees of Google—*only you will know what you are doing*.

The reason it's so useful and beneficial to join companies like this is because these are companies that are on the verge of, or are, helping people do something new in an entirely new way. They will help millions of people and will make a huge difference in how the world functions.

You know companies like this when you see them. You can feel it. When I started using eBay back in 1997, I realized immediately that this company would change everything. I knew this because I saw how powerful it was. I couldn't believe that the company was as small as it was at the time. It was a game changer and I knew it.

When you pick up a new product that's really exceptional and will revolutionize things for you and others, it's a sign you are dealing with a company that's likely a game changer. You need to seek out these sorts of game changers.

The next greatest step for your career is to attempt to influence as many people as you possibly can. You can do this in a couple of ways. The first and easiest method is to enlarge your sphere of influence by seeking out more and greater responsibility in your work and by doing something that's likely to expand the quality and quantity of service you provide.

The cook could become a restaurant owner.

The restaurant owner could start a chain of restaurants.

The list goes on and on. You need to expand your sphere of influence and just keep expanding it as much, and as far, as you can.

The ultimate success is to do something groundbreaking that benefits the lives of millions of people. Develop a vaccine, come up with a cure for cancer, come up with a new product that enhances the lives of millions, start an important social movement. Doing things along these lines is how you can make the biggest difference.

Ultimately, your success in your career is going to come in direct proportion to how many people you touch with your work. The more revolutionary your work, the more people you will touch and the more memorable of a career you will have.

\*I have attached a PDF to Gladwell's article here. It is an excellent read.

[Gladwell's article](#).

## THE LESSON

Your ability to help people will determine the extent of your success. The more powerful and effective your help, the greater rewards you will receive. One of the rarest and most profound achievements is to follow through on your goals and create a paradigm-shifting idea. The more revolutionary your work, the more people you will Effect and the more memorable of a career you will have.

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<https://www.harrisonbarnes.com/>