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## MY BIGGEST MISTAKE

# I thought I could win by using know-how, charm

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February 2, 2004

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**Type of company:** Software consulting

**Founded:** 1997

**Employees:** 3

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I am one of the fortunate few who realize they have a great thing going. I have all the benefits of being an independent businessperson with all of the benefits of being aligned with a large corporation.

I am a certified consultant for ACT! Software. Unlike many software consultants, I do not have to worry about finding leads--they come directly to me via the company's Web site. I've been doing this for five years, and so far the leads have been steady and strong.

In addition to earning commission on sales, I also earn fees from training and supporting clients who use this software. Typically, I work at the client's office to provide the training and support.

And while my business is going well, when I had an opportunity to earn what I thought would be "fast" money I didn't hesitate to take on the project. What I learned about myself and how I approach business has been life-altering.

It was my first business failure.

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Yes

No

At the time, another software consultant from out of state asked me to subcontract some work with one of his clients. That consultant provided me with a scope document and indicated I could charge \$4,000 for my services.

After reviewing the scope document, I realized I could get the work done in about four to six hours.

Everything about this project seemed great. The money was great and I was able to do the work--designing a database that they could merge with very sophisticated contracts--from my home office, without ever going to the client's office.

I did the work, turned it in, only to discover that the other software consultant had created a faulty scope document. Everything that I had done was wrong.

But, instead of walking away, I was determined to make it right for the client.

At the time, I could not accept the fact that I wasn't able to deliver a quality product to the client. I have been working with this software since 1989 and have more than 200 projects under my belt.

A client survey in 2002 indicated that the No. 1 reason they enjoyed working with me was my technical savvy and my can-do attitude.

I was so focused on my own capabilities and my belief that I could solve any problem that I didn't pay attention to what the client was saying--she wasn't happy.

It simply wasn't a message I had heard before, and I arrogantly thought that I could win her over through a combination of technical know-how and personal charm.

So I kept working to prove to her that I could get the databases to talk to each other. Although I was able to do it, it wasn't the most elegant database solution.

By this point, she wanted nothing to do with me. She was not happy with me or the consultant who hired me. She didn't pay.

Instead of spending 4 to 6 hours on the project, I spent about 40 to 60 hours.

Several months later, I was able to collect some fees from the other consultant. But the lesson wasn't about money.

It was about my cavalier attitude and my willingness to assume facts rather than check them out.

I assumed the other consultant knew as much about the software as I did. I assumed the consultant had a proper scope document. I could have asked some questions, but instead I was only thinking about the fast money.

And I assumed the client was running the same version of the software that I was--that was a deadly assumption.

Then I assumed the client didn't have other databases that needed to be merged with mine. They did. All I had to do is ask. I didn't.

And finally I assumed that my technical savvy and my personal charm would ease the tension between

the client and myself, allowing me to salvage the project, my pride, and my \$4,000 fee.

That easy money project taught me a lot about how I wanted to run my business.

Today, I don't start a project until the client and I have reviewed the scope document together. Only after they sign off on my understanding of the project do I begin working.

It may not be easy money, but it has a lot fewer heartaches.

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