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10 Boston Leaders on Worst Jobs, First Jobs, & Lessons Learned Along the Way



Kaitie Rosa

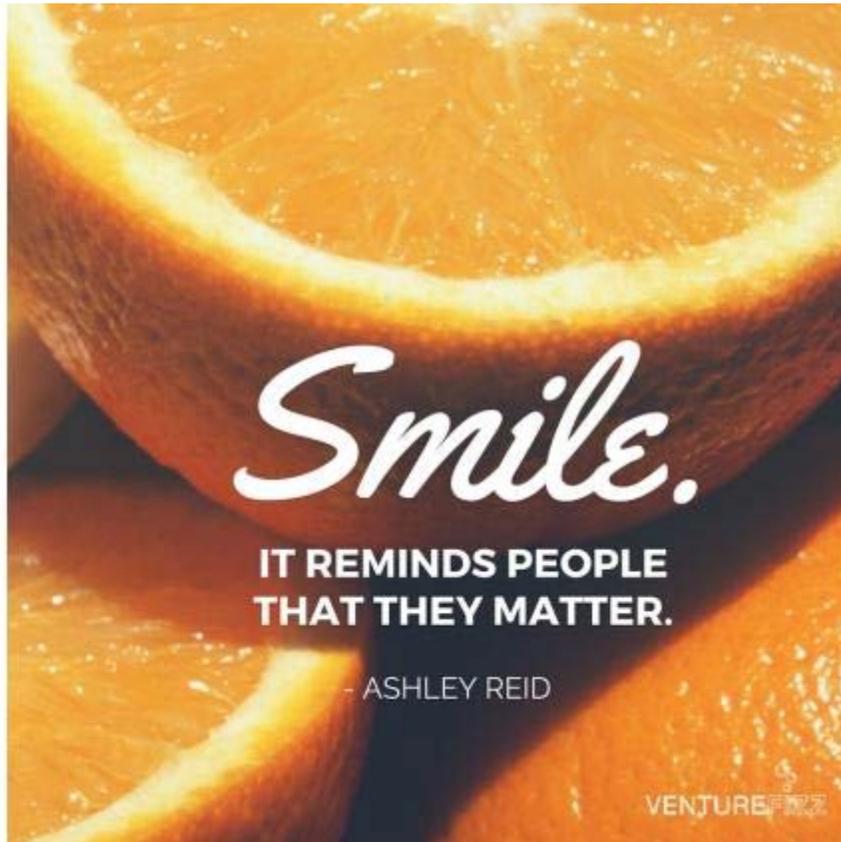
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Director, Content & Marketing, VentureFizz

Bad jobs. Less than glamorous working conditions. Usually our introduction to the workforce and often early on in our careers, we've all got our arsenal of workplace horror stories. (Like my older brother, who worked at a fast food chain as a kid and had to clean the playscape interior and disinfect the ballpit. Gross.)

Fortunately, most of us live to tell the crazy tales of our first jobs - and are able to glean a few key learnings from them, too.

Welcoming a new crop of graduates to the "real world" this month left me wondering: what crazy workplace trials and errors did some of Boston's tech leaders endure when kicking off their careers?



Ashley Reid, Founder & CEO, [Wellist](#)

What was your first job?

I scooped ice cream on Nantucket the summer after my freshman year of college.

What was your least favorite aspect of working there?

I got carpal tunnel and had to work (and sleep in!) an orthotic wrist brace that smelled of sour milk.

What lessons did you learn that summer that you apply to business and your career now?

As cliché as it is, customer service matters. Smile. It reminds people that they matter. And it will not only impact the size of your tip, but also your own personal enjoyment of a role.



Micah Adler, CEO, [Fiksu](#)

What was your first job?

My first real job was working construction with a contractor, mostly focused on jobs involving excavation. Sometimes you can't get [big] equipment into hard to reach places, and for that you need manual labor. That was me.

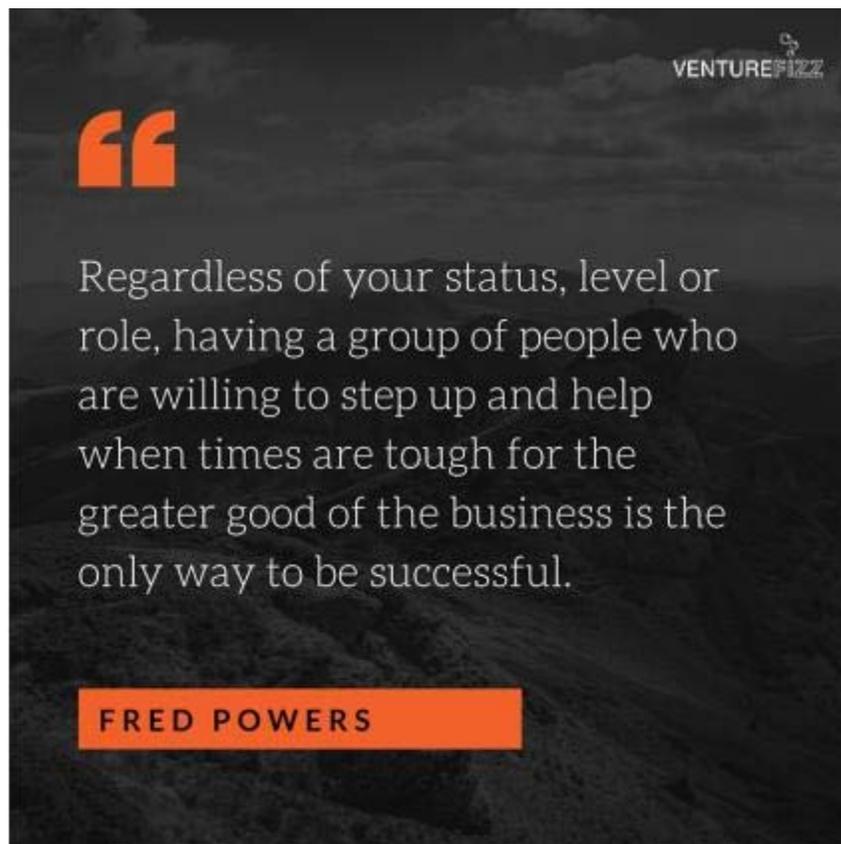
Tell me a "horror story" from your time there.

One day, my assignment was to take a barrel of used motor oil and spread it on a road made of sand, to control dust. A friend helped me get this huge black barrel into the back of the pickup truck first thing, and then we went off to do our morning's work. We drove around to a couple of different sites, did some small jobs, and the whole time that barrel is sitting in the pickup. In the sun.

Finally we get to the sand road, and I went to open the barrel without realizing how much pressure had built up from the heat. Picture a fire hydrant, but instead of water, it's spewing oil: that's what I was suddenly hit with. I got covered head to foot in used motor oil.

What lessons did you learn while working there that have helped you grow your career and business?

My boss, the owner of the business, had barely finished high school. But he was clearly very sharp and had built an interesting business. He was incredibly quantitative about all the significant decisions he faced: hiring, whether to take a job on, when to invest in new equipment, etc. No one would ever think of him as a mathematician, but his consistently quantitative approach really worked. It stuck with me as good way to build a business.



Fred Powers, CEO, [Dimensional Insight](#)

What's the least glamorous job you've worked?

I took a job [as a college student] as a garbage collector to make some money during the summer months.

What lessons did you learn while working there that have helped you grow your career and business?

The work experience taught me what teamwork really looked like. If one person was sick, another would pitch in. Even the leaders on each truck would jump in and help the individuals collecting trash. It was all about getting the job done, regardless of what "role" or "level" you were. There was a real sense of unity, and at the end of the day, getting the job done was only possible when everyone worked as a team.

I now emphasize to my staff that teamwork is the most important part of any business. Regardless of your status, level or role, having a group of people who are willing to step up and help when times are tough for the greater good of the business is the only way to be successful.

hen kicking off their careers?



Joe Krivickas, CEO, [Ipswitch](#)

What was your first job?

My first job was a golf caddy when I was 12 years old.

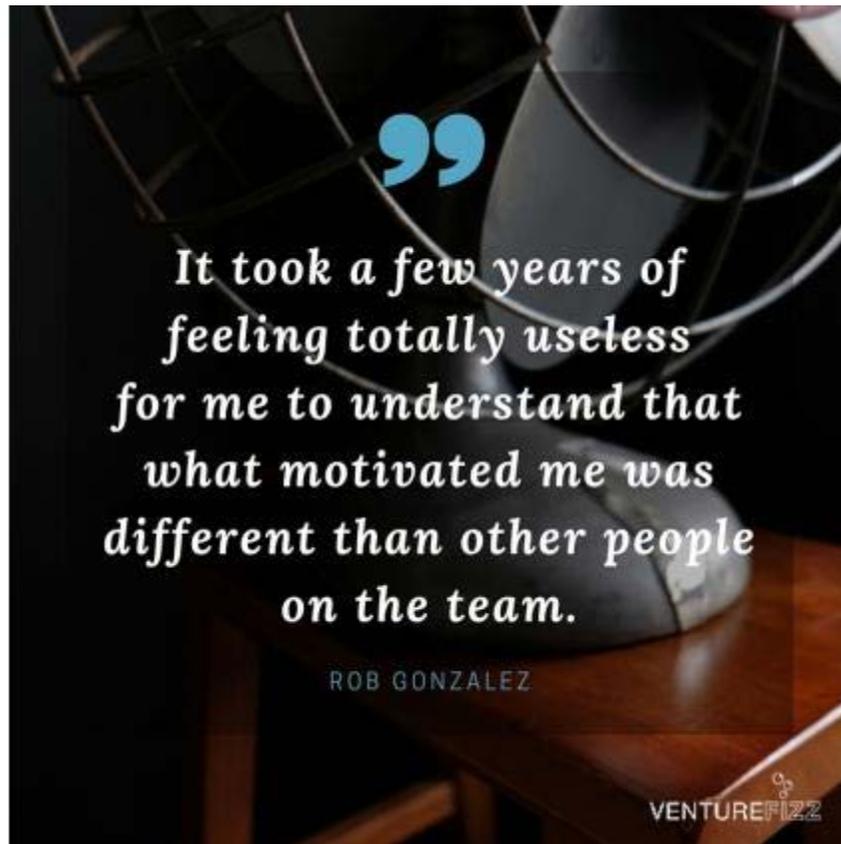
Tell me about your worst day at that job.

While I genuinely liked the job, the bags were too heavy - but I was vain and would never admit it. One time, it literally felt like the golf bags were filled with rocks. I had to stop halfway through the 18 holes because I wasn't going to make it.

What lessons did you learn while working there that have helped you grow your career and business?

The most important thing I learned was manners - and that is very much still applicable today. Having good manners was at the core of my performance in my caddying job - and in future engineering, marketing, sales, and CEO jobs.

Another great lesson from that job was good customer service. The job consisted of carrying other people's golf bags, cleaning up their golf clubs and fishing golf balls out of creeks – all of which meant leaving my ego at home.



Rob Gonzalez, co-founder, VP of business development, [Salsify](#)

What was your first job?

My first "real" job was working for IBM's Advanced Internet Technology team in Cambridge.

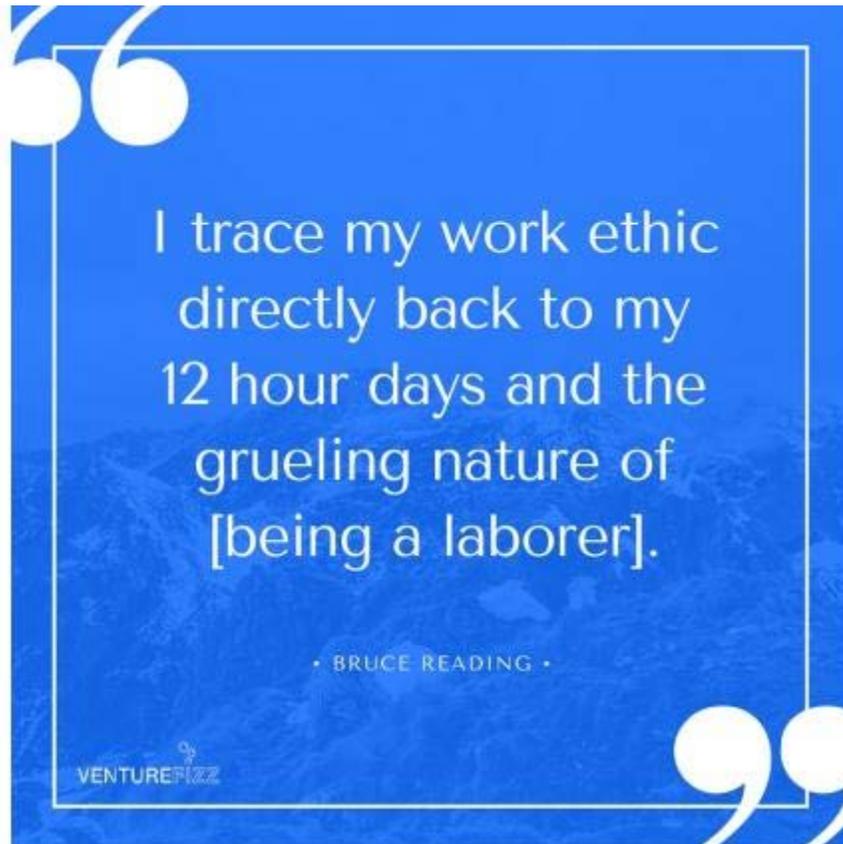
What did you hate about that job?

For me, the thing I hated was being *so far removed* from real users touching what I had built. I find that if my work doesn't have a relatively near-term likelihood of legitimately making someone's life better, then I have zero motivation to work on it.

What lessons did you learn while working there that have helped you grow your career and business?

It took a few years of being unmotivated, procrastinating all the time, and - frankly - feeling totally *useless* for me to really understand that what motivated me was different than maybe other people on the team, who really did enjoy the deep thinking associated with research and invention.

I am energized by working with people who are using what I built. The closer I am to the customer/user, the happier and more motivated I am.



Bruce Reading, President & CEO, [VoltDB](#)

What was your first job?

At 13, I worked as a laborer for a building supply company, delivering tractor trailer loads of drywall into high rise apartment buildings.

What did you do day-to-day?

Each day I logged between 10 to 12 miles of walking, carrying several tons of drywall into those buildings. It was backbreaking, hard core work.

Tell me a "horror story" from your time there.

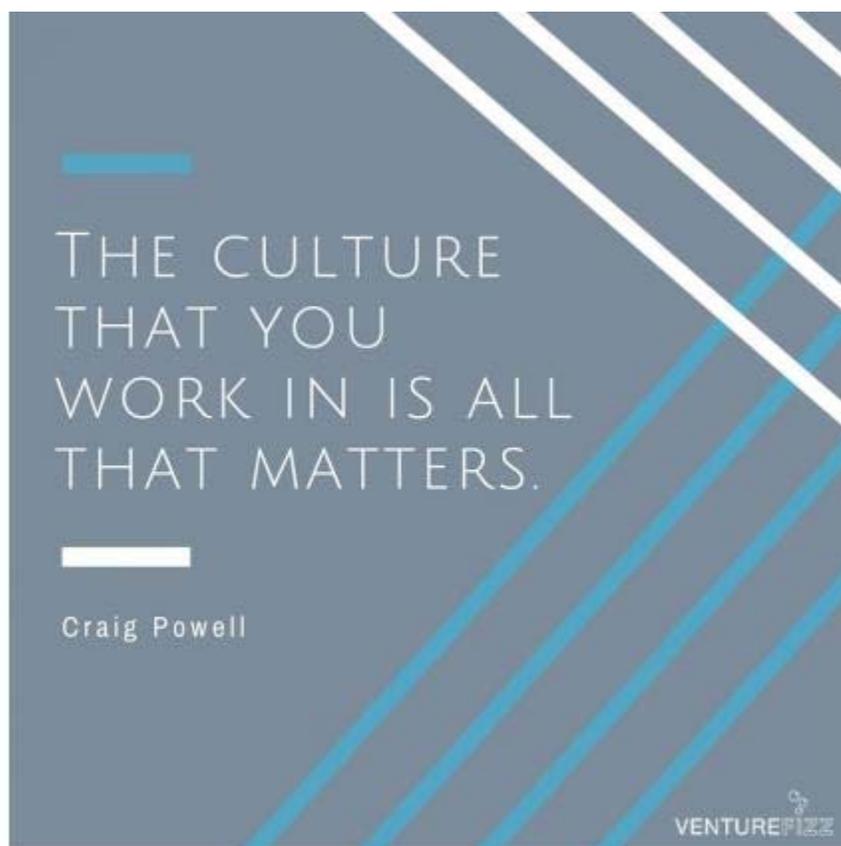
I worked with guys who were pretty hard scrabble - typically individuals who had been in and out of prison and had little upward potential for their careers. The resulting environment was very challenging BUT it taught me

many life lessons as a young man that have been foundational to who I have become.

What lessons did you learn while working there that have helped you grow your career and business?

I trace my work ethic directly back to my early days of working 12 hour days and the grueling nature of the work. I learned about compassion for others and the ability to put myself in another's shoes, and it taught me a great deal about the value of education and importance of applying yourself diligently no matter what you are working at. I can also say that my role gave me great insight into how to work within an environment where you had a multitude of skill sets and how to best assimilate into that type of environment.

There is no doubt that lessons learned from these early experiences have been with me my entire career and have served to shape the person that I am today.



Craig Powell, president & CEO, [Motus](#)

What was your first job?

I was an investment banking analyst.

What did you you dislike most about that job?

I did a lot of work and most of it went nowhere, meaning that it never resulted in a deal getting done or pursued.

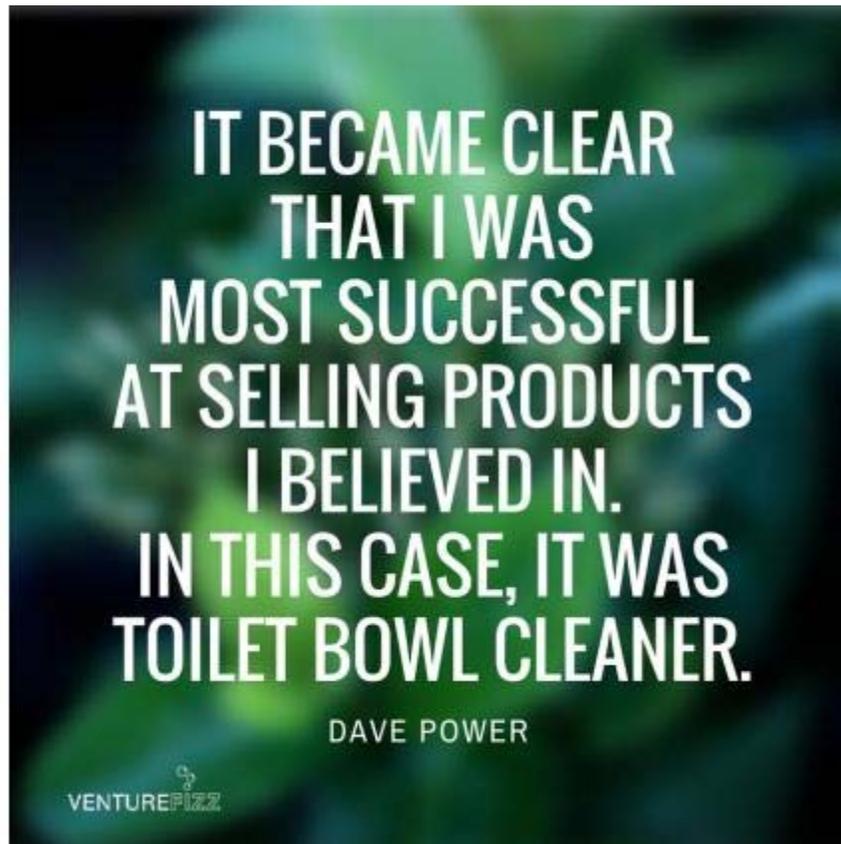
On some nights, I begrudgingly slept in my car in our office parking lot in Menlo Park to accommodate my crazy schedule – I would be up all night working until 5:45 a.m. with an early 7:30 a.m. conference call staring me in the face, so driving all the way back home to San Francisco, just to turn right back around again, didn't make sense.

For a group of folks that fashioned themselves as being very focused on efficiency, I've often thought the amount of time I spent on projects that went nowhere was quite ironic.

What lessons did you learn while working there?

The culture that you work in is all that matters. All too often, losing cultures lose even when they should win, and winning cultures win even when they should lose.

Investment banking and the finance industry have a singular product – money – and a singular focus – making more of it. There are things that matter more in work/ life than just making money.



Dave Power, CEO, [Perkins School for the Blind](#) & Board Member, [ownCloud](#)

What was your first job?

I needed a part-time job to pay for my golf habit, so I signed up to sell Fuller Brushes door-to-door during one of my summers off.

What did you do on a day-to-day?

Each day, I'd go around with a little kit trying to sell an array of products like cleaning sprays, brooms – you name it.

What lessons did you learn while working there that have helped you grow your career and business?

I learned a lot about sales right off the bat, including that only about one in 10 people will buy something. I had to get used to the word "no," let it roll off my back, and think of new ways to convince people, lessons that have been hugely helpful throughout my career.

That summer, it became clear very quickly that I was most successful at selling the products I believed in. In this case, it was toilet bowl cleaner. The main cleaner on the market was liquid, but ours was solid. I felt very strongly that because ours was solid, it would last longer - and people ended up buying a ton.

Ultimately, I learned that passion sells, which has rung true throughout my career.



Fred Powers, CEO at [Dimensional Insight](#)

What's one of the more memorable lessons you learned early on?

Before I began my career in the software industry, I had a job working at a marina. One day [my boss and I] were working on the mechanicals in the marina and my boss wanted to move forward with a strategy that he thought was best, though I disagreed. I spoke up and told him that if he moved forward with the way he wanted it would be a mistake.

Unsurprisingly, that didn't go over so well with my boss, and it resulted in him threatening to fire me if he was right. Luckily, I was right, didn't lose my job, and actually received a pay raise.

The lesson here is that if you know you are right, stand your ground. Don't take the back seat just because you fear the consequences, or what others might say.

This has carried over to how I run my business today. I applaud my staff to speak up and challenge the norm. Having this type of open dialogue is incredibly important and will ultimately benefit the greater good of the company.



Mark Jaffe, CEO, [PreIert](#)

What was your first job?

My first job out of college was as an engineer for Raytheon.

What lessons did you learn while working there?

I learned that that slower processes required in a large corporation working on 10-plus year government contracts was not a good fit for me. The job convinced me that my career was going to be better served in a more rapid, short-cycle, innovative environment where customer progress can be measured daily and weekly.

How did that experience influence your career today?

Without having experienced that type of large work environment, I may have never discovered my entrepreneurial spirit.

Since my work at Raytheon, I've been continually amazed by the fabulous and innovative products that can be developed, marketed, and sold by a small team working closely together.

By taking away the barriers of process, history, or rules, I've [been] involved in teams that - with focus, motivation, and commitment - have done amazing work together and grown some great companies.



Keith Cline, Founder, [VentureFizz](#)

What was your first job?

Between my junior and senior year of college, I worked at a real estate tax company.

What did you do on a day-to-day?

I stood at a copier all day - I like to joke that I had the original standing desk. I'd copy these massive, 200 page real estate appraisals.

What lessons did you learn while working there that have helped you grow your career and business?

You mean aside from my impressive ability to fix copy machines?

The job itself wasn't exciting, but I showed up every day with enthusiasm. If I was going to spend my days making copies, I was determined to be the best damn copy guy they could find! When my work was done, I'd always ask for more to do.

My attitude lead to the company hiring me full-time straight out of college to do data entry, and eventually promoting me to sales. That "dig right in, do whatever you can" kind of work ethic is key to growing and scaling a business. It's something I've carried with me since my copy guy days, and it's something I look for when hiring employees.