

ASK THE EXPERT

A New Breed of Professionals



**Son
Nguyen**

Son Nguyen, Senior Manager of Software Development at Fish & Richardson P.C., was responsible for migrating Office 2003 Word toolbars into Ribbon Controls for Word 2010, while his team was responsible for ensuring all software — custom and third-party — would be compatible with the firm's Windows 7 and Office 2010 rollout. Son also wrote an award-winning Outlook plug-in that allows attorneys and staff to access all major data sources across the firm from one centralized location. He can be reached at nguyen@fr.com.



**Carlos
Rodriguez**

Carlos Rodriguez, Network Manager at Nexsen Pruet, is responsible for designing, implementing and maintaining day-to-day operations of the firm's network and security infrastructure. With more than 12 years of successful technology engineering and leadership experience, he has been recognized as a professional who leads teams to deliver technologies and reach common goals, while adding value to others. He can be reached at crodriguez@nexsenpruet.com.



**Meredith
Williams**

Meredith Williams, Chief Knowledge Management Officer at Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, PC, is passionate about KM. Meredith started the knowledge management department at her firm over 10 years ago and has grown it into a world-renowned program. She can be reached at mlwilliams@bakerdonelson.com.



As we headed into ILTA's 2011 annual conference, we took the opportunity to catch up with our three nominees for the new "Young Professional" distinguished peer award. With the changing landscape of legal IT, it was a treat to have each candidate share some information about their views of professionalism and leadership, a history of their career development paths and how they're paying it forward in leading their teammates and subordinates. Each person's interview can be heard in its entirety on the accompanying podcasts.

What does the word "professional" mean to you, and why?

Son: It defines how you should conduct yourself in and outside of the workplace, because you never know who may be watching and how it might affect your image and that of your firm. It's also the manner in which you approach your work and your attitude, and your demeanor while doing so. Everyone can be professional when the good times are rolling, but it's in a crisis when true leaders and professionals really shine.

Carlos: I associate "professionalism" with the values of ethics, integrity and respect. These are part of the core values that my parents instilled in me, values that I, in turn, am instilling in my own family, as well as my co-workers and peers. Conducting yourself professionally helps you build trust — one of the stepping-stones of leadership.

Meredith: I agree with Carlos that a professional is a person with integrity. This is someone who's honest, direct, fair and has a great work ethic. I appreciate someone who is very direct with their staff and all their team members, provides consistent feedback, and who is also willing to get their hands dirty.

As you think about your own professional development, what are some milestones along the way that provided a real boost to your career?

Carlos: I really believe that the key for my career advancement and for becoming a better person has resulted from two major adjustments that I made in my life. First, I changed my attitude — not only at work, but toward life in general. While I always had the drive to become better, I only wanted to satisfy myself. Today I continually seek to add value to those around me while having a positive, proactive and can-do attitude. And second, my career has evolved because I have trained my mind to adjust how I think according to where I am at the moment. When

I was a helpdesk analyst, I tried to think as an engineer; when I became an engineer, I thought as manager; today, I am a manager, and I try to think as a director, CIO or as a business leader would. These two factors have led me to achieve multiple technical certifications, move up the ranks and achieve what I once saw as unreachable goals.


Meredith: The first milestones for me were graduating from law school and passing the bar exam. And then when I became the Director of Knowledge Management for Baker Donelson, as well as the Conference Vice President for ILTA — these were hugely important milestones for me as I felt a sense of pride and accomplishment. I was also flattered that others felt enough confidence in my skills and leadership abilities to allow me to flourish and be creative in these new roles.

Son: The first big milestone for me was being named team lead of my group, and then shortly thereafter becoming manager of my department. These two events were the catalysts that allowed me to make my belief in myself as a leader a reality.

Thinking back over your career, are there any specific skills that you've struggled with, and if so, how did you jump those hurdles?

Meredith: I think the biggest hurdle early on in my career was trying to figure out my leadership style. I looked for my own mentors, and, thankfully, I found three that I have adored through my entire career. And I learned that the best leadership style for me is a coaching style. I love to let people — my employees, in particular — figure out their own strengths and learn to trust in their abilities. I'm here to help them, but I want them always to trust themselves, so that they can do the things I'm challenging them to do.

Son: After being given the opportunity to lead my team, I knew I would be placed in situations where my public speaking skills would be put to the test. I participated in a



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Toastmasters group early in my career but didn't feel that was enough to hone my skills sufficiently. I needed to experiment and push myself, so I started volunteering at small events and giving presentations that were in my comfort zone and allowed me to speak in front of groups of professionals I did not know. That really helped me develop public speaking and presentation skills that have helped me when working with the leadership in my firm and doing presentations at large events.

Carlos: I started out too focused on myself — achieving success for the sake of recognition and elevating myself for self-satisfaction. I also struggled with listening. I wanted to be heard, yet cared little about what others had to say. Eventually, I came to desire to see the world from others' perspectives and I created a personal growth plan based on the core values of passion, integrity, commitment, knowledge and stewardship that I was taught growing up. I learned that in order to add value, I had to understand what others need and what is expected from me. Now I consciously listen, and try to communicate according to the situation. I've also had to learn not to torture myself when I make a mistake. Instead, I look at a situation or project where I failed, and I learn from it, so that I don't make the same mistake again.

Who are your professional heroes, and why?

Carlos: I have several heroes. First is my brother, whose only option has always been to be the best. By constantly

challenging himself, he has become one of the most recognized electrophysiologists in Latin America. Two others are Pedro Acosta, my former senior manager, and John Davis, former IT director at Nexsen Pruet. Both instilled principles in me, such as a passion for learning, that support my career. Many ILTA members would also fall into my heroes category — Bob DuBois and David Michel, to name two. Both men possess a unique leadership style, and they have equally contributed to making me a better professional by helping me understand the power of volunteering, leadership, networking and communication.

Son: My biggest heroes are my parents. Throughout my life I've seen them run their own businesses, take risks and learn from successes and failures. And no matter what life has thrown at them, they always maintain a high level of professionalism and perseverance. I've learned so many things from them that have helped me in my career, but one of the major lessons was this: Attitude and execution go hand-in-hand; you cannot succeed without both.

Meredith: There are three people from my firm whom I credit for helping make me the professional I am today. Randal Mashburn was my mentor when I started out. He is an exceptional man, and I truly could not have become the KM director without him. Two others I've worked closely with are Jim Hughes, my direct report, and Bill Painter, our Strategic Planning Officer. Both have put a lot of faith in me and have modeled for me professionalism at its best. Outside of my

firm, I can always bounce ideas off of John Alber, the Strategic Officer at Bryan Cave. I met John about three months after law school when I saw him present at a conference. I was so amazed at what he did that I decided that I wanted to do it, too. We became friends and, later, colleagues in ILTA. I consider him an exceptional leader, whose qualities I constantly strive to emulate.

Tell us about your efforts to mentor others and develop their leadership skills.

Son: Being the manager of software development, I manage folks who are typically introverts. Because of the visibility of my group, I feel it's necessary for my team members to be able to professionally present their products and conduct meetings with the firm's leadership. I help them gain confidence by having them conduct internal presentations, demos and codes review, and by "putting them on the spot" with tough questions to simulate what it's like in front of a group of firm or community leaders. I also do one-on-one coaching sessions to discuss areas in which my team members can excel and find growth opportunities.

Meredith: I love being a leader in a lot of different ways. Outside work, I like to volunteer and get involved, so I'm associated with several organizations. As an advisor for a University of Memphis women's chapter, I advise some 70 young women each year. In my 10 years of mentoring those young women, my role has been to help them find their inner strength and define their inner leadership skills. It's been truly one of the most fulfilling things I have ever done in my life.

Within the firm, one the ways I mentor my team members is to give them quick and very direct feedback. After all, how can they be expected to change their behavior if they don't know they've done something wrong? Likewise, how are they ever supposed to feel they've accomplished something if they don't receive praise on a consistent basis? I try to do that with my staff regularly, not just once or twice a year. I also challenge my staff to help me set their goals for the next year. I always love to ask a couple of questions that usually catches them off-guard, like how do you like to be recognized. Every person is different in how they like to be recognized. I want them to feel that whatever the kind of recognition they need – whether it be an email, gift card, being honored at an office event, whatever – I want to recognize them in the way that makes them feel they're part of the team and part of the firm they're not just working for, but always working to make better.

Carlos: Like Meredith, I believe in giving my direct reports feedback as soon as I've seen them doing something wrong or something well. I ask them to reflect on it, and tell me what they learned — assuring them not to be afraid to fail or think outside of the box. I also let them deal directly with attorneys

when I get a request I know that they can handle, so they get the opportunity to develop their communication skills. In addition, from a technical and operational point of view, my team trades responsibilities from time to time, so there's no knowledge gap and they can become well-rounded technology professionals. The author Halford E. Luccok put it well: "No one can whistle a symphony. It takes an orchestra to play it."

Is there any advice you'd give to other young professionals on how to stand out from their peers?

Meredith: The best thing I can tell any young professional is to find yourself, never lose yourself. Each day try to be the best version of yourself you can be. Utilize all of the people around you, so you never stop learning. And don't be afraid of critiques; they help you learn and become better.

Son: My best advice is to always be willing to assist your colleagues — whether you feel it's your area of responsibility or not. People appreciate when you do your own job well, but they really notice when you take that extra effort to help the firm and help others succeed — always be willing to get your hands dirty. With that goes a friendly word of caution: Always be sure to follow through; it's worse to offer and not help, than to not offer.

Carlos: I'd say strive to learn and be prepared every day, and don't be afraid of failure. Set big goals that can be broken into smaller ones, always keeping an eye on the end result being something great and meaningful. As distant and hard to achieve as that may seem, I believe any goal can be achieved with discipline and determination. And don't let "experts" tell you that something cannot be done; prove them wrong. Never give up on your goals and dreams. **ILTA**

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