Topic: My Coworker’s experience with business.

Abstract: My Coworker’s decision to have a family at a very young age essentially forced him into a field of work, and he stayed in it for years. His decision to continue his time in the field of construction was a decision based on the need to support his family, and based on the fact that he was making an immense amount of money. He managed to become one the most profitable contractors in the bay area, eventually hitting economic downturn so bad that it forced him to drop his business and work hourly retail at The Home Depot. My coworker has been at the top of the business of construction, and has fallen all the way to the bottom as an hourly associate, his journey through the business is interesting, but many share similar stories as he.

Key Words: Business, Construction, contractor, economic downturn, carpenter, financial success, financial problems

I have worked at The Home Depot for about five years now. I started there when I was 19 years old. When I first started I worked in the lumber department, there I would have to pull and load lists of materials for contractors. It was non-stop; I was so busy with huge lists of materials, and countless contractors. Savings at that time for the contractors was not of interest, it seemed as if they were making money hand over fist with construction. Five years later it is a different story, we aren’t so busy anymore. I now am responsible for making sales for contractors, the “big shot” contractors do not come in anymore, with the exception of one. He comes in about five days week, at about eight hours per day, he works with me. He now works beside me every week trying to sell to people that are in the same field of work that he used to be in, getting paid per hour a fraction of what he used to pay the people who worked for him. He started off small time in construction
climbing to the point of owning his own company and making an immense amount of money, and falling back down to hourly retail. I have worked with him for about a year now, and I learned his story and he turned out to be one of the most interesting people I have had the luxury of being associated with.

He was born and raised here in the California’ bay area. He is an Irish-American, he asked me to emphasis the Irish. Though he did graduate high school, he had little to no interest in continuing a career where education in its conventional form (school) was the necessary path. He had his first child just after high school, which led to him getting married at the age of 19. His wife’s father was a plumber, “I just knocked up his daughter, I thought he was going to kill me, instead he tells me ‘marry my daughter, and don’t worry I got work for you’” my co-worker told me fallowed by his stoic chuckle. My co-worker spent less then a year working for his father-in-law.

While working for his father in law, he met a licensed contractor who wanted him to work for him as a carpenter, he agreed. He spent the next few years in California as a union Carpenter, mastering the craft. “California carpenters were the best, we had our own way of dong things, and it made work go smoothly and fast. I loved it.” He bragged of the era. His boss at that time planned on moving to Colorado because there was a lot of need for construction, and not enough contractors there to fill the need. My co-worker took his family, now having 2 children, to Colorado. “They paid us the most because we were from California, we changed the way houses were built outside of California, because of the California
corner”. The “California corner” was a term for the specialized technique in framing that was created in California, “I know that doesn’t mean shit to you, but at that time it was a big deal.” He defensively tells me. He spent a few years in Colorado, eventually returning to California to continue his work as a carpenter. He stayed busy, but he noticed the amount of money his various contractors were making so he was lured to becoming a certified licensed contractor and owning his own construction company. He began the process of doing just that. It did not take him long; he had been in the field for so long that he had a strong grasp on just about all the aspects of building.

He got licensed and started his own business; it wasn’t easy at the start. He started his own business at a time when the industry was slowing down; on top of that he didn’t have a really developed plan for running a business. “I was missing the basics for running a business, if I had taken a few classes or something, it would have been smoother in the first year”. In any case he made it through the first year and things began to pick up. He was finding more and more work year after year, and he had employed more workers year after year. He was making enough money to continue to grow his business and keep a strong profit.

His company was growing and growing year after year, eventually becoming one of the most successful construction companies in the bay area. “I had gotten to the point where I was making a lot of money, I paid for my wife to go back to school, I bought myself a bunch of cool toys, a Harley and a boat. Life was good”. He employed many workers, giving them the opportunity he was given, and the
opportunity to learn a trade and get paid for it. “I hired my cousin to work with me, after a few years he started his own company, he was making money, we all were making money.” My co-worker explained. “In the early 2000’s we didn't have to worry about competition, there was that much building going around, it was almost shocking how much money was being made.” Don tells me with a look on his face of excitement.

My brother at that time worked at Johnson Lumber in Morgan Hill, Ca. Doing essentially the same job I do now, catering to contractor’s every need. When asked about Don’s company and whether or not he had worked with them before he said, “Yeah I remember that company, that guy would come in, call, or fax over lists of material every week. He easily spent on average $5,000 every week, nice guy too”.

I also remember him coming to work, never went to the department, instead went the “contractor desk”, handed them a list, then that list was handed to me. Just like all the other contractors I pulled whatever they needed week after week. This larger amount of purchasing for his business went on for a few years, and then at one point it came to a screeching halt.

My co-worker’s business had fell on to hard times. He was not getting the work he was getting only months before. It was not a slow down period; he went from having an extremely successful business, to having trouble finding work. His company was not getting work, and he thought it was just a matter of time before it

would pick up again. He tried to keep his business going to get passed the slow period. It was roughly about a year of attempts to find major construction bids for
his company, it was unsuccessful. He simply could not continue on with the workforce he was employing. He was forced to let go of essentially all his employees. “It was heartbreaking knowing that not only can I not provide for myself anymore, but the times meant I could not help my friends provide for their families either”.

His company had become a one-man job, rarely employing anyone else to work with him. The jobs he was finding were small projects that offered no kind of consistency as far as incoming checks go. The jobs he was getting were backbreaking ones, grunt work. He had to worry about competition as well. He had to bid his jobs at a fraction of the price he would, to get the job over another guy, near the point of having to charge his customer at an hourly rate, which he claimed was “demeaning”. Despite the quality of his work, he was losing jobs to inferior contractors who were not licensed, because the price was right.

Along with losing out on jobs due to the fact that he was being under bid, he was also at the point where his body could not handle the heavy lifting due to his age. My co-worker was forced to look for a more consistent job, retail was his only option. He applied at one retailer, and they called him back a few days after his application was put in. My co-worker was in a vulnerable and desperate situation, he got hired at The Home Depot at an hourly rate that was shameful in comparison to the vast knowledge he had accrued through the many years he had spent in the trade.
At the very retailer he went in on a regular basis making purchases, he now was on the other side of that desk making the sales. He has worked there for a few years now, with no intention of being in the business of construction again. My co-worker said that he couldn't attempt to start bidding jobs again because his age would not permit him to do that. Seemingly every contractor still in business, who comes into The Home Depot, has known my co-worker from previous interaction out in the field of construction. One man told me about a year ago, “You know your co-worker there, he was the best contractor, he was honest. Most contractors you have to hunt down to get your check. One time early in the morning he came to my door with a check. You don’t get that from anyone else in the trade”.

For the entire duration of time I worked with him, not one time did he complain about his situation, or say he deserved more. My co-worker never talked about how “high and mighty” he used to be, he actually never spoke of the good times, until I asked him about it. Now he feels fortunate that he was given a chance to adapt to the time, and instead of complaining he is making the best out of his situation.