

Victor Montgomery - PodCAST Transcript

Kara

Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today, we have a chance to talk to Victor Montgomery. Victor is an information technology alum and currently serves as IT Director of data services at Gaines co insurance, which is a subsidiary of State Farm Insurance Companies. Welcome and thank you for being here.

Victor

Thank you. Thank you for having me. Kara, it's a joy to be back with my Illinois State family.

Kara

This is going to be fun. So let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

Victor

A few reasons. ISU was one of my top choices for schooling, but the main reason was that financially, it just made sense. Originally, I wanted to major in architecture, and I wanted to get away from Illinois, so my choice was Arizona State University. They had a very great architecture program, but for things being what they were, I had to transition from that. And ISU was a school that I visited during a senior trip. And you know, I enjoyed the serene, calm state of normal Illinois, and I thought that that would be a great choice of a school. It wasn't too far from my hometown of Chicago, so anytime I needed to get back home, you know, I could just go up the road and be there. So it just made sense many years later, it still was the perfect choice for me.

Kara

And So walk me through how you got from architecture to information technology. What did that path look like?

Victor

Great question. So originally, you know, I wanted to do something dealing with math, like, I love numbers, I love geometry, I love angles. So, you know, architecture was, was just a natural fit for me. When I chose to go to Illinois State, that pathway was no longer available in the way that I wanted. So I decided to, you know, double down on my numbers passion, and I chose to study accounting. I know we'll talk a bit about being a first generational college student in a moment, but, you know, I didn't realize that accounting wouldn't necessarily do the things that I wanted from a math standpoint, you know, it was a bit different than what I was expecting. So I happened to have a roommate that was in computer science, and I saw some of the things that he was doing, and I wanted to do those same things. So originally, I pivoted from accounting at Illinois State University as a major to computer science, which eventually led me to the Information Technology pathway. But again, it's one of those things that was a life changer, and now here I am, many months later still in that same discipline, leveraging some of the knowledge that I gained from Illinois State, you know, 2000 through 2004

Kara

and I have to ask, Was that roommate of yours? Did it happen to be a random roommate? Or did you know this individual? It was a random roommate?

Victor

It was.

Kara

That's amazing.

Victor

And, so for all of the students you know who sometimes make choices later in the process, I happen to have six roommates at that time, you know, because I decided to go to Illinois State a little bit later in the in the process. I had six roommates, and I used to just stare at this roommate doing his computer science work. And it was very intriguing. It reminded me of kind of that thing I wanted to get from studying math, although I didn't want to be a math major, right? So seeing him do that random roommate, it intrigued me, and here we are, many years later.

Kara

Well, talk about meant to be. I love that story, and you touched on it. Victor, I know you were a first generation college student. So what advice do you have for other first generation students as they start to explore this space?

Victor

It's important as a first generation student, that you don't silo yourself, right? One of the things that I did, you know, coming from Chicago, coming from a single family home, being a first generation student, I just wanted to finish. I wanted to complete college. I didn't want to return home and say, Yes, I started something, but I was unable to complete it, right? So my focus was strictly on doing the best I can from a class work standpoint. Now, that's noble, it's honorable. That's what you're in school for. But I missed out on some of the connectivity. Of the university. You know, I didn't participate in as many networking opportunities as I probably should have. I didn't build as many relationships, originally, with professors that I should have that would have helped me navigate college in a much easier fashion as an employer now, and I go to college campuses, and I engage with the student organizations, I engage with professors, I realize how that connectivity creates opportunity, right? So one of the things that I do as I'm mentoring students is I share with them that story. You know, don't limit yourself to your dorm room, in the classroom right? Ensure that you're observing what activities are occurring at your university, understand what's going on at the quad, understand what student organizations align to your major and participate. You know, don't just join, participate, be an active member, because you never know what doors that will open for you. I've done similar things, you know, post grad recruiting students, and many times, I'm going to those student organizations to find the members that you know are really engaged and providing insights to the group. So what I would tell any first generation student is it's more than just completing. It's about being engaged, and it's about the experience as well. Connectivity creates opportunity.

Kara

I love that I wrote it down. Thank you for that. I think that's fantastic advice for our first generation students, but also for any of our students. So as you're here, you're completing your time on campus and you get your degree. What was that initial job search like for you, and where did it lead?

Victor

Oh, can I be extremely transparent? It was nerve wracking. So, you know, we have to take all the gloves off. If I'm first generation, that means that, you know, I wanted to go into the corporate space, but I didn't have anyone to give me guidance and insights on what that process looked like. And as I said, I wasn't engaging with the campus in a way. I wasn't engaging with career services, you know, I wasn't doing the things that probably would have given me insights into how to approach that search. So, you know, I kind of was, uh, you know, just just randomly engaging with companies, and I didn't know to do research on companies prior to talking to them, so I can align my skill sets with their needs, right? I had no understanding of that. I figured, if I can go talk to some people and they see how amazing of a student I was that they'd automatically just want me at their companies, and that that wasn't necessarily the case, right? So that initial job search was a bit nerve wracking. Initially, it felt a bit defeating, because I'm like, I'm a really great student. Why am I not getting the opportunities? But you know, I happen to run into some people within the Bloomington Normal Community that took interest in me, and they began to give me some additional guidance on how I could approach the search. They gave me guidance on doing research on companies prior to the career fair, and that helped tremendously, because at that point, when I went to speak with the companies, I was then able to align, like my talents, my skill sets, with things that I read about their company and what they were looking for. And it was like magic. Yeah, things started to happen. I started to get job offers, so that was pretty amazing. The other piece I'll throw in there is that, you know, I didn't start going to career fair as my freshman sophomore year. I started my junior year, I would encourage every student, even if you do not get an opportunity, get your feet wet, start going as early as possible. Go your freshman year, get a feel for what that environment is like, because that's just the pre lo to your job, search for your first entry level job.

Kara

That's great advice, and I will follow that up with asking you, How do students overcome that nerve barrier, right?

Victor

I think they hear career fair, especially if they're a freshman or sophomore, they know they're going to have to talk to strangers. They know they're going to have to, you know, dress up a little bit. How can they overcome the nerves and present their best self in a situation like that? That's a really good question. A thing that I do, and the thing that I promote others to do, is when you're in there, the first thing is research, right? So research about an organization you know

helps you overcome, you know, at least a knowledge barrier, because at least you'll feel like you have something to talk to them about. And that doesn't mean you have to go, do you know hours of research you know, just capture a few notes that you know will be beneficial in your conversation. But as you approach the career fair, I would find a couple of companies that maybe I'm not interested in, just to talk to them first so I can get the game day jitters out. And when you get the momentum, that's when you begin to engage the companies that you're really interested in. I always tell people, you're at a career fair, maybe 45 minutes to an hour. That's an hour of what could be the rest of your life, right? So if you're the type of person that you know, don't enjoy engaging with people, maybe you're more introverted and you like to reflect a bit. It's an hour. This is an hour that you're just going to have to go out there showcase who you are, what you are, why you are, how special you are. So you can set yourself up for the rest of your life, and you don't have to be perfect. You don't have to minimize your flaws, if you have them, embrace them, but know that there's something unique about you that makes you special to a company, and you're going to find that right match. So the nerves are going to be there, that's okay, but don't allow the nerves to dictate, you know, your ability to set yourself up for the rest of your life.

Kara

That's a great perspective. Thank you. And so give us the Cliffs Notes version: you find this entry level job after, you know, a little bit of a nerve wracking search. You had some mentoring and coaching along the way. Tell us about that. And then, how did you get from that job to now being a director of it, right? That's a great title, and probably one that you would have been really excited about as a 22 year old. So kind of walk us through what that path looked like.

Victor

Oh, it was a great path. You know, for me, being at State Farm. You know, I just celebrated 20 years. And I know currently I'm aligned to Gaines CO on a temporary assignment, but I celebrated 20 years with State Farm in December and the pathway coming in I would have never, you know, aligned myself to the experiences I had today, but it occurred because of intentionality, right? When I stepped into State Farm, the beauty of having those mentors that I engaged with that gave me the insights about the career fair, they also assisted me with understanding how to navigate the organization. So the first piece that I would just say from a cliff notes version is I did my job very well, right? So I came in as a software developer, software engineer. I ensured that, you know, the assignments that were aligned to me, that I did them

with quality, and if I ever had a mistake in it, I stood up and accepted it, right? I didn't try to hide from it. I didn't make excuses. I think that's a very important piece, because sometimes when we make mistakes, especially within our corporate career, we try to make excuses. And you know that that really hits at our credibility, right? So if you want to stand out, don't hide from your mistakes. Don't hide from your failures, embrace them. And so in doing that, you know, I was able to create a brand for myself, of someone that delivered on what he said he was going to deliver on, and when he didn't deliver on it, he didn't hide, right? And that allowed me to get many other opportunities within the organization. I was able to go from being that software engineer, to being a team lead, to doing a leadership development assignment in HR, which was something completely different than the technical work that I was familiar with, and it allowed me to show that, you know, I had more tools in my toolbox, and I was able to do a lot more than what was expected of me. I moved from doing that HR road to pivoting and relocating from Bloomington, normal Illinois, to Atlanta, Georgia, where I was entrusted to help stand up an entire department in a new location, which that was a lot of fun and a lot of hard work. But again, when you have successes, you gain more visibility within an org, within the organization, and that's what occurred for me. So I had success. And again, it's not like I didn't have failures in that as well, but my successes outweigh the failures, and I continue to get more opportunity. So, you know, as they needed leaders that they knew, you know, could build teams quickly, influence change and engage with business partners. You know, I was one of the names that, you know, consistently floated to the top, and that happens even still to today, which is why I was able to get an opportunity to pivot from State Farm for a period to go to a completely different company to provide value. And how often do you get to do that? You know, you get to work for two companies at once, you know? So it's a I've had an amazing journey.

Kara

Well, and I know you shared with me, before we started recording, that you have taken part in a leadership program. So I'm curious between your career and your leadership program, how would you describe your leadership style? And how do you put that into practice on a daily basis?

Victor

I love that question because you know when you think leadership style many times. You know, if you're a pace pilot person, you think red, someone that's ultra aggressive, you know they're all about results, and they just want to, want to get to the end goal no matter what, and there's a

place for that at times. But me, I'm a builder. I'm a person that believes no one of us is greater than any other of us, and we're only as good as the weakest one in our group. And so my style is one that's about encouraging, investing in my people, helping to build skill set. I believe in building the bridges that's going to assist groups with getting to the other side, right? So I'm very, very intentional. I believe in listening before talking. And what that means is, you know, sometimes with title, people don't always tell you what they truly mean, right? So I believe in listening to their heart, right? Because, because sometimes you can tell me the the prettiest of words, but I understand that that's not really what you mean and what you want, but you're being respectful of title, right? So I encourage my people. I like getting in a foxhole with my people. You know, I'm never asking them to do something that I'm not willing to consider myself understanding that there's a different level of accountability. And, you know, whereas I might not be as tactical as my people when it comes to executing on the work. I want them to understand that I have their back and everything that they're doing. And when we make a mistake, I make a mistake, and I'll put my hand up as if I'm the one that did it right. So when you think about just being authentic, being yourself, being real, like that's my approach. I'm a kid, and I always say this, granted, I'm not a kid anymore. When I just say I'm a kid from Chicago who's trying to make his way. And I carry that with me, because I understand that those learnings from my youth, the things that I was exposed to, it prepared me for these moments, and so I allow that to be my North Star when it comes to leadership, like I believe in helping others grow to their full potential well.

Kara

And what I appreciate about this perspective is that you spend time walking the walk too, because I know you spend time giving back to the community, and this is often in the role of a mentor or a coach. So tell us both about the importance of that, but also, how do you make time for that?

Victor

Right? There's so many demands on our time and on our schedule. So talk about prioritizing that, yeah, so you know, just going to the importance of it first. You know, just thinking back to earlier in our conversation when we talk about being first generation and you know the things that you don't know. And fortunately for me, I just so happened to stumble upon a mentor coach that was able to give me guidance that, to this day, is still helpful. So in turn, you know, I've been given much, so I have the expectation that I'm going to give much. Right? Someone may not

understand what they don't know, and they don't even know to ask the questions about what they don't know. So it's up to us that, you know, have the experience, you know, have the exposure to bring them along, and sometimes that means exposing the good and the bad of ourselves, right, being vulnerable. I believe that's extremely important as you're helping to grow other people like you know, I don't want you to make the same mistakes I've made, and if I can help you accelerate getting from point A to point B, who am I not to do that? If I know the shortcuts while in a way that you still can learn the necessary skills, then I should expose you to those so you, in turn, can pay it back for that next person that's coming along. And that's how, you know, in my view, we get better as a society. We get better in this corporate environment, and our communities get better. And then when we think about just, you know, the timing, the ability to prioritize and allocate space for this, you do what you love, and if you love that thing, you're going to create an avenue for it to occur. I'll be honest, I am not the Hallmark representation of sleep. And why do I say that? Because I sacrifice it in order to participate in activities where I can give back to others. I cannot execute on everything that I do within a general, normal work day. So what I find myself doing is prepping, like I'll prep for a mentorship session at midnight. You know, although the mentorship session may occur during the day, but I want to ensure I give the individual the best of myself, they have no clue that I'm sacrificing time in that way, but that's how much I care about their success. Is that I'm going to disrupt whatever I can on my end so I can fully invest in them. So for me, you know, to get these things to happen, to make space for it, either I'm sacrificing time or I'm figuring out a way to incorporate it into my day to day work, right? We're talking about, you know, being a part of groups. I was doing a session where I was doing evaluations, executive evaluation for a group going through a leadership program. Well, I just made that a part of my work day. And, you know, I got my company to sign off on the fact that, you know, this is a good investment of our time, because those individuals that are going through the program is getting exposure to a company now that believes in investing in people. So it's like it's an opportunity to brand our company, while I get to provide my expertise to the group as well.

Kara

And I think you bring up a good point as far as making some of these activities part of your work day, when I think about students that are headed into the job market and job searching, is there a way that they can be cognizant of that when they're talking to future employers? How can they find a place that supports their values, whether that value is leadership training and professional

development or maybe time off for community service. How do you recommend a student start a conversation like that?

Victor

Yeah. So, so a couple of things you know, you definitely, as a student, wants to go out to those company portals, to their websites and see what information they're publicly providing, in regards to continued education, in regards to community involvement, maybe what awards have they won, you know, around that topic, whatever is in alignment with things that you're passionate about, see if they publicly expose You to those activities. And then beyond that, you can begin to, yeah, as you go to career fairs, you can ask about company culture. You can ask about, you know, the ability to engage in community activity. What do they do? Especially, let's just say, because I'm biased, it's around, you know, software engineering, and maybe you want to teach coding within the community. Well, okay, does your company do this already? Or are you a part of a program that will allow me to volunteer in that way? And if I volunteer, is it paid time off, or is it just, you know, I would have to take vacation to volunteer like that's very fair questioning. And because companies are competing for talent in this day and age, you know that can be a game changer, and companies understand this. In addition to that, I will leverage my online networking. So if you're on LinkedIn, go to LinkedIn, see people that work for those companies. And a lot of times when they're participating in these activities, they will post about it, and they will attach pictures and different things like that to showcase their engagement. So that also will give you insights into different things that companies may be involved in, or the people of those companies may have approval to be involved in.

Kara

That's great advice. Thank you. Well, Victor, this has been so insightful, and we are going to finish with a speed round, just to get to know you a little bit better. So go with your first instinct on these questions... Are you a morning person or a night owl?

Victor

Night Owl.

Kara

I wondered that when you referenced prepping at midnight... So what is your go to breakfast?

Victor

Cereal.

Kara

I love that. Maybe you are a kid... And what is your favorite memory from your time at ISU?

Victor

Oh, my favorite memory would have to be attending red birds, basketball games.

Kara

Nice... if you had time in your day, which is questionable at this point, to start a new hobby. What would it be?

Victor

Oh, singing.

Kara

What's the best trip you've ever taken?

Victor:

I did a cruise, and part of the cruise was to Jamaica. It was awesome.

Kara

Nice. And I ask everybody that comes on the podcast, Avanti gondola, or pub two cheese balls?

Victor

Let me get the gondola. That sweet bread is amazing.

Kara

And one last question, if you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Victor

I would say, enjoy the experience. Enjoy the process. Don't limit yourself. Don't silo yourself. Ensure you're networking with those around you. Who is a peer today could be a business partner tomorrow. So keep your eyes open.

Kara

Well, thank you and thanks again for being here. That was Victor Montgomery, IT Director of data services at Gaines co insurance. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.