



Predictive Planning
Norkay

Published: 2009

Categorie(s):

Tag(s): fiction "short story" norkay

“It has been two weeks since I had quit my job” said Sudhir.

He is my childhood friend and he had a very high paying and much envied job in the ‘New products’ division in the Indian office of a Fortune500 software company. I am meeting Sudhir after a gap of more than five years. We are sitting at a restaurant. There are not too many customers in the restaurant as it is late morning but too early for lunch for most people.

The company that Sudhir worked for is a highly admired software firm and people treasure the opportunity to work there and once people get in there, they only leave the company when they retire. Here I am using the term people loosely - when I said people I actually meant ‘techies’ in the software field. Anyway my friend Sudhir had joined that company when they recruited him in a campus interview about 15 years ago. He used to tell me that he was a very well respected employee and had the designation of ‘Principal Software Architect’ which is a highly coveted position within his company. He did not tell me that he quit his job when we spoke on the phone the previous day.

So now I was quite surprised to learn that he had quit his well regarded job. I was in mild disbelief. I said “You are not serious! – are you?”

“Why would I joke about such a serious matter?” said Sudhir.

Still in disbelief, I asked in an enquiring tone “Why have you chosen to quit that comfortable and prestigious job?”

Sudhir replied “It is a fair and reasonable question. To tell you the truth, in my case, it is more accurate to say that ‘I was asked to go’ rather than to say ‘I had quit my job’ which makes it look like I left on my own accord.”

Then that naturally led to my next question as to why, he, who was a very ‘well respected employee’ was asked to go.

Sudhir started telling me what led to his current predicament.....

It all began three years ago on a warm summer morning in the month of May. I sought a one-on-one meeting with Brian Carter. He was the Vice President of the new products division where I worked. Brian had started as a sales person in the company and rose from the ranks to become the President of an important division in our company. He turned the 'New products' division into a cash cow by rolling out successful products and that made him one of the most influential persons in our company. Although Brian was the head of our division, he was very accessible and very supportive of bold new ideas. I was sitting across the fine Mahogany table from Brian in his plush corner office.

"So you are proposing that you would work on this computer program that predicts the time and date of the death of a person, given that person's date, time and the place of birth?" Asked Brian.

"Yes" I said "I think it will become the next big revenue earner for our company".

"And how do you suggest that we make money out of it?" questioned Brian - he always asks pointed questions.

"Well, as you know, we humans do not like surprises and try to plan for everything ahead of time to the greatest extent possible. As much as we hate surprises, every living being and that includes us, is bound to be surprised by 'Death'. While 'Death' in itself is not a surprise, the 'time of the death' is - because no person ever knows when that person is going to die. And I think if a person knows the time of his/her death, then, he or she can be better prepared for the only certain eventuality in one's life"

"So you think people would pay money to know the day and time of their death?"

"Yes, I think most people will, if not all" I replied

"What are you going to use as the basis of your computer program?" asked Brian, still not very convinced about the whole thing.

"My program would be based on ancient Indian astrological science called 'Jyotish Sastra' which is a branch of ancient vedic sciences, that deals with the prediction of a person's future based on the date, time and place of a person's birth and the alignment and position of various planets and other celestial bodies at that time"

I continued "It involves very intense and complex mathematical computations involving several variables. Normally when one goes through this prediction process manually, one does some approximations to reduce the mathematical complexity at the expense of foregoing some of the accuracy of the prediction"

"Hmm... that is fascinating" said Brian, I could see him getting interested in this, and that is a very encouraging sign. He continued " Is it possible, with this program of yours to predict not only the time of the death but how it is going to occur"

I can see that Brian is starting to already think about other more marketable features. Not for no reason, his business savvy is well regarded in the company.

I replied "May be, May be not, at this point I just want to focus on writing a program that predicts the time of death accurately".

"If a person knows not only when that person is going to die but also how, then, may be that person can try to avoid the situation or circumstance causing that person's death" Brian persisted.

This was the question that I was expecting to hear but was hoping not to hear. So I had no alternative but to digress and narrate the story of the great astrologer Varah Mihir...

Around 56B.C.E , there lived a great astrologer called Mihir. He was an astrologer in the court of King Vikramadhithya. He was a great sage and an accomplished scholar. The King had a son and Mihir cast the horoscope of the prince, using his knowledge of Jyotish Sastra. He predicted that the prince would be killed by a varaha (boar) and specified the date and time of when that was going to happen. He also mentioned to the King that no human remedies could avert the danger and save the prince from the jaws of death. Even after being told of the futility of any human remedies, King Vikramadhithya made sure that the prince was always well guarded and well taken care of.

Years passed and finally the fateful day predicted by Mihir arrived. The prince was in good health and the palace and particularly the section of the palace where the prince lived, was well guarded. On the morning of the fateful day, the king requested Mihir to verify his computations and confirm his prediction again. No one had really believed any harm could come to the Prince from a boar or any other wild animal as all access to the prince's palace was guarded by a huge army.

The prince was asked to stay on the seventh floor, and all the staircases were fully guarded. The king was confident that his son was safe. At hourly intervals a soldier was asked to give information about the prince's well being. The King kept getting information that the prince was 'well and doing fine' even after the predicted time of the prince's death.

Convinced by that information, the King had told Mihir that his son had avoided death. Mihir did not agree. He calmly told the king that the prince had died at the predicted time.

The king along with his entourage then went to where the prince was, to see for himself. The king went to the seventh floor of prince's palace, where prince's friends were keeping him company by playing games etc.... When asked about the prince they told him that the prince was playing with them all along and that only a little while ago, the prince had gone out to the adjacent open terrace.

The King and his entourage rushed to the open terrace and to their shock and grief found the prince lying dead in a pool of blood. They found that his heart was pierced by the iron claw of a boar statue. When the palace was constructed, the architect had erected a flagpole and fixed a statue of a boar made of iron and mortar at the top of the palace. Just before the predicted time, the prince felt uneasy and went to the open terrace to have fresh air. Exactly at the predicted time, a strong wind broke the flagpole and the boar statue fell down on the prince and the iron claw pierced the chest of the prince killing him. The King awarded the title "Varaha" which means boar to Mihir and from that day onwards Mihir became known as Varah Mihir.

I concluded the story of Varah Mihir and asked "Do you see the futility of efforts in evading death as proved in the above story?"

Brian appeared to agree and asked "Alright Sudhir what do you think you will need from the company?"

"I will need a lab equipped with a super computer cluster which I will use to execute and validate my programs which will have extremely complex mathematical computations. We will need lab animals with very short life expectancies, so we can track their birth and death and try to predict the time of their death. I will also need a small testing team to device and run test cases against my programs to verify the accuracy of prediction I will handle all the programming myself as I will be using my knowledge of Jyotish Sastra which I had learnt from my grand father who was a Sanskrit scholar"

"Sounds good. Let us meet again to discuss the details and come up with the budget and a project plan that I can present to the Board to get the approval" said Brian and ended our meeting.

Soon afterwards Brian got me all the approvals and the funding. I had started working on the project and time just flew by. Since our company considered this project to be a highly classified project, most employees of our company were not aware of the details of this project. I had single handedly written all the programs and only I had the access to the source code. Finally after nearly three years of back breaking hard work and extremely intense and successful testing by the testing team working for me, my computer program to predict the death was ready for the prime time.

The company had spent millions and was eager to see some returns on the massive investment. It had planned to offer a service of predicting 'the time of death' for a fee. Whoever wanted to utilize this service would give us his/her date, time and place of birth and pay the fee. We would then run those details through my program and predict that person's time of death. The company had started making preparations for advertising this service to make the general public aware of the impending big launch of the service. The company had named this service "Predictive Planning" carefully avoiding any negative connotation arising from the actual nature of this service.

Our company's "Predictive Planning" service was successfully launched and there was a huge public demand worldwide for this service on the very first day – Thanks to the extensive advertising campaign in the news papers and TV channels by our company. The Predictive Planning service became a huge success worldwide. People talked about it everywhere. There were many news items worldwide about it in the news papers, TV channels and the internet blogs. There did not seem to be any limit to the demand for this service and it started to turn into a big revenue generator for our company.

A few months after the launch of our company's Predictive Planning service, the news papers, TV channels had started reporting a sudden and big surge in crime rate worldwide. This surge in crime rate appears to have started over the last few weeks and appeared to get worse each day. I started wondering if it had anything to do with our company's new service. Suddenly I saw the connection. The people who utilized this service fell into two categories – Ordinary people and Criminals.

Ordinary people who used our company's service to learn about the time of their death reacted in one of the following ways...

If it was determined that they would live a full life then they made no changes to their life style.

If it was determined that they have a few years left then they started to plan for the benefit of their family.

If it was determined that they have only few days or weeks left to live then they wanted to enjoy their life to the fullest. Unfortunately some of these people then decided to ignore the line between 'the Good and the Bad' and 'the right and the wrong'. This resulted in the surge in crime rate.

Criminals who used our company's service to learn about the time of their death used that knowledge to commit their crimes with utter fearlessness and this further contributed to a surge in the crime rate.

This means that as more and more people knew about the 'time of their death', this surge in crime rate would only worsen. This is an unexpected consequence of a previously unavailable knowledge being available to people now. Knowledge is power and not all the people are capable of using that power responsibly. Oh God, What have I done... I scheduled a meeting with Brian and told him about what I discovered and told him that we need to stop our service. Brian said there was no direct proof that the increased crime rate is linked to the service provided by our company. He refused to stop it.

Some more months passed. There was a clear uptrend in the crime rate and in most cases the perpetrator died soon after the crime was committed. In my mind there was no doubt about the connection between our company's predictive planning service and the uptrend in the crime rate. I was lying in the bed but was unable to sleep as I started to despair and wanted to do something to stop our company's predictive planning service. Slowly a plan started taking shape in my head and I eventually slipped into a deep slumber.

The next morning, I took a quick shower and headed back to my office. Back in my office I went over my plan again and again in my head. Around 3 pm that day I came to a decision. I had logged on to the super computer cluster and modified the program code to introduce a very small error in its intricate algorithm that is used to predict the time of death. I had then made sure that the error got propagated to back up copies so that there was no possibility of correct source code recovery from backup copies. This was all possible because of the super user access that I had to the computer systems.

No one noticed anything astray initially, but the predictive planning service has started predicting the time of death incorrectly. Over a period of a few months the service lost the credibility. My company had conducted an internal investigation but could not conclusively establish what the cause was.

Brian was suspicious that I was somehow involved. He asked me a couple of times if I caused it somehow but I feigned innocence. I was given four weeks to fix the problem and I did precisely nothing to fix it in those four weeks and strangely felt good about doing nothing. At the end of the four weeks I was summoned into Brian's office by Brian and a HR representative and was informed that I got fired. On hearing that, an immense sense of relief and peace had descended on me.

I went home and told my wife Amukta that I became unemployed unexpectedly and what led to my firing.

She said "May be instead of writing a program to predict 'the time of one's death', if you had written a program to predict the 'time of one's firing from one's job' then you could still be having your job today"

Thus Sudhir concluded his story about the circumstances that led to the loss of his job. I did not know what to say. Neither of us talked for a little while.

Then he said "Now that you know how I ended up in my current predicament of not only losing my job but also not being able to use my software industry skills anywhere else, I am sure you are now wondering as to what kind of job I would be having in future. Honestly I do not know the answer myself....no wait a minute... may be I know the answer.... I think I might become a fortune teller!"

As we were parting, Sudhir said "Never empower people with more power than they are capable of handling!"

The End



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