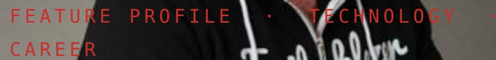

FEATURE PROFILE · TECHNOLOGY · CAREER

One Thing Led to *Another*

Steve Ruble didn't plan any of it. He said yes to interesting problems, stayed curious longer than most people thought was useful, and ended up present at a surprising number of things that mattered. He's still not entirely sure how to explain it.

DALLAS, TEXAS MARCH 2026

STEVENRUBLE.COM

In rural Arkansas in the early 1980s, Steve Ruble was the kid who loved English class and played saxophone in the school band. He liked writing. He liked music. He had no particular direction beyond that, just a general sense that both of those things were worth doing.

Then a single TRS-80 computer arrived at his school.

He didn't know what it was. He sat down and started trying to make it do things with code. Hours passed. He came back the next day and did it again. Nobody told him to. There was no goal. It was a puzzle he couldn't put down.

His father wanted him to be an accountant. Stable, predictable, nine-to-five. That plan ended during the final exam of Accounting 101, when Steve had what he now describes simply as a panic attack. *Not for me* is his complete review of the profession.

What he didn't know then — he wouldn't find out until his forties — was that he has dyscalculia. A neurological condition, a form of math dyslexia, that makes numerical processing genuinely hard. The kid his father wanted to crunch numbers for a living was wired to struggle with numbers. Nobody knew. Not his father. Not his teachers. Not Steve.

College wandered from there. Accounting first, because his father asked. Then youth ministry. Then journalism, because he liked writing and wanted to communicate things. Then pre-law. Then a semester in Italy that transformed him in ways that took years to fully understand — the world was so much larger than Arkansas had suggested, and he came back a different person, knowing with complete certainty that he would never live or work there again.

His father offered to fund exactly one more year. That sent him to an academic advisor.

Steve had been taking computer classes every semester — not as a plan, just because they were puzzles he enjoyed. When the advisor spread his transcript on the desk, the answer was already in it.

Hm. This is strange. It looks like you're a Computer Information Systems major and can graduate in a year.

Steve slapped his hand on the desk. *That's my major. What is it?*

The accounting gave him business fluency. The journalism gave him an instinct for communication. Italy gave him ease in unfamiliar rooms. Andersen Consulting — one of the most respected firms in

the world at the time — hired him because of all of this. He was twenty-two. He had never done anything like it before.

The work in those early years was physical in ways that are hard to picture now. He hand-wrote code on paper and submitted it to key-punch operators by 7pm. Came in the next morning to find out if it ran. An error meant losing the full day — and a senior consultant all over you for it. No instant feedback. No debugging in real time. Just the next morning and whatever it brought.

Most of what followed was ordinary. Corporate applications. Whatever methodology was fashionable that year. He was one person inside larger teams, doing work that got done and, often, got forgotten. Most of consulting is this. Most of technology is this.

But occasionally, something turned out to matter.

He built the billing backbone that let Sprint operate as a national long-distance carrier — the system that processed every call, every charge, at scale across the country. He worked on the safety tracking system for Comanche Peak Nuclear Power Plant: radiation and chemical exposure logged for every valve, every pipe, every sensor in a facility where a single untracked failure can make national news. He worked alongside someone who had been at Three Mile Island in 1979. That context was not background. It was the weight under which every decision got made.

Systems like those don't get replaced on a schedule. Several he built in that era ran for decades. Some almost certainly still do.

He could feel the difference while it was happening. But what he couldn't do — then or for a long time after — was explain it to anyone else.

His mother called him sometime in the mid-1990s.

Steve, she said. *We don't understand what you do. We just need to know — is it legal? Can you make a living doing this long term?*

He was stunned. The gap between what he was building and what the people who loved him could see was wider than he'd realized. He couldn't explain himself at family gatherings or dinner parties. He just did something with computers that somehow mattered and couldn't be described.

The irony settled in slowly. The kid who loved English class. Who tried journalism because he wanted to communicate things. Couldn't explain what he did for a living to his own mother.

He still doesn't entirely have the words for it.

RIGHT IDEA, WRONG DECADE

A trucking company asked if technology could digitize maps for route optimization — bridge heights, weight limits, fastest paths between any two points. He spent weeks on it. The hardware couldn't do it. What he was trying to build in 1992 became Google Maps twenty years later.

For another client, he spent weeks trying to get a camera to notice when a convenience store freezer was running low on beer and send a notification. Image processing. Video transmission rates. Making a machine see and decide. The technology wasn't ready. What he was exploring in the mid-1990s is what computer vision became thirty years later.

Neither felt like failure. They were interesting problems the technology couldn't solve yet. He moved on. You couldn't tell from the inside which moments were going to matter.

> GULF OF MEXICO · 1994
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> The Compaq Portable II weighed nearly 24 pounds. It had a 9-inch CRT monitor that folded into a keyboard and was worth close to $5,000. For a project testing remote connectivity at Halliburton drilling sites across Mexico, Venezuela, and Trinidad, someone had built it a custom road case — the foam-lined, latched kind that bands use to ship amplifiers.
>
> Steve still had to check it as luggage.
>
> He crossed the Gulf of Mexico in a small skiff with the case strapped beside him, waves coming over the bow, willing the latches to hold. The question he was trying to answer: could oil drilling sites in remote locations connect to company systems at all? He proved they could. The connection wasn't clean — the code needed extra error-checking logic to catch retransmission failures and make sure everything actually made it back to headquarters — but it worked. Most people would file that trip under stressful. He filed it under interesting.
>
> He got home. Weeks later, his daughter was born.

A COFFEE, THEN A PROBLEM, THEN SOMETHING NOBODY HAD DONE

By the late 1990s Steve was at IBM, focused on selling and delivering technology consulting to telecom companies across Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana. IBM had burned relationships across the region. He was walking into offices where the company was effectively blacklisted. Cold calls that went nowhere.

One VP agreed to let him bring her a coffee for five minutes. He kept showing up. Five minutes became a monthly conversation. One day she mentioned a problem. He said he could personally fix it — no team needed. IBM charged $70,000 for a few weeks of his work. That got him in the door.

What came next was something nobody had done. In 2000, Amazon had been selling books online for five years. Buying a book is simple: pick it, pay, ship. What nobody had solved was selling a mobile phone online — carrier plan attached, phone number assigned, service activated in real time, no store visit. The data had to move between systems never designed to talk to each other, fast enough that a customer wouldn't notice.

Steve sold the engagement. He had no formal sales training — he had figured out, call by call, how to get in front of people with real problems and make them believe he could solve them. Then he led the team of hundreds that built the system, on IBM's brand-new WebSphere platform, so new that IBM engineers were pushing patches practically in real time alongside the build.

They launched on Black Friday 2000. One shot. No soft launch. The entire marketing machine behind Cingular Wireless pointed at that date. On time. On budget.

The first person who ever bought a mobile phone and activated service online did it through a system his team built. That had never happened anywhere in the world before that day.

It was cool, he says. *That's really what I was chasing.*

Around the same time, a separate IBM team was asking a different question: could employees work from home, full time? This was 1999. Downloading a day's worth of email could take an hour over dial-up. Video calls were science fiction.

Steve volunteered for the research team. Their conclusion: remote work was possible, but only with one missing piece — instant messaging. Short, real-time text between people. Not email. Not calls. IBM built it into their distributed work tools and drew a second conclusion: if people can work from anywhere, companies need less dedicated office space. They built a desk reservation app so employees could book a workspace for the day instead of owning one permanently.

Steve Ruble has worked from home ever since. When the pandemic forced the entire working world to sort out remote work in 2020, he had been doing it for twenty-one years. His colleagues found this mildly astonishing. He found their surprise mildly amusing.

Steve also heard about a new IBM R&D project asking a strange question: what if a phone wasn't just a phone? Researchers in Korea were working on touchscreens. Engineers in the UK on voice commands. Chip designers in California on the hardware. He volunteered. His piece was the communication layer — how a single device could handle email, texts, a pager, even fax, all through a finger on a glass screen.

They pitched it to telecom executives. Nobody bit.

In January 2007, Steve Jobs walked onto a stage and introduced the iPhone.

I had zero idea, Steve says. *We were just asking what if.*

THE DOT-COM BUST AND A CFO WITH A LONG MEMORY

Around 2002, because of the dot-com crash, Steve Ruble couldn't find another job. The market had collapsed. Companies weren't hiring.

He sent his resume to a recruiter. She called back and told him, politely but directly, that she didn't believe it. It couldn't be accurate. He must have overstated things. He tried to explain. She wasn't persuaded.

He felt the same thing he'd felt in the guidance counselor's office. Defeated. Unseen. The resume was accurate.

He started his own consulting firm because the doors weren't opening. He had one client already. Years earlier, he'd been called into a conference room where the CFO and his team had been stuck for days — whiteboards and papers taped to the walls, half-formed ideas going nowhere. Steve walked in, picked up a marker, and started moving around the room. Making connections. Scratching things out. A few minutes later he stopped: *this is what you need to do.* Explained the path forward, flagged the things to avoid, and walked out. The CFO looked at his team: *do it just like he said.* No debate.

That CFO was now running a national outdoor retailer. He brought Steve in before the new executive team had even started. Within a month of that team beginning to rebuild the company, Steve was already there. That was enough.

The company — Camping World — was in bad shape. Siloed data, no process discipline, nothing you need to operate and grow a business. Steve spent ten years fixing it: every department, every system, every process that touched a real decision. He assessed what was broken, determined what needed to change, and changed it. He was not popular for it. *I didn't have a great reputation internally*, he says. *I was changing everything for everyone. But I got it done.*

The company grew from twenty-three stores to several hundred. It went public. You don't go public with broken systems. The foundation held.

In 2013, they hired him directly. He recommended Salesforce as the growth platform, then led it for nine years: 7,500 licenses, 20 million customer records processed every night, a custom iOS tablet application built for 5,000 sales associates on the floor. During those same years, he was part of an

early online community helping a small New Zealand company shape an issue-tracking tool they were building. That tool is now called JIRA. It's used by millions of teams worldwide.

He is candid about one thing: he has never been good at capturing credit for what he builds. *Not a huge regret*, he says. *But I never had a mentor who helped me navigate that stuff. I just figured it out as I went — and I know I missed some things.* Patents he probably could have claimed. Compensation that didn't match what he was contributing. The Camping World IPO produced wealth. Just not for him, not in the way it could have.

SALESFORCE, A STAGE, AND SEVERAL MILLION VIEWS

In 2017, Salesforce was building a new product. The idea: let companies create their own employee training, customized to their brand and culture, fully integrated with Salesforce's existing learning platform used by millions. They wanted input from people actually running large organizations, not consultants advising them.

They assembled a small council. Learning leaders from Apple, Accenture, UnitedHealthcare, Michelin. And Steve Ruble, representing Camping World. For the better part of a year the council shaped the product. Salesforce's developers built. The council tested and pushed back. Back and forth until it worked.

Then Salesforce asked Steve to go on stage at Dreamforce — their annual conference in San Francisco, the largest of its kind in the world — and tell the story. Thursday morning, September 27, 2018. Nine o'clock. He said yes without hesitating.

Then months of preparation, and everything went wrong. He worked with a speaker coach — a woman named Kel, assigned by Salesforce to guide him through the whole process. They brought in a speechwriter. The material came together. He practiced constantly. It got worse every time.

The night before flying to San Francisco, he ran through it with his wife. It was not good. They both knew it.

He arrived nervous. The brand-new Salesforce Tower required a trial run before speakers could take the stage. He went in and bombed it. Voice tight, lines gone, the kind of stiffness that compounds the harder you try to fix it. Too late to pull him. The Salesforce team huddled about what to do.

Kel pulled him aside. *How often are you practicing*?

Constantly. Every moment I can.

Okay, she said. *Stop. Don't look at the material again. Go enjoy Dreamforce. Have the best night you can. I'm arranging things for you.*

That night: a Salesforce certification exam, which he passed. Dinners, cocktails, after-hours events. He went to all of it.

Two days later, at 3am, Kel called. *How are you doing*?

Just got back to the hotel. Had a great night.

Good. You're ready. Go sleep.

He woke up full of energy. Got to the session room an hour early. A line was already forming — forty-five minutes before the session. He didn't go backstage. He walked over and stood in the line. He started talking to people. Asked them what they hoped to hear. They described, almost exactly, what he was about to cover. He got genuinely excited. Maybe twenty people. The session was in forty minutes.

There was a small miscue — Kel signaled him a beat early. Slightly embarrassing. Kel made a joke. He took a breath.

He nailed it. Calm, clear, himself.

The session was posted to the Salesforce website afterward and stayed up for years. The last time he checked, it had several million views.

Which, he says, *hurts my brain.*

He has never been good at performing. He has always been good at solving the problem in front of him. The line of strangers worked because it stopped being a performance. It became a real conversation. That's been true his entire career. He just hadn't seen it that clearly before.

IT CONTINUES

Steve joined Deloitte in 2022. The clients are different from anything before — an Olympic Games, a telecom merger, a global hotel chain, a company building AI infrastructure. The work is the same: walk into a room, figure out what it needs, find a way to show it.

The LA2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games organization was a startup. Building from scratch, no playbook passed from previous host cities, figuring out how to run one of the largest events on earth with no reference from anyone who'd done it before. Steve was embedded directly with them.

The subject matter experts weren't analysts. They were Olympic athletes — people who'd competed in multiple Games and knew what the operation required from the inside.

I probably asked too many questions, he says, *about what it personally felt like to compete at that level.*

There was a project for a major telecommunications carrier — months explaining that enterprise architecture is a discipline, not a diagram. A way a company makes decisions about technology. Not overhead. A practice. He wasn't always sure it was landing. Then one day, on a call, someone on the client's team referred to the work as *our* architecture function. Not Deloitte's. Theirs. That was the moment he knew it had worked.

There was a global hotel chain that wanted a new tablet experience for front desk staff. Everyone came in expecting a Salesforce solution. He evaluated three options and recommended a custom-built interface — faster, simpler, built for someone checking guests in while standing in front of them. Pushback from the client and from his own firm. He made the case. He'd seen this architecture work before, at Camping World. It went through.

The yes instinct has a flip side. When the evidence points somewhere the room doesn't want to go, he says so anyway. He's been doing that since he had his own company and his own income on the line.

DALLAS, TX · JANUARY 2025

Three hours before the presentation, Steve Ruble found out he was leading it.

He was at home. He grabbed a sport coat off a hook in his home office. He was already wearing a dress shirt. That helped.

The subject: a billion-dollar telecommunications merger. The room: thirty-plus people in a conference room in New York City. Around a hundred on the phone. Investment banks. Private equity. Legal counsel. People whose job is to find the holes in exactly this kind of analysis.

He had never done M&A technology due diligence before. He'd taught himself the methodology over the preceding weeks.

During a break he messaged his partner: *how's it going, what do I need to do?*

The reply: *you are nailing it. Keep going. Just methodically work through it and pause to think before answering questions.*

He didn't feel like he was nailing it — but he knew his findings, and he knew how to ask the questions that would surface what the room needed.

The room got what it needed. Deloitte recognized him for it afterward.

Ask him what he does for fun and he talks about music. Jazz mostly, and jam bands — artists who take a melody and see how many ways they can express it, what it sounds like in a different key, what happens when you hand it to a different instrument. He's re-learning guitar and piano.

It's the exploration of new ways to express a melody, he says. *That's what I enjoy.*

He's also describing his career. The technology changes. The industries change. The problems change. But the underlying motion — find something nobody's figured out yet, stay with it longer than is strictly comfortable, find the direction, hand it off — has been the same for thirty-eight years. You can't improvise a melody you don't actually understand. The breadth is the depth.

Most of it was just work. Some of it turned out to matter. He usually couldn't tell which was which while it was happening. And that, he'll tell you, is what made it fun.

There is a hoodie in Steve Ruble's closet with the word "Trailblazer" across the chest. Salesforce conference swag, years ago. He remembers putting it on and thinking: *yeah, that's about right.*

He still doesn't have a better word. Probably never will. The career has been too many things at once — too many rooms, too many decades, too many problems that didn't exist yet when he walked in — to fit inside any single one.

But if you ask him about it, he'll talk for a while. And somewhere in there, usually, you'll hear about a nuclear power plant, or a skiff on the Gulf of Mexico, or a stage in San Francisco he almost didn't make it onto. One thing really did lead to another. It still does.

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