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Former Fresh Faces Blaze New Trails With IBM i

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Richie Palma, Stephanie Rabbani and Liam Allan

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Mentoring Others

By covering the Fresh Faces within the pages of *IBM Systems magazine*, the goal is to show the innovations brought to IBM i by some of the users who are newer to the system and just beginning their careers.

Over the years, we've highlighted numerous people, which leads readers to wonder, "How did their careers progress after they were featured in the magazine?" We caught up with three of them to answer that very question.

Looking Back and Ahead

"It's wild to reflect back on all of the personal and professional growth I have experienced since my IBM Fresh Faces debut in October 2017," says Richie Palma, technology solutions consultant for iTech Solutions Group, LLC. "Being the hardware guy that I am, the most notable experience for me was the launch of POWER9* in early 2018 and having early access to the technology due to my status as an IBM Champion for Power Systems. Also, getting to tour the IBM lab in Austin, Texas, and seeing what I now know to be POWER9 scale-out machines was a launchpad for a very bright 2018."

Last May, he took the biggest leap of his professional career by leaving the safe harbors of his family business to join his friend and fellow IBM Champion Pete Massiello at iTech Solutions Group. "This was one of those big boy decisions that opened up a world of growth that I underestimated," he explains. "iTech has put me in a position where I am surrounded by likeminded teammates looking to move IBM i and the Power Systems* footprint within our clients' data centers forward."

Other former Fresh Faces are currently launching new projects on IBM i. Stephanie Rabbani, senior consultant for Seiden Group, is utilizing YUM on a regular basis to try out

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the latest open-source offerings. These offerings include Python 3, Node.js 10, Bash and NGINX, in addition to other solutions, some of which are being used in production for the company's clients.

Liam Allan, consultant with Seiden Group, is taking a similar approach. "I'm writing and promoting the use of Node.js alongside existing RPG and COBOL applications," he says. "I want to see how it can be utilized to create web services or new client-facing applications. I am also using Node.js, Git, and GitHub to create a continuous integration/continuous delivery (CI/CD) platform using barryCI for existing RPG and COBOL applications."

"I've taken a more active role in Young i Professionals and have been working with COMMON to build a strategy for growing what I believe is an underserved group within the IBM i community."
–Richie Palma, technology solution consultant, iTech Solutions Group, LLC

Racking up Learnings

The three former Fresh Faces have continued to learn while making an impact in their companies and becoming influencers in the industry by speaking at conferences. They've also achieved recognition as IBM Champions for Power Systems.

"I continue to speak at many conferences and create connections by teaching about the future that I'm trying to create for the IBM i industry. I feel very motivated to keep making great software for IBM i," explains Allan about his recognition as an IBM Champion.

"I got named an IBM Champion this year—I'm quite proud of this," Rabbani notes. "I've spoken at more than 10 conferences and user groups, and I learned a new programming language. This is because of the amazing opportunities offered by being a part of the IBM i community. For this, I'm very grateful."

Palma has seen his focus move to the cloud, which is increasingly important to his clients, who are now looking at cloud as a viable option for high-availability target environments and even full-blown Infrastructure as a Service.

"Cloud has become a major player in the offering portfolio for my clients," he says. "IBM i spends much of its time behind the scenes running business-critical ERP packages. Due to the nature of its work, the user community is slightly more reserved about the adoption of leading-edge technology, but they're moving to the cloud."

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Moving the Platform Into New Areas

The three continuously use open-source solutions to help clients modernize their environments. This provides opportunities to leverage and experiment with new technologies.

"CI/CD has not really been popular on IBM i until now because traditional change management can do some of the work," Allan notes. "I'm trying to create a platform to show what a true CI/CD implementation can do—just like using Travis CI or PHPCI, but on IBM i."

He's also been using and creating open-source software. "I am a huge fan of IBM recently moving some of its projects from BitBucket to GitHub," he adds. "Even my own projects, ILEditor, barryCI CE, among others, are on GitHub with the source code available."

Rabbani is also using the latest open-source solutions. "They include NGINX, the latest ODBC driver to connect to the database from off of the box, and running Django, the Python framework, on IBM i," she says. "I'm also trying to use industry standards on IBM i."

While she hasn't yet had the opportunity to experiment with IBM Watson*, she would like to do so. In the meantime, she's using open-source solutions, mostly PHP and Python, to deliver web applications on IBM i.

Palma's last year has been consumed with projects such as end-of-program support for IBM i 7.1, IBM i 6.1 reaching end-of-support completely, and POWER5, POWER6* and POWER7* hardware reaching end-of-life during the 2019 calendar year.

"These events have pushed a lot of IBM i shops that have simply been existing with the status quo over the last eight to 10 years to evaluate their infrastructure and application strategy," he points out. "Helping these clients get through the process and into a modern and supported compute environment is daunting, but it's extremely rewarding. Moving a business running on an old Power 520 is a beautiful thing, and POWER9 hardware at IBM i 7.2, 7.3 and 7.4 allow IBM i to continue to dominate the total cost of ownership within the business while providing a bright future for the platform."

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–Liam Allan, consultant, Seiden Group

Facing and Solving New Challenges

Like everyone in the industry, the trio faces new and ongoing challenges in their jobs. They use their experience and technology solutions to overcome them.

An existing challenge Allan sees is that the bar is set very low for development platforms. "For example, a regular IBM i developer may have just experienced using change management to manage the application development and wouldn't have used Git," he explains. "The true challenge is showing them how powerful Git can be with its source tracking, ability to rollback, tag releases, see who changed specific lines of code and when, as well as the distributed development workflow, which is very new for RPG and COBOL development on IBM i."

Palma is witnessing first-hand the transition of the user community from being more mature to being comprised of those who are newer in their careers. He's answering this pain point by helping engage new users.

"I've taken a more active role in Young i Professionals (YiPs) and have been working with COMMON to build a strategy for growing what I believe is an underserved group within the IBM i community," he says. "We are working with colleges through the COMMON Education Foundation, but we don't really have an active group that helps support the formative years in an IBM i professional's career."

He's working to change that with YiPs. "The reality is new folks coming to the platform are entering a very mature community, which, in some cases, overlooks mundane tasks that have simply become second nature to experienced users," Palma adds.

One of Rabbani's challenges centers on learning new languages. In true fashion, she also has a solution. "I start by just trying it out and creating a proof of concept," she says. "I have access to a development partition that I can play with, which I highly recommend."

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Brett Martin is a freelance writer based in Shakopee, Minnesota. He's been writing about business and technology for more than a decade.

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