

Incentra Solutions: IT Pros Focused On

DANIEL MARGOLIS

Incentra Solutions has achieved a growth rate of 4,000 percent over the past several years, and although this eye-popping figure might be difficult to comprehend, it's easily explained by Incentra's dedication to its main objective: bringing managed storage and professional IT and monitoring services to the midmarket.



Storage Services

According to Shawn O'Grady, Incentra president and COO, the company lives and dies by using its IT staff toward this end.

"Our business is built on IT professionals because we're providing consulting and outsourcing services to midsize customers, typically those that aren't going to have the specialization we have," O'Grady said. "We're managing a big IT infrastructure, and it's that infrastructure upon which we deliver our services to our customers."

Incentra has 190 employees, and more than 75 are IT professionals. Their job roles and responsibilities vary as needed.

"When we're delivering managed services, they look like an in-house storage administrator," O'Grady said. "They're managing primary storage arrays on behalf of our customers and monitoring the health of the operation. They're rezoning and reallocating based on usage and doing the types of things that a storage administrator would do."

This differs from the IT department's duties with respect to Incentra's professional services.

"They're doing things that are focused on access and design," O'Grady said. "So, we're evaluating storage usage, designing storage consolidation and virtualization systems and doing data classification projects."

With Incentra's IT professionals wearing a lot of different hats, the variety of career paths within the IT department naturally follows.

"There are varying levels of pay and seniority based on someone's experience and certification, and that has a whole bunch of gradients," O'Grady said. "On the lower end, we have technicians — technical people that are doing basic diagnoses, installations and implementations. Then you have engineers, who are much savvier in their problem-solving skills, so they're doing more of the design work. Then, at the highest end are

people that fall into the category of consultant — people that are really able to understand business problems and processes and help a customer understand how technology can help them (address) those things."

It's this last capability Incentra looks for most in an IT professional. After making sure an IT pro has technical capability as "a given," Incentra looks at whether a potential employee will excel in customer service settings.

"Because we're providing IT services to our customers, we're looking for people who have a customer service focus, people that want to solve problems, take care of customers and get things done," O'Grady said. "We have a couple people on our development team that are just 'heads down,' doing IT projects in a vacuum. There are positions that are just technical. We give them the playbook and say, 'You've got to go in and do this.' But most of our IT professionals interface quite frequently with our customers."

This is where soft skills come into play and become absolutely necessary to advancement, O'Grady said.

"To get to the highest level in our organization, soft skills are critical because our most senior IT professionals interact with customers and need to be able to communicate," he said. "By 'communicate,' I mean be able to listen, ask the right questions and establish credibility and rapport so the customer is able to open up and tell them what's going on."

Certification Solutions

Moving beyond soft skills to technical ones, Incentra looks for IT professionals who understand data replication, data classification and advanced data protection. The company relies on certifications to make sure it finds the right people.

"We have some people who say, 'The certification doesn't really matter because I have the knowledge. I

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just don't like to take the tests," O'Grady said. "I don't give that much credibility. To me, certification is a sign of how seriously somebody takes their profession."

He compared it to whether financial professionals keep up on their CPA certification. Whether the qualification is financial or technical, certification is an unambiguous way of confirming people know what they're talking about, O'Grady said.

Beyond ensuring individuals are qualified, Incentra also relies on certification to make sure it gets the right person for a particular job and places its IT professionals into positions that best match their skill sets.

"If we need somebody who understands IP telephony, we're going to want somebody who has IP telephony certification," O'Grady said. "And a lot of times, especially if we're doing billable projects for our customers, the customer will want to know if that person's certified."

Incentra looks for individuals with an equal match of vendor-neutral versus vendor-specific certifications, and the company also tries to balance out the overall mix in its IT department in this regard.

"We need both. If Hitachi is going to let us install their product and not void the warranty for the customer, our employee who does the work needs to have the proper certifications from Hitachi," O'Grady said. "At the same time, if we're doing a higher-end consulting project, sometimes it's more valuable for us if the individual has the SNIA certifications because those are more vendor-neutral."

Incentra offers on-the-job training and acts to foster the continual education of its IT pros outside of work. But, O'Grady pointed out, this is only as successful as the level of effort the company's employees are willing to put into it.

"It depends on the ambition of the particular individual," he said. "When somebody joins the company, we don't lay out for them, 'These are the 17 things you have to do this year, and if you do them, you're going to get to the next level.' We're constantly making certification

and training classes available and encouraging people to participate in that and giving people the opportunity to do that on the job. But it ultimately comes down to the individual, how hard and how fast they go."

Storage Sells

Because Incentra provides storage solutions, finding employees with storage knowledge and experience is critical. In addition, the company must develop ways to manage its own storage needs. With about 60 percent of its business in the United States, 35 percent in Western Europe and the rest in Asia, Incentra manages more than 75 infrastructures in 43 locations, as well as thousands of servers, 1,500 terabytes of data and 200,000 backup jobs.

"It's all about data retention and protection," O'Grady said. "Industry experts say storage is growing 50 percent to 60 percent a year in a typical enterprise. We have customers who would say that's true, and customers who would say it's growing even faster than that."

In fact, Gartner Research has estimated the storage service market will account for nearly half of all IT hardware spending in the next few years, with estimated growth expected to be nearly \$30 billion through 2008.

Incentra's IT professionals' necessary storage knowledge becomes even more complex as regulations such as Sarbanes-Oxley and the 2006 Federal Rules of Civil Procedure amendments change the landscape of what information must remain in storage and for how long, O'Grady said.

"You don't want to delete e-mail files that are going to get subpoenaed in a court case next year, but by the same token, you don't want to be protecting somebody's MP3 collection," he said.

It's because of this changing landscape that Incentra strives to find the best and brightest IT pros.

"IT professionals are really what we're all about," O'Grady said. ☺

– Daniel Margolis, dmargolis@certmag.com

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