

TECHNIQUES

Upward Mobility in IT: Business Skills for the Technical Professional

JULIE ZINN



Advancements in outsourcing, global commerce and technology indicate that the economic landscape is shifting. In order to change with it, companies are increasingly emphasizing the need for strong business skills — otherwise known as soft skills, management skills or business acumen.

Expert knowledge is a prized possession in the current professional environment. Without it, organizations lack the ability to innovate and compete in the global marketplace. But in today's business world, deep technical or specialized knowledge is not enough — especially for those moving up the corporate ladder. IT professionals must complement this knowledge with business acumen — or general knowledge of the "rules of engagement" in business — and the ability to apply that knowledge to maneuver through the business environment.

Organizations from nearly all industries are acknowledging that technical prowess — regardless of discipline (IT, project management, science, engineering) — is no longer sufficient. Because business skills positively impact productivity, efficiency and ultimately, the bottom line, executives are changing their standards when hiring new staff. According to Robert Half Technology's June 2006 Midyear IT Employment Outlook, "41 percent of CIOs polled said they are placing greater emphasis on job candidates' knowledge of business fundamentals compared to five years ago. Strong communication skills and the ability to work as part of a team also are essential, as IT professionals must work with employees outside their departments and explain their work to management."

When hiring, executives look at technical qualifications, of course, but now more than ever, jobs are going to individuals who can perform well in a business environment and can demonstrate strong business skills. And as those individuals rise through the organization, they are expected to have the skills necessary to identify and achieve ever-expanding goals, create innovative solutions to complex problems, take on leadership roles throughout the organization, and communicate effectively with team members, stakeholders, managers and customers.

Consistent with this analysis, Gartner's 2005 report on the IT professional outlook declares that six out of 10 IT employees will assume business-facing roles

Upward Mobility Advice From a "Serial CIO"

No variant of IT professional knows more about upward mobility than the CIO. But the rap against the CIO position is that it stands for "career is over." Once an IT pro reaches that office, the conventional wisdom holds that there's nowhere else to go, which is, perhaps, a little depressing.

The career experience of John Stevenson disproves this, however. Stevenson refers to himself as a "serial CIO," though self-deprecatingly. "I say that with tongue in cheek," Stevenson said.

Stevenson is currently an industry consultant and president of his own company. Previously, he served as CIO at a number of organizations — most recently at Sharp Electronics.

Stevenson outlined how his career path might prove similar to others'. "Every organization or every job I've been in, whether it was my early days in the military or my civilian career focused on IT, you've got the new-kid-in-the-new-job-itis, where there's a period of time [in which] you've got to learn and grow what you're doing," he said. "Then, there's a second era in your life when you're trying to enhance, to the best of your ability, that job you inherited. Often I've gone in to fix things because the incumbent was tired or wrong and needed to be moved into another assignment. Once you think you've got things humming as smoothly as you can, then you can grow the assignment within the company, and you give the company back more capability."

Stevenson then outlined how a high-level IT pro such as a CIO might know it's time to move on: "You begin to get stale, perhaps, and it may be [the case that] a different personality could add further success to your position. In a number of cases, I've left great successors behind; they were ready to take my chair in the organization and it was an exciting double move. It's when that second era of redundancy or claustrophobia catches up with you, that's when I've seen a lot of people with glazed looks in their eyes saying, 'I've got to go do something different to generate excitement.'"

Moving to another company can prove to be a complicated decision. Managing this transition well, however, can ensure it's not an acrimonious split. One way to do this is to strictly avoid poaching the old company's best employees.

"Having the gift of a number of great people reporting to you can be thrilling, and often, in my case, I would get to the point where I had great people reporting to me and move on," Stevenson said. "Sometimes that was as big an agony as anything, as I was pretty careful in my career not to raid an organization I left when I went to a new company. I've resigned positions and had some of the greatest parties given to me by my boss."

Not all of Stevenson's departures have been this festive, but most were still civil. "In one or two cases I got into a war with management," he said. "At that point, it's time to put a peacemaker who doesn't carry strategic luggage in the job. But you're still wished well by the people who are leading the organization who know what you did and how you did it." 🙏

— Daniel Margolis, dmargolis@certmag.com

by 2010. And according to the Society for Information Management's IT Workforce Executive Summary 2006, business skills account for half of the top 10 attributes IT managers say they will need from in-house staffers over the next three years.

Technical and specialized professionals need relevant, practical skills they can use to align their projects with broader organizational objectives. An

understanding of in-demand skills will help technical and specialized employees prepare to take on responsibilities that require a broader business mindset.

So, if this cross-functional skill set is the ideal, what do technically based and specialized professionals need to learn? Six focus areas are essential to this complex transition.

1: Establishing a Business Mindset

Every organization has an overall set of objectives, practices and protocols. Technical professionals must understand how to align individual responsibilities with these rules and strategies if they hope to meet (or exceed) expectations. This general "business mindset" is crucial to accomplishing almost any activity or task. One needs to consider myriad perspectives for all of the work regularly performed, including strategic and operational, as well as interpersonal and personal — in order to reduce political and cultural barriers and truly find organizational success.

Understanding common business practices and rules is also important to maneuvering initiatives through the political maze in most business environments. In order to take an idea from conception and manage it through to an end product, employees need extremely honed business skills, along with the ability to align team goals with overall business goals. Without an established underpinning of business fundamentals, rules and practices, the work performed will contribute less to the organization as a whole.

2: High-Impact Communication

Put simply, communication in the workplace gets business done. Many communications, however, often fall flat and do not achieve the desired results or impact — causing misunderstandings and misinterpreted expectations and results, as well as unnecessary conflict.

Technical experts must know how to translate technical and specialized language into general business terms. Additionally, today's economic landscape demands that professionals have other key interpersonal skills required to facilitate brainstorming or data-gathering sessions, run high-profile meetings, and speak to nontechnical and management audiences.

Interpersonal style, along with communication, customer-service and relationship-building skills,

is critical not only to personal success, but also to the success of a project or organization as a whole. Presenting the right message, in the right medium, at the right time can be a difficult — though necessary — set of skills to acquire.

3: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Companies encounter problems and opportunities every day in the regular course of business. But considering them with thoughtful and outcome-oriented approaches is not an everyday occurrence. Too often the same problems occur over and over, or the solution doesn't quite work, or opportunities are identified once it's too late to pursue them.

Using methodical approaches to analyze problems and opportunities can help not only to ensure correct root cause diagnosis, but to give one the ability to generate a number of innovative responses to select a solution from. Applying standard approaches for prioritization and business risk analysis is also critical to selecting correct responses and making good business decisions.

The bottom line is that in day-to-day business, too often employees get in a rut that confines thinking to "what's worked well in the past." To make truly good decisions, one needs to actively apply different thinking styles to tackle different types of activities and tasks.

4: Coaching and Mentoring for Improved Performance

Today's business demands put increasing stress on high performers. As the pressure on these professionals mounts, broadening the pool of high-performing and expert individuals becomes critical. To ensure appropriate delegation and equitable resource distribution, the transfer of knowledge and skill is crucial. However,

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developing individuals can be complicated. For many technically based professionals, the art of transferring skills and knowledge to another person may prove difficult to master.

When a technical professional begins to perform a more business-oriented role, a firm grasp of his or her team's skills is essential to understanding how to develop the knowledge and skill — and overall performance — of team members. Technical profes-



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sionals must identify specific learning needs using skill-gap analyses and understand individual learning preferences before selecting and implementing the best methods for increasing team competencies.

5: Financial Considerations in Business Decision Making

One of the biggest potential challenges for specialized professionals is a lack of “outcome thinking.” In a technical-only environment, thinking about the financial outcome of specific tasks is probably not a priority. However, specialized professionals competing in today’s economic environment need to understand that financial decisions — at any level — have an effect on the entire organization.

It is valuable to know how typical financial statements are used in an organization and how each person’s work contributes to them. For instance, individuals should be able to effectively create or manage a budget, as well as use estimating methods and tools. In addition, it is important to know what organizational metrics will be used to track progress and performance — and how those metrics are used throughout the organization.

6: Taking Charge of Organizational Change

As specialized or technically based professionals begin to take on more business-oriented roles, their understanding of the risks, benefits and repercussions of change becomes essential. Positively managing and implementing change within the organization is vital to success.

Change of any kind can create anxiety and uncertainty because business changes, such as mergers, acquisitions, or staffing increases or decreases, affect each level of an organization. Technical professionals must embrace a mindset that not only welcomes organizational change, but also leverages it to create opportunity for themselves and their organizations.

Closing the Gap

Clearly, today’s technical professionals need more than analytical expertise to be successful. According to recent studies, this need will only increase in the coming years. Technical experts have invested significant time and money to




Learn more about ‘upward mobility’ in IT. CertScope links to two CertMag articles and 10 Web sites on the subject.

understand the full range and depth of their disciplines. Their expertise is sometimes cemented in advanced degrees and professional certifications in their specialized knowledge areas. Yet, suddenly, they’re being asked to make the transition from the specialized side to the business and consulting side of the operation.

As many organizations have found, these specialized or technically based professionals often make ideal business managers. They understand the mechanics of a project, including how much

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time certain technical tasks will require, what resources will be involved and how to best complete each task. However, without the right business acumen, technical professionals will not be completely effective.

It’s essential that organizations take the necessary precautions to ensure the business knowledge of current and future leaders. Only then will companies truly be able to fully leverage the expertise of their technical professionals. 

Julie Zinn is senior director of ESI International’s business skills program as well as the professional development of ESI’s sales force. She has a background in management, human resources development and corporate training. She can be reached at editor@certmag.com.