



“To deal with this, organizations need a new breed of business-focused IT professionals with an expansive education and broader view,” points out Diane Youden, principal, PwC.

While the job itself has changed, “the way management thinks about IT also has changed,” says Jamie Boughman, Learning and Organizational Development manager at IT services partner Atrion. Modern, tech-savvy managers understand that integrating IT into their operations not only enhances efficiency, but introduces options that help grow the business.

To maximize this value, IT and business unit leaders must share information—and that requires bridging the gap between technology and the language of business.

### DEVELOP OPPORTUNITIES

L&D can help create commonality by developing a menu of structured and unstructured opportunities to expose IT professionals at all levels to the concerns and operations of the overall company, to develop their soft skills, and to help them remain technologically current in a rapidly changing field.

Sometimes creating the opportunity is as simple as pulling back the curtain. For example, when one PwC client changed its enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, business unit leaders talked with IT about what they hoped to accomplish, what they needed to be successful, and what the change could mean to the company.

That conversation elevated the change-over from a software installation to a business strategy by providing IT with deeper insights into the business. That understanding gave IT the opportunity to optimize the deployment in ways that helped the organization achieve its goals.

“IT is much more integrated in multiple aspects of the business than ever before. There’s been a sudden explosion of business units that want more partnerships with IT,” according to Jennifer Selby Long, CEO, IT consultancy Selby Group.

Those partnerships thrive when IT understands the company’s strategic direction, quarterly demands, and similar business needs in addition to technology. “Too often, however, IT is isolated from the rest of the business.”

To resolve that, Selby Long says, “the head of IT should participate in organizational off-site meetings to focus on aligning IT with the business.” That involves discussing key priorities and business drivers, as well as understanding units’ quarterly results and what those results signify.

“Managers may need to explain why something is important and to connect the dots. An app developer or help desk manager, for example, may be so focused on their own projects they forget how their function connects to the business,” Selby Long continues.

Once IT understands the organization’s direction and

challenges, it may find ways to realign its own operations or eliminate unnecessary projects, freeing staff for projects that are more strategic.

To initiate such relationships, “IT leaders should approach business unit leaders. Place phone calls and knock on doors—don’t e-mail,” Selby Long advises. “Ask how IT can help. Ask to build stronger connections, so you can better support them by introducing options non-IT leaders may not know exist.”

## PERFORMANCE-BASED TESTING: DRIVING THE FUTURE OF IT TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

By Frederick “Suizo” Mendler, CEO/Co-Founder, TrueAbility ([www.trueability.com](http://www.trueability.com))

Performance-based testing methods are particularly valuable in the IT industry due to the amount of critical thinking and problem-solving involved. Working in IT means being faced with complex problems that require action. While knowing the relevant theories and facts certainly does not hurt, the ability to demonstrate this knowledge is critical.

This method of testing is not new to the technology industry. In fact, the pioneers of performance-based testing created their own versions and have been using this form of testing since the 1990s. Certifications such as the RedHat Certification Engineer (RHCE) and the Cisco Certified Internetwork Expert (CCIE) depend on performance-based testing as a means for determining which users are true experts.

If these industry leaders have incorporated performance-based testing methods, why are other companies just now following suit?

The challenge with today’s legacy IT training and certification methods is they heavily rely on time-consuming manual tasks and configuration, piece-mealing third-party tools, and costly testing centers. Plus, they don’t allow candidates to prove their technical expertise due to limitations such as multiple-choice tests. There is market demand to remedy these challenges, but there hasn’t been a standard best practice in place that brings all the elements together for this type of learning.

Performance-based IT testing does just that—encompassing an end-to-end approach that gives IT educators the ability to automate all tasks (from development to receiving score reports), conduct remote proctoring from anywhere at any time, and prevent fraudulent activity by “locking” in the identity of the examinee from start to finish. Candidates are able to demonstrate their technology skill and expertise with cloud-based work scenarios that are custom developed in the environment in which they are designed. Furthermore, financial barriers are removed with utility pricing, and companies have the flexibility to either implement new programs or transition existing methods seamlessly in just a matter of weeks.

With technical talent shortages and demand at an all-time high, forward-thinking IT educators and certification leaders have recognized the urgency to adopt performance-based testing to stay competitive and add long-term value to their organizations.



# Rethinking IT Development

## IT NEEDS SOFT SKILLS

While the tech industry debates whether there is a technical skills shortage in the face of rapidly changing technological needs, the most pressing gap may be in the area of soft skills. “New technologies can be learned. It’s the soft skills that are harder to develop,” Boughman says.

Technically trained IT managers, for example, typically need to develop leadership and mentoring skills. Trained in the objective world of math and science, as managers, they must navigate the more subjective realm of human motivations and relationships. It can be enough to drive a scientist mad.

They also must adjust to managing staff rather than doing the work themselves, Selby Long explains. “The manager’s job is to remove barriers and build relationships to help projects move faster, and develop staff. Those who started in sales, marketing, and HR know this,” she says, but it’s not necessarily evident to those who began in engineering and technology.

Recent college graduates, even when working in entry-level IT positions, also need grounding in soft skills. For example, Selby Long says, “employees coming directly from school need to learn to initiate and maintain professional relationships, to listen closely, and to resolve conflicts under pressure. They also need to broaden their perspectives beyond their immediate circles to access information from a variety of sources.”

Some of these skills develop naturally with experience; “critical thought and a service mentality, for example, develop over time,” Boughman says, along with professionalism and polish. However, the process can be speeded with help from L&D.

## MEETING TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

New technology is being introduced so quickly it’s almost impossible for organizations to predict which technologies they will need to solve today’s complicated issues, says Ken Perlman, advisor with Kotter International. Therefore, “we see organizations encouraging staff to learn how other companies and industries are addressing the types of challenges they’re facing.”

The goal, Perlman says, is to develop a learning-oriented, high-performance culture. “L&D and IT function well

together,” Perlman says. For example, IT professionals tend to develop purely logical business cases that may not entice business leaders. By working with L&D, however, they can develop a narrative that makes the business case enticing, as well as rational.

One Fortune 100 company’s IT department teamed with L&D to develop peer-to-peer training. Combining L&D’s training acumen with specific technical expertise—such as the DevOp approach to software development or the use of the JIRA application for issue tracking—yielded repeatable courses and lunch-and-learns, as well as an outline for individual coaching.

This approach let L&D minimize reliance on outside trainers (and, thus, lower development costs) while refreshing the organization’s knowledge base. It also increased technology leaders’ engagement.

## RETAINING TALENT

Increasing engagement at all levels is particularly important. “Mobility is back, especially in technology,” Boughman says, and employees are considering their employment options. “Employers, therefore, are trying to retain their good players, as well as their stars.”

One of their strategies is to invest in employee training focused around trending technology and probable needs. “Employees want to work on meaningful projects and use cutting-edge technology,” Perlman stresses. “Employers are encouraging employees to learn independently, as well as from their organizations, to foster a true learning organization. Options include online courses, TED talks, and spot training, plus internal classroom training,” from onboarding throughout employees’ tenure.

“They also want to contribute to their organization,” Perlman says. “To keep them, open the doors of opportunity to let them contribute in ways that may be outside their immediate niche.” That may mean cross-training or assigning them to committees or development teams in other areas, for example.

The return on investment is tangible and should feature in any discussion regarding training. The proposition for employees is clear: “We train you, and you become more valuable to us,” Boughman explains. “Employees sometimes forget about the benefits atop their salaries. Once they’re stated, you have almost built-in loyalty.” **T**

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