

Soft Skills Deliver Hard Results

By Sixto Ortiz Jr.

Don't Neglect Your Soft Skills Training If You Want to Advance

If you're like most IT professionals, you're pressed for time, overwhelmed by pending deadlines and working with limited budget dollars. So, your training efforts are probably focused exclusively on acquiring new technical skills or developing those you already have. But in doing so, you may be forgetting about the "soft skills" that comprise a well-rounded résumé.

These include business acumen, communications (speaking, listening and writing), management, team building, leadership, etc.

These soft skills can burnish your résumé and open up a whole universe of new opportunities. And in many businesses, soft skills are becoming increasingly important across the board, even for IT personnel who work in strictly technical jobs. Don't neglect them.

WHAT EMPLOYERS ARE VALUING

According to a company press release, a recent survey developed by technology staffing firm Robert Half Technology revealed forty-one percent of CIOs polled said they are placing greater emphasis today than five years ago on the business fundamentals knowledge of IT candidates.

Specific business fundamentals areas addressed in the survey included accounting, finance and general business operations. "Technology is integrated into all aspects of business, which means technical aptitude alone will not suffice for IT candidates," explains Robert Half Technology executive director Katherine Spencer Lee in the company press release.

Bennet W. Ockrim, Professional Services Group Vice President for Spherion Corporation, a recruiting and staffing firm, says customers value technical professionals who demonstrate business acumen.

"Customers tend to place a higher value on technical professionals' ability to understand the business context of the work they are doing (a business first philosophy)," says Ockrim. As a technical professional, you should also be able to communicate and articulate your understanding of customers' critical business issues, listen and speak customers' language and communicate effectively and concisely in writing, he adds.

Also, adds Ockrim, "CIOs are charged with providing the capabilities to their respective organizations that will make the organization's vision for solving the critical business issue of the day a reality." So, he adds, this requires well rounded professionals who can understand and articulate the ideas and answers that make this happen.

FORGOTTEN SKILLS

It's plain to see that soft skills, especially knowledge and understanding of business fundamentals, are finding increasing value in the eyes of CIOs today. So, why do so many technical professionals neglect acquiring the training needed to develop these skills?

Laurie Orlov, Vice President and Research Director for Forrester Research's IT Management practice, says many IT professionals believe their technical skills are the sought after requirement for employment – the type of thinking that, Orlov adds, employers encourage – but then struggle on the job to move into leadership positions or alienate the business users they support.

“In the past, technical professionals could get by on acumen alone,” says Spherion’s Ockrim, “so it is not surprising that many experienced professionals still think that they continue down that path.”

As an IT professional, it’s important to understand that technology is so deeply ingrained into every aspect of business operations today you can never hope to avoid frequent interaction with business users.

Take those who work with ERP systems such as SAP: they not only have to have the technical skills necessary to support and maintain these systems, but must also be able to interact with business users, understand their needs and develop system functionality that supports business goals.

SOFTEN YOUR RESUME

So, how do you go about enhancing your business acumen and learning and developing the skills you need to successfully navigate today’s business environment? Learning starts with training; Forrester’s Orlov recommends taking basic business courses and honing your presentation and writing skills.

It’s also important, she adds, to use role-playing exercises to demonstrate and describe your newfound business skills and what you can do. In day to day job situations, you must strive to demonstrate customer service, communication and relationship building, Orlov emphasizes.

Spherion’s Ockrim says joining networking groups and industry associations provide technical professionals with the opportunity to socialize and exercise their newly acquired skills. So, don’t neglect opportunities to expand on your classroom training by interacting with other like-minded professionals. The old adage that “practice makes perfect” holds just as true for soft skills as it does for technical skills.

THE BOTTOM LINE

As a technical IT person, you should rejoice at IT’s growing importance for all facets of the business. For a long time, IT was a silo, an ancillary function where highly specialized personnel performed the back-end tasks needed to keep certain vital but unseen systems going (payroll, anyone?). So, most IT personnel could toil away in relative anonymity, without ever getting very much exposed to other aspects of the business.

That’s no longer the case: today, IT is a strategic part of the organization, charged with automating the processes necessary to succeed and thrive in business. And, while some businesses are farther along than others at integrating IT into every aspect of their organizations, the bottom line is that the proverbial cat is now out of the bag for good.

If you’re part of the technical IT career ladder, chances are your involvement with other people in the business is increasing day by day. These are exciting times indeed, but success requires a new set of skills beyond technical prowess. So, obtaining, developing and mastering the soft skills required to succeed in the business should be an integral part of your training efforts.