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# Arming techies with business nous

## Management skills for IT managers

By Tony Lock, June 2007

We recently had a very interesting conversation with Martin Griss, dean of education at Carnegie Mellon College in Silicon Valley.

Over the last few years the school has launched a number of programmes designed to develop new management skills in experienced IT professionals, including a Masters in Software Management. This is an interesting attempt to help people in the IT community look at some of the complex issues that surround IT software development, systems deployment, and complex IT management and operations.

One of the reasons many of us are drawn to technology as a business sector is that it is dynamic and fluid, in part because the technology itself changes, but also because the nature of the technology is to change the way the business works as well.

There is no doubt that after a few years working in the wonderful world of Information Technology the vast majority of those engaged in systems development and operations develop a veritable wealth of technical skills.

However it is usually also true that, unless the person has attended some form of business school, little formal attention is applied to developing the skills necessary to help run or manage a software business operation or a part of it.

Thus, the majority of these men and women may often be left exposed when they first pick up project design, development, or operational responsibilities. Additionally, most business schools do not provide courses oriented toward the complexities and nuances of a particular business sector, and the software business has particular issues that must be dealt with.

Many in the industry rapidly garner considerable experience working with the technologies themselves, and it forms the platform on which much can be built. But running an IT operation also demands an additional, completely different set of people-centred skills not currently offered in most engineering programmes.

For example, when challenged to develop a new product or system there is a clear requirement to understand exactly what business issues the solution is to be designed to meet. Equally, if asked to find an answer to an existing business requirement it is essential to be able to evaluate, thoroughly, existing solutions and to establish their fit to requirements.

Many of the skills needed to meet these challenges focus on communications with colleagues, peers, customers, and potential suppliers. It is also fair to say that in many scenarios the IT manager will find themselves having to form new teams composed of individuals with diverse backgrounds and personalities, perhaps from different parts of the organisation, even from external entities. The manager is also likely to face challenges dealing with competing priorities and agendas or even having to get directly involved in the murky world of office politics.

For those newly facing the challenges of managing in IT, establishing a sound platform of accurate communications, into and out from their unit, is the single most important matter at hand. It can also

be the most difficult challenge to surmount if the person has been immersed inside the IT organisation for some time.

With these thoughts in mind it was very encouraging to discover that Carnegie Mellon is tackling many of these issues head on. Students enrolling on its part time SW Management course average between six to ten years' experience working in technical IT roles. The course operates in a practical, real world mode allowing students to fit the course into their working lives. Importantly, it is not lecture based but instead creates teams that are then assigned projects to complete projects that are solidly based in the real world.

This development is encouraging and it is not unique. We are aware of other courses that are looking to impart similar skills. Anything that helps raise the level of social interaction skills and that seeks to engender effective communications between IT professionals and the business world at large will deliver benefits of great value to the IT professionals themselves, their departments, and to the organisation itself.

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