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CIO Corner

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Specialists or Generalists?

Tom Costello, *UpStreme*

Recently, there has been a fair amount of press about the increasing drive for specialization in technology hiring. This push to compartmentalize capabilities can be attributed to leaner staffing without a comparable decrease in the number of “urgent” projects. Furthermore, organizations have been doing this for so long now that it’s becoming standard practice. Where are the positions for “generalists” who can perform multiple functions? Are the “utility players” in organizations being hired into management and then driven down into tactical projects (thereby leaving management vacuums)?

There’s an inherent risk to the business if IT turns into a “tool shop” for the enterprise. Yet there’s little indication that CIOs are concerned about—or even aware of—this situation.

Where’s your Business Expert?

Every organization should have a mix of technologists and business experts. Where, in your

organization, are the business experts? Depending on where the organization exists on its own maturity curve and the evolution of their market and competitors, the balance of business and technology skills can differ. But it appears most US businesses have devolved into an irrational mix that ultimately lacks any true business expertise.

Too many IT shops confuse the business expert role with the best technical person for a given tool (such as for the enterprise-resource-planning or customer-relationship-management tool). It’s easy to spot this person—he or she usually says things like, “I know the business better than our business counterparts.” In reality, this person simply knows the tool better—not necessarily the business.

This role is equally confused when the organization assumes it should be filled by the person who “knows where all the skeletons are buried” or who has “tribal knowledge” about that particular company (but, again, not necessarily about the business in general). This person is also easy to spot,

because he or she typically must attend nearly every meeting on any hot topic. The demands placed on this person usually lead to project delays, because he or she can never focus on any one problem. Furthermore, this person often must focus on internal tactics instead of analyzing external markets and the broader pressures across the industry.

The Role of the Generalist

Really strong organizations usually have a cadre of people who are keenly aware of current tools in the market, the players and disrupters in their market segment, and the capabilities that are true “differentiators” for their business. It would be ideal to find these people on the business side, but they’re most often found (when found, at all) in the IT department. The trend prior to the 2008 economic meltdown was to seek out such generalists, but now neither IT nor business departments are hiring them.

Think of the largest personalities in the business world, and
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most have a balanced awareness of technology, business, markets, end-customers wants and needs, and timing. Steve Jobs is the most recent notable example of a person who exemplified this balance. He had a keen perspective on the future and could create markets where none existed.

It's highly unlikely that your next hire will be of the caliber of Steve Jobs, but you don't even have a chance when your job descriptions don't hint at these skills.

Call to Action

I have often noted how organizations must position themselves for the eventual uptick that will come. Those CIOs who seek and hire generalists now will reap the rewards, while those who

continue to hire only tool specialists will find themselves slow to respond when their competitors pull away with growth. So as you review your next open position, think about the value a generalist can bring... and be prepared to use that generalist correctly if and when you do hire one.



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