IT Workforce

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It is redundant to say "business" and "change" in the same sentence when referring to any industry or marketplace. And so it is when considering the IT workforce. There are times when the job market affords an individual greater bargaining power and independence, and other times that are more advantageous to the businesses. We can recognize the harvesting of situational benefits by either the individual or the business unit. Importantly, and on the other side of the scale, is the continuance of best practices.

A business utilizing enterprise-wide computer systems requires IT professionals who have varying competencies. The traditional skill sets of systems administrator, database administrator and developer are a good starting point. However, applications software stretches the required abilities to include an understanding of how the business operates and what software adjustments (setups) are required for proper functional integration, as well as how the software and business will interact. To satisfy this requirement, we need yet another skill set—that of the systems analyst.

The demand by the business for increased efficiency, coupled with the need to employ IT professionals who possess enhanced skill sets, creates an employment environment that fluctuates with the ebb and flow of the economy.

Regardless of the job market, having skilled employees leave a company is a less than desirable circumstance. We must then pay the costs associated with recruiting new associates, or perhaps pay high consulting prices. In some cases we may find ourselves having to do both. So what's a business to do? Avoid the whole mess—by retaining its key technologists.

FIVE BASICS FOR RETAINING IT PROFESSIONALS

On first reading, you may think that the concepts presented here seem rather simple. After all, volumes have been written about, and everyone has been exposed to, the topics of training, communication, leadership, environment, and motivation. However, you should accept the challenge of considering each topic on its own merits, as well as how it should be integrated with the other topics. For example, what is (or should be) the relationship between communication and leadership, or motivation, within your own company?

You may be thinking that these seem like the basics—In fact, they are the basics. We can be successful in retaining our employees as part of high-performance teams by reaffirming, applying, and expanding on the basics, and by maintaining their proper balance.

Training

IT personnel, in general, covet training. Training is valued much more highly by IT professionals than by those in other fields. Since existing technology changes rapidly and new technology is constantly being introduced; training is essential to keeping one's skill set current, and therefore marketable. An employee with a well-maintained skill set feels confident and employable.

Make training a part of each employee's goals and objectives. There is no better way to communicate your commitment to training. Training requirements must be very specific and not vague objectives that never seem to be accomplished. One of the tricks to planning training for an individual is to approach and resolve it like any other issue. Begin with the desired state: WHAT do you want this employee to be able to do after the training curriculum is complete? The answer will assist you in determining what is needed to achieve your goal of training an individual employee.

To be fully trained on a topic may require that an employee be enrolled in multiple courses and training sessions. Training is available from many sources; vendors and consulting firms are valuable sources, as are independent consultants. Therefore, a comprehensive training plan should be developed for each individual employee. Developing individual training plans for each employee might seem like a large task, but it can be simplified by asking the employees to list the training they think they need to maintain or improve their skill sets. One standard rule always found in corporations is to make certain that training undertaken is job-related. This is necessary to achieve the desired result as well as to justify the cost of the training. Obviously, a company is not in business solely to provide training for its employees. There is the need to ensure that the necessary work of the company is accomplished.

Once individual training plans have been developed, they should be reviewed for commonality so that any economies of scale can be leveraged. (For example, if all employees need "fixed assets" training within a specific software package, perhaps an onsite course should be arranged.)

Training comes in many forms and should always be viewed from the standpoint of the desired end state. From that perspective, the following is a list of different pieces that can be combined to reach that end state, each contributing to the overall training of an employee:

- Half-day seminars (often provided at no charge)
- Vendor sales calls discussing future directions
- Magazine subscriptions
- Conferences
- Lectures
- Expositions
- College courses
- Specialized training courses
- Visits to other divisions or companies utilizing the same technology
- Researching an issue or module/product
- Being teamed with a knowledgeable consultant

Sometimes the best way to learn is to teach; to provide instruction to a group of people, much preparation is required. The instructor must be organized in terms of what is being presented, and must also have comprehensive knowledge of the content. This probably means hands-on activity within the company's own system to do the research, resulting in a course of instruction that is very specific to the company's current situation. The effect is very positive, as most employees can then identify with and relate the training to their everyday work life.

Technical training received by an employee can be leveraged by ensuring that the knowledge gained is transferred to other employees. Aside from reinforcing what has been learned, this activity has the added benefit of making the trained employee feel good. (Hmmm, imagine feeling good while performing a task that provides value to the company.)

Technical training is often a dilemma for an organization because although it is necessary, it also represents cost, including the price charged for the class, the associated travel and living expenses, and the opportunity cost of taking an employee away from the tasks he or she needs to accomplish.

If you are a manager or supervisor, it is up to you to enlist upper management's support to achieve the desired end state. If you are an individual contributor or a "worker bee," it is up to you to help foster the learning environment.

You can have immediate impact in the area of training by utilizing internal resources to increase an employee's knowledge about the processes or issues facing a company. By reserving the first half-hour of staff meetings for training and developing a schedule in cooperation with other departments, you can enable the most knowledgeable person associated with a given process to provide 30 minutes of useful instruction.

Some choose to schedule these training sessions in a sequence that reflects real-world occurrence. This strategy might see a topic of "New Product Development" in one week, followed by "Bill of Material" in the next, and so on. Others organize by functional area; such a schedule might present "Invoicing" one week and "Vendor Check Cutting, the next.

Communication

Many people who have chosen careers as technologists find that a large part of their communication is with a machine rather than another human being. Companies believe that communication, both written and oral, is so important that they include it as a requirement in job descriptions. Some even have it on their annual evaluation forms.

Communication is vital to employee retention. The flow of information must be bi-directional, with some regularity. If this is not the case, how will the manager or supervisor even know that there is an issue, let alone what to do about it? In order to cover this topic prior to the arrival of the next millennium, we restrict ourselves here to communications between supervisor and employee.

Too little attention is paid to the definition of "effective communication." Often, when a convincing memo is written or an audience is captivated by a powerful presentation, it is said that effective communication has taken place. While this may be true for that particular occurrence, communication with our employees can be evaluated only as the sum total of all contact, or lack thereof, that we have with them—measured by the changes in their behavior that the communication was intended to effect.

You can communicate with employees by many methods, and each should be used to enrich the communications link between employees (usually not an issue), between managers and their employees, and between the company and its employees.

To make effective use of various communication methods, you must first understand the elements of communication. More than one book has made reference to the following four elements, which must be present for communication to be possible:

- Message—An idea, concept, or some other form of notification
- Transmitter—Someone or something that originates and sends the message
- Receiver—Someone or something that gets the message
- Medium—The means or vehicle by which the message is sent

Note that the presence of these four elements does not guarantee that communication will occur, or be effective. To quickly illustrate this point, picture a manager telling his staff, in a meeting—that on Saturday they must begin planning a software upgrade. At this point, we have all four elements present. The *transmitter* was the manager, the *message* was to begin planning the upgrade on Saturday, the *receiver* was the manager's staff, and the *medium* was the spoken word.

The two missing elements that can verify whether or not communication has occurred and was effective are *feedback* and *action*. In the above example, if the meeting adjourned with no further communication, feedback did not occur. If on Monday, however, the manager discovers that the upgrade planning was started on Saturday, then that action makes it obvious that the communication occurred and was effective. It is a good practice to follow up on action and at the very least feedback.

The circumstances surrounding the communication medium can enhance the message being sent. Imagine a singing telegram: ♫ *Your sister Pearl is dead* ♫ . While a singing telegram may be a fun and effective way to deliver some messages, it is important to ensure that the medium utilized is appropriate to the message being sent. Aside from singing telegrams, some ideas on other effective forms of messages and mediums that can be implemented with very little planning and almost no cost follow.

Employees always appreciate recognition of an anniversary date with the company. Even if this is an employee's first or second anniversary, the occasion is a good opportunity not only to recognize service, but to praise employees for the work that they have been doing. A one-page letter of three paragraphs works best. The first and last paragraphs can be standardized to discuss the state of the company and the future of the company respectively. The middle paragraph should be used to personalize the letter by choosing something that has been successful because of the employee's involvement.

Birthday wishes from the boss are always a welcome communication when done tastefully. A simple email at the beginning of the day provides the sentiment. Additionally, when the employee runs into the boss later that day, the opportunity arises to briefly exchange pleasantries that are not work-related.

Staff meetings are the old standby, and should always be held with regular frequency (same day and same time). These meetings are extremely important, not only to communication, but to leadership, environment, and good chemistry as well.

Another effective method of communication is the 10-minute stand-up meeting. This type of meeting can provide a quick update of what has occurred over the last day, and may also be used to outline expectations for the next day. This is an excellent time to praise an employee in front of peers. Short meetings such as this can also be used as abbreviated awards ceremonies.

The "skip level meeting" is an outstanding mechanism for a supervisor to communicate with the employees of his or her direct reports. The purpose of these meetings is for small groups of employees (five to seven) to meet with their bosses' boss. Such encounters are not intended to undermine anyone's authority; when used properly, in fact, they can assist the management team in resolving issues before they become exacerbated.

A last communication method worth mentioning is the "management by walking around" concept. Making the rounds (daily) to exchange a few words with each employee serves a number of purposes and spills over into other areas discussed later in this chapter. Daily rounds assist the manager in developing an employee's review and help ensure that the review, even if only provided annually, is not a surprise to the employee. The amount of time to be spent with each individual will work itself out; not every employee must be seen every day.

Leadership

Managers and leaders who have had to choose between saying "follow me" or "take that hill" may not learn anything in this section. Social climbers may not either, but for different reasons. Leadership means "guiding or conducting in a certain course, or to a certain place or end, by making the way known, or showing the way." Sometimes leadership means directing with authority, and in those situations, actions by a leader should be so strong and distinct that people automatically follow.

Employees look for and need leadership. They want to be guided or have the way made known to them. This does not mean that an employee wants to be told exactly what to do and when to do it.

Leadership or management style has always had an effect or impact on employees. As a manager, you have many situational predicaments to tackle; an employee's attitude is reflective of the leadership you provide in doing so. The character that you display is what employees will sit in judgment of or follow. Nobody wants to work for a screamer.

Being a feared, short-term, on-the-edge, moving and shaking "task-master" may appear useful when the company is experiencing a crisis, but even if it is, how will employees ever get anything accomplished during normal times? We should never forget that things must get done, but the discussion is leadership and not task completion. Too frequently people who can bully others into doing something, but are without leadership qualities, attempt to redefine management and leadership. To provide leadership, IT managers must meld their understanding of the company's

goals and objectives with a definition of the role technology plays in that plan, and link these directly to the activities expected of the employee.

All managers and leaders will agree that some degree of planning is necessary. The depth with which a plan is developed is completely dependent upon the organization. Imagine trying to do a conference room pilot without first attempting to define what needed to be tested. Chaos would soon reign, and the complexities associated with thoroughly testing the technology would become overwhelming.

Having the employee participate in planning is always possible at some level, but communicating how the employee's assignment fits into the high-level plan is often overlooked. Leaders should avoid falling into the trap of believing that the employee knows how his or her individual contribution will assist the company or department in meeting its goals. Besides, this is five minutes of conversation that will provide the guidance and stability that employees seek. Should any leader risk *not* spending that five minutes? Once the employee knows what is in store over the next quarter and year, and how she fits within the plan, she will begin to support that position, perform the necessary detailed planning, and attempt to achieve the desired results.

Keeping the work organized for the DBA, system administrator, and other technical associates is paramount to retaining your technology employees. The employee must be kept busy with meaningful work. To handle certain times when workflow is ebbing (usually because something required is not yet available), the leader must plan ahead.

The importance of documentation is common knowledge, as is the fact that most IT organizations are behind in this portion of their responsibilities. If the manager consistently stresses the importance of documentation, the stage is set for two events. First, when the workload is down, the manager can direct that work be performed on documentation. Second, since it has been given a degree of importance, it will not seem such a lackluster task!

As the leader, you play many roles. As the supervisor, you must ensure that a productive and motivated team is being maintained and that the right project is delegated to the right person. There are times when you must delegate and empower others to get the job done. You must be able to turn over entire tasks with confidence.

There are also times when you must turn employee conflict into productive action. This may mean handling difficult people and situations for a win-win result, and will require utilizing more than one of your leadership capabilities. There may be still other times when you must become a worker on the team. One example might be a manager who jumps in at the appropriate time and writes a specification for a developer. This action will enhance your leadership position because it saved the analyst time, and made the developer more productive by allowing him to get to work much sooner.

The organization of your employees will also be a factor in retaining them. Don't be afraid to assign titles such as Technical Lead or Team Leader, Manufacturing Modules of course, such titles must reflect not only the employees' positions, but also the actual job content they describes. Having more prestigious or important sounding titles should not offend anyone.

A leader is only as good as the team he or she creates. The better the team, the more will be accomplished—and the less the time required.

Environment

Titles were discussed in the previous section, but not the appropriate structuring of an organization to accomplish its task(s) and the resulting effects of structure on the people involved. It is important to look at the approach to *process*—that is, how the task is accomplished, including how people relate to each other and the interpersonal dynamics that occur.

Any IT shop will find itself somewhere on the managerial grid shown in the Figure below. This grid has been adapted and modified from *The Managerial Grid* by R. Blake and J. Mouton.
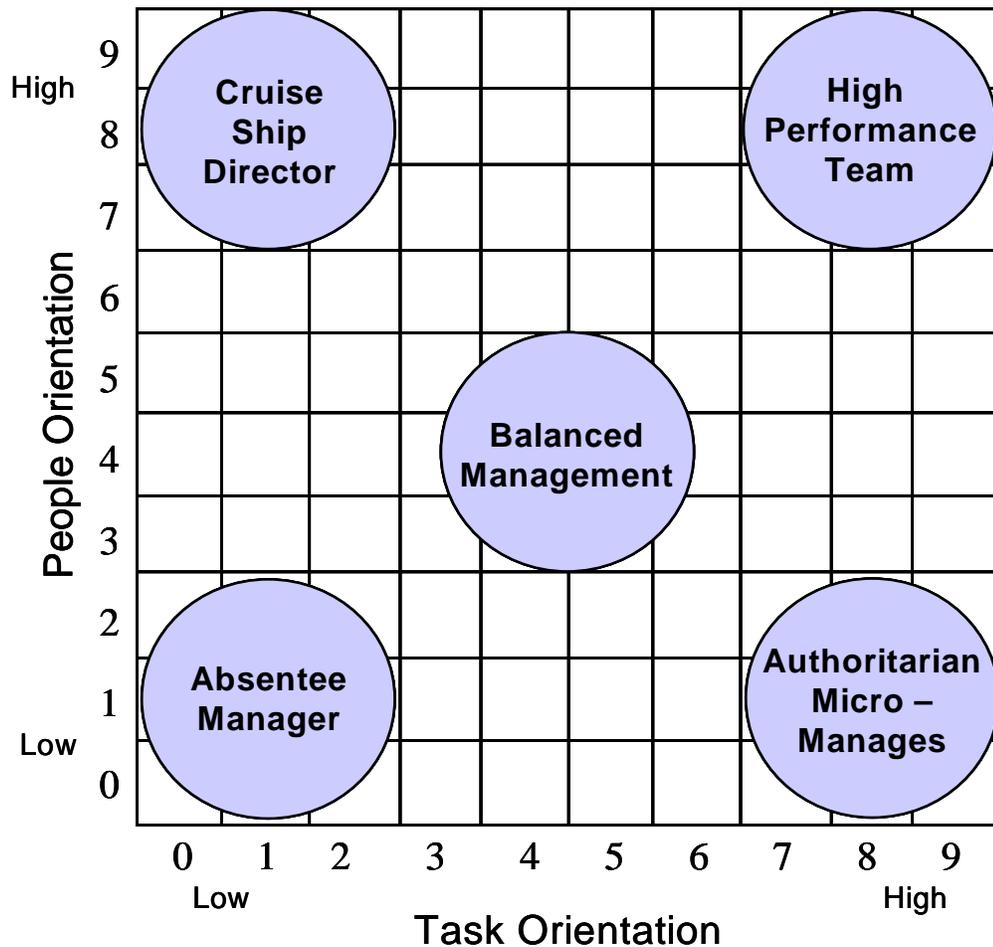
Figure Managerial styles

Exhibit 1 - Managerial Styles

Absentee Manager: Does the bare minimum in terms of visibility and exerts just enough effort to get required work done. The management style is to stay out of trouble and not make waves. This manager is about making resources "appear" busy and will merely put people on a job. There is little consideration for skill-sets because the manager allows people to do the job, or not do the job, as they see fit. This can lead to great difficulty with the applications, as well as with the functional end users.

Cruise Ship Director: This style values people more than the accomplishment of the task and provides security, comfort, and ease for employees. It provides thoughtful attention to the needs of people for satisfying relationships and leads to a comfortable, friendly organizational atmosphere and work tempo. Employees in turn will be intensely loyal and therefore will accomplish their jobs without undue coercion or pressure. Care must be taken here to ensure that goals are established and that employees understand what is expected of them and feel as though they are making progress, both as individuals and as a team.

Authoritarian Manager: This style is characterized by a low concern for people and a high concern for producing. As long as everyone agrees with the boss, there won't be a problem. However, employees are asked to buy into the underlying assumption that they are truly subordinate and inferior to the boss, and obedient performance is the watchword. It is implied that deviation from the above will result in retribution up to and including termination. Choosing or allowing this scenario will definitely result in high employee turnover and its associated costs on all fronts—dollars, morale, productivity, and customer service.

Balanced Management: This style of management balances the maintenance of morale with the need to complete work, using a different mode than the others of addressing the conflict between task and people. The cruise ship director resolves this conflict by siding with the people, while the authoritarian manager doesn't care about the people and so prefers to side with the task, and the absentee manager, if even aware of the issue, withdraws from the battle and doesn't attempt to address the conflict. In contrast, the balanced manager realizes that people know they must get their jobs done and so assumes a "half and half" position of attempting to balance the needs of the employees and the need to get out work. This can be effective, especially when the manager is adept at shifting the balance to fit. For example, during an upgrade period, more focus might be placed on task, while empathizing with the employees and helping them to see light at the end of the upgrade tunnel.

High-Performance Team Management: This style is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the other four in that the others make the basic assumption of an inherent distinction between the needs of the individual and the needs of the organization. The high-performance manager lives and breathes the belief that the needs of the organization and the needs of the employee can be integrated by involving people in making decisions about the strategies and conditions of work. The basic goal here is to achieve high productivity and high morale. This is obviously the best place to be if employees are to be retained.

Notwithstanding the above, it has been my experience that management is highly situational, with the current circumstances often driving the requisite management mode. In other words, while it is generally desirable to strive to be a high-performance manager, the situation may require an authoritarian style until the environment changes sufficiently to warrant another approach. This is particularly true in turnaround situations.

This situational condition can also hold true at the individual employee level; some people require a more hands-on management style than others. Effective management of the IT workforce occurs when the management mode aligns with—and stays aligned with—the situation being managed.

Motivation

The difference between *vocation* and *avocation* is one letter, but oddly enough, this addition does not create an antonym or opposite. These two words are related and are key to understanding motivation. *Vocation* is most often the associated with occupation-or-profession; if an individual is extremely motivated, it may become a –pursuit or calling. *Avocation* is thought of as a pastime or hobby, but again, depending on the intensity, may become a sideline or side interest. The difference, then, is that one is work and the other is play. Employees are self-motivated when they enjoy what they are doing. In order for a manager to motivate an employee, the question of how to enjoy work as much as play must be answered.

Mark Twain captured the essence of this in his book *Tom Sawyer*. As punishment for something he has done, Tom is assigned the task of whitewashing a fence. As Tom stands there, not very motivated, with paint brush in hand, a friend arrives on the scene and asks him to go fishing. But Tom says he doesn't want to, because he's painting the fence. The friend is incredulous and says, "But ain't that works?" Tom replies that he's having a great time and soon convinces his friend that painting the fence is actually fun. The friend wants a turn with the brush, but Tom hesitates, saying that while this is fun, the end result is extremely important and must reek of excellence. Over a short period of time, a group of friends, who have paid for the privilege of painting the fence is assembled, and the task is accomplished in a fraction of the time, leaving Tom free to go and see his best friend—Huck Finn!

Tom's original task was to paint the fence white, not to see Huck. But Tom was clever enough to present this task as both fun and extremely important. He had to do some "selling," but this was overcome based on the relationship and trust that Tom had with the people whom he wanted to paint the fence for him.

This scene is directly applicable to an IT shop. There are many ways to "sell" a task that needs to be accomplished. Motivating employees is an everyday task, but not every employee must be motivated every day. Additionally, some employees (self-starters) may seem to require less attention than others, but don't fall into the trap of impoverishing that employee. Everyone has an ego and likes to receive feedback. Listed below are seven possibilities that may help motivate employees in different situations and circumstances.

1. Explain the longer-range reason(s) why a task must be undertaken. Sometimes it is helpful to show that while this task seems small or meaningless, it is a building block for other activities. Perhaps it is a gating item for other dependent tasks. This is certainly the simplest and most straightforward method of motivating an employee. As a coach or mentor (to all of his or her direct report employees), the leader/manager can help the employee develop the innate capability to discern such reasons on his own. Over a period of time, the employee will learn to recognize the impact this particular task will have on the business. Once the employee harnesses this ability, the next logical step is to learn to prioritize those activities that have a greater impact. Eventually, ROIT (return on information technology) will take on a whole new meaning.

2. Evangelize the value or importance of what the employee is doing, even if only with the employee. This is very effective in making an employee believe that the current task she has undertaken is the most important activity occurring at the company. While many tasks are very important, some are less visible and therefore have a higher likelihood of going unnoticed or unattended to by managers. Functional users always want to obtain the result of the task at hand. Typically, it is the functional user who generates the requirement upon which the employee is working. Taking the opportunity to evangelize the importance of a task while the employee is together with the functional user may create some excitement and synergy related to the task.

3. Explain how the completion of this task will make for a happy functional end user. This is a good motivator for those employees who are service-oriented, and also works well for employees who are image or reputation-conscious. Because enterprise requirements planning (ERP) systems are integrated packages, actions taken by employees are very visible to the functional end user (quite possibly in many disciplines). Positive reinforcement upon task completion will make it that much easier to motivate the employee the next time this technique is be used.

4. Make the completion of tasks a game or form of competition. This can be accomplished in many ways. A few examples include issuing a challenge that refers to how quickly this or a similar task has been accomplished in the past-indicating that completing this task by a given date will reap a reward and providing the information that another company took five months to do the 10.7 upgrade, while we're scheduled to do it in three. Care should be exercised with this technique, as the manager does not want to pit one employee against another in a negative fashion or create any other form of unhealthy competition.

5. Appeal to employee professionalism, or ask that a task be accomplished to maintain a standard. This approach is in the gray area as to whether it is has positive enough effects. Improper presentation of this concept could leave the employee thinking that there is no good reason to be undertaking this particular task. Certainly professionalism and a sense of pride are positive, and if maintaining the standard is contributing to the overall strength of a position or capability, then it is also viewed as a good thing. When this approach is used, therefore, care should be exercised to ensure that the employee sees the result as a positive contribution.

6. Clarify that performing this task now will make life easier or more efficient later. This motivational scenario attempts to sell short-term pain for long-term gain. This is further down the fun scale and definitely has some negative connotations. What is being sold here is "let me tell you how wonderful things are *going* to be," which requires that the manager be a skillful salesperson since the benefit is deferred and so gratification not only not instant, but could be postponed for quite a while.

7. Identify the task as something that is not fun but must be done. This is the "it's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it" scenario. While at first glance this appears to be a negative scenario, it does have positive points if presented correctly. For example, if an employee is the only logical person to complete the task, it can be sold as "you're the only one who can do this job, and it's lucky for the firm that it has an employee such as you with this capability." If the job requires that more than one person be assigned, this can also serve as an excellent team building element.

No matter which scenario the manager is presenting, the sell must ring true. When we talk of "selling" something to an employee, we are talking about packaging the truth (that is, that a task or tasks must be completed) in a manner that is acceptable to the employee.