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Hiding in plain sight: Finding undiscovered talent in the IT marketplace

by Judith Sears

In a 1998 report, the Gartner Group, a research firm in Stamford, Conn., announced that for every 10 IT jobs, there are seven or eight candidates available. Faced with such daunting statistics and competition, many employers are responding by learning to spot talent in some unexpected places. By being willing to go outside conventional job requirements, these companies are finding people whose aptitudes, skills and experience enable them to successfully transition into IT positions, even without the customary computer science degree or experience.

Case 1: Denver, Colorado. Summer, 1998. 102 degrees. Tony Cash, hoping to land his first IT position as an Oracle education instructor, flew to Denver for interviews, only to be dropped off by the bus at the wrong address. Cash was unable to get a cab. So, wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase, Cash set out on a mile-long hike across busy intersections and portions of the freeway.

Cash arrived late, was hot and "looked like he'd been through a washing machine," recalls Michael Alfano, Vice President, Oracle Education in Vienna, Va. Cash went straight into the interview and handled both the questions and the practice presentation with surprising poise. "That really showed me that he had the wherewithal to endure any classroom experience. I thought, if the system goes down in the middle of class, he'll teach from the book. He'll recover and say, 'the system's going to be down for a few hours, but that's okay - we're going to learn what we need to learn and life is going to be good,'" says Alfano.

Case 2: Marina Douglas, clinical practice director for SAIC's Healthcare and Enterprise Solutions Sector in McLean, Va., and a nurse with 17 years of direct patient care delivery, was looking for clinical installation specialists to serve as liaisons between hospital end users and the IT department. She wanted candidates with initiative and follow through. She asked candidates to describe a project of which they were very proud. One woman's response was especially memorable. "She and her sister had refinished their basement," Douglas says. "They had passed all certifications, pulled the wiring and done both the plumbing and dry wall. This lady was not timid about finding information about something she didn't know and then planning and executing it. I said, 'She's a hire.' We found that she approached her work in the same way she did refinishing the basement."

Case 3: Dan Schwartz, employed in customer service at a financial services company asked for a transfer to pursue an IT career. Despite a need for IT talent, the company refused citing Schwartz's lack of a computer science degree. The company also refused to reimburse him for computer skills classes since he was not already in the IT department. That didn't stop Schwartz, who decided to advance his IT education on his own time and with his own money. During an entry-level computer skills course, Schwartz met an employee of ECS Inc., providers of integrated environmental risk management services headquartered in Exton, Pa., who told him about the very different outlook of ECS' management.

"When I interviewed Dan he proved that he liked to learn," says Greg Weidler VP of information services for ECS. "He's a dynamite guy. He had mastered all of his company's products and services. I've said jokingly to management at other companies, 'Please, send us your rejections!'" Weidler laughs.

These stories of hiring "outside the box" highlight the hidden talent in the marketplace. To spot and select these individuals effectively, however, management needs to focus on the raw materials -- behaviors, attitudes and aptitudes -- which characterize individuals who can successfully transition into an IT career. As these examples show, companies who learn to do this successfully are uncovering some gems.

Oracle: Profiling successful behavior

In early 1998, Oracle Education management was facing a staffing crunch. Fueled by the tremendous marketplace demand for ERP software, Oracle needed 200 people asap to serve as instructors to new Oracle customers. "The nature of training is that it's very time critical," says Alfano. "If you can't meet project training dates, you could cause them to miss their production live date."

Given the size and immediacy of their staffing needs, Oracle management decided to cast a broad net in hiring. They determined to evaluate candidates on three main criteria: 1) some software implementation experience, whether with Oracle or a competitor's software; 2) in-depth knowledge of a functional area, such as accounting or human resources; 3) the right behavioral attributes to be successful on the job. The heaviest weight was to be placed on items two and three, functional knowledge and behavioral attributes. In choosing this route, Oracle management was not just responding to the urgency of the moment. In many applications positions such as the instructors, in-depth knowledge of the business function is generally viewed as more important than IT sophistication. "You're teaching people who need you to understand the process they go through to do their job. You're not going to learn that by learning the software tool," says Alfano. "Additionally, the line is becoming blurred between technology and the ultimate use of technology, for example, whether you're an accountant or using an e-commerce system. We believe people need to have a good appreciation for both the functionality and the technology," says Oracle Education's vice president.

In seeking successful matches, Oracle took pains to identify the key behavioral attributes of successful instructors. Along with Selection Strategies, Inc., one of their recruiting partners, Oracle established a behavioral benchmark by interviewing successful on-board Oracle instructors and identifying those behaviors that were consistently exhibited by exemplary instructors. Through this process, several behaviors surfaced as typical of successful instructors: an attitude of service and team play, problem-solving skills and intellectual curiosity, flexibility, initiative, multi-tasking abilities and work ethic.

Additionally, Ross Rich, founder and president of Selection Strategies, Inc., in Chicago, Ill., provided interviewing skills training for Oracle management to equip them to evaluate candidates according to the behavioral profile. "We wanted to help management look past specific IT-related tasks to the basic behavioral attributes that transfer across disciplines and enable the individual to get the job done," says Rich.

The results of Oracle's blitz were highly successful. Alfano estimates that about 90 percent of these hires have gone on to be successful instructors. "There's no doubt in my mind that we can train someone of nearly any background to take on these responsibilities," says Alfano. "It's more a question of whether the individual can develop an interest, a real passion around IT." The Oracle hiring project was typical of many IT career transitions in that candidates begin with functional roles such as help desk analyst or applications instructor rather than "deep technology" design and development roles. Tony Cash, who has since been promoted to senior consultant at Oracle Education, intends to stay on the applications track. But with nearly 18 months of experience, other instructors hired during the same time frame are heading into database administration and development.

"Don't allow the lack of background to short circuit thoughts of applying," Cash advises. "There are a lot of companies that are actively pursuing anybody who has an interest and an ability to learn."

Nursing Informatics: Thinking, communicating, multi-tasking

The medical field is a notable instance in which functional knowledge consistently trumps IT sophistication. The unique requirements of hospitals and other health care settings make for their own steep learning curve. SAIC's Douglas notes that health care organizations are in need of making the transition to the automated

world, "but, it's very difficult to teach someone what pieces of information are critical in dealing with, for example, a cardiac patient." To fill the gap, hospitals and other healthcare organizations are turning to medical professionals who also bring IT expertise to their jobs.

In fact, organizations, professional networks and medical-IT specialties are proliferating. In 1994, the American Nursing Association (ANA) recognized nursing informatics as a specialty. The American Medical Informatics Association (AMIA) provides networking, education and certification. In the D.C. area, CARING (Capital Area Roundtable in Informatics in Nursing) also provides networking and information. For example, CARING sponsors WINIs (Weekend Immersion in Nursing Informatics) which provide nurses opportunities to explore informatics careers.

Douglas transitioned into nursing informatics in 1988 when an eye-opening experience with computers rocked her patient care delivery world. "I was responsible for a large outpatient clinic at Georgetown University Hospital and served as part of a selection committee for an automatic scheduling system. Omigosh, did that system make our lives easier!"

This experience launched Douglas into the brave new world of informatics as she realized what a difference computers could make to patient care delivery. Since then she has opened up this path for many others, having served as co-chair of CARING and currently serving as an organizer of the D. C. WINI.

Douglas finds that the training that nurses and allied healthcare professionals receive is usually a strong foundation for IT responsibilities. In particular, strengths such as analytical thinking, communication skills and an ability to multi-task are golden in an IT project management situation.

For example, the scientific method trains medical professionals to observe, assess, plan, implement and evaluate. "It is, in my experience, unlike the training that many other professions get," says Douglas. "To teach someone to think critically and have them also understand the nuances of the medical field is difficult. We can teach the IT side and, because they have the critical thinking process, they make the transition well." Most nurses are skilled at being the bridge between doctor and patient and easily learn to facilitate communication between vendor and customer. "They understand how programs work, but also can turn around and explain them to the people who need to use them," says SAIC's Healthcare and Enterprise Solutions Sector's clinical practice director.

Finally, direct patient care delivery nurses are accustomed to juggling many important pieces of information: whose potassium level is down, who needs to be dressed for their physical therapy appointment and who's waiting for pre-operation medications. "That ability to multi-task is phenomenal in the technical world," says Douglas.

As with the Oracle instructors, nurses frequently begin in an installation role, which essentially requires them to know how a program works in their environment. Typically, after 18 - 24 months, individuals who are interested can move on to an analyst role or other more technical positions. Carol Bickford, senior

policy fellow with the ANA, notes that currently many nurses serve as directors of IT in healthcare organizations, while others are providing software support, programming skills, defining project requirements and spearheading implementation projects.

ECS: Anyone can play

Another company that is making good use of talented IT neophytes is ECS, Inc., headquartered in Exton, Pa. Greg Weidler, VP of information services, emphatically agrees with those who put the emphasis on hiring talent, as opposed to formal IT experience or education. Out of 21 employees in his department, only two have computer science degrees. Weidler himself has a B. S. in Engineering and an MBA. "I'd much rather have good raw material than someone who walked out with certification, but doesn't know anything but what they learned in the book," says the VP.

Weidler looks primarily for people who have "a burning desire to learn, people who don't mind having to throw away what they learned three years ago. Those who are happy with what they know tend not to do well in these positions."

A desire to learn has characterized help desk analyst Steve Schermerhorn, who initially joined ECS, Inc. in 1997 as a summer intern. At first, Schermerhorn's responsibility was simply to install standard word processing and spreadsheet software on ECS computers. But over time, Schermerhorn demonstrated initiative and a willingness to take on the challenge of solving an application problem. "There's two ways you can do things when you get a call," Schermerhorn says. "You can run and ask somebody or you can try and figure it out yourself." Schermerhorn took the second approach and in the past two years has progressed to increasing responsibility at ECS' help desk.

Schermerhorn says he was not a computer hobbyist prior to joining ECS. But at ECS, "I found I have a knack for this stuff that I didn't know I had. I started interacting with people and realized - Hey! I know the answer to that."

Weidler intends to keep his department open to individuals who can demonstrate that kind of initiative and desire to learn. He notes that too often IT professionals appear to operate in a closed culture that may discourage experimentation and learning. "We make it appear so guru-like that people are afraid to even dabble," he says.

Weidler has determined to avoid that at ECS, Inc. "Every chance I get, I say, 'we're looking for a few good people and they don't have to have a technical background. If you like the way this looks, you too can play.'"