

Hiding in Plain Sight: *Finding undiscovered talent in the IT marketplace*

by Judith Sears, Principal, Strategic Staffing Group

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, CO. 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.