Tracking down tech talent
Building your E-Team

by Nancy Pekala

You may not be quite ready yet to roll in the foosball table or schedule in-house massages, but if you're like many real estate firms, you're getting serious about assembling a top notch e-team.

From CIOs to CTOs, the real estate industry is recognizing the importance of hiring IT talent that will help it achieve strategic technology goals in order to effectively compete in today's customer-centric Web environment.

Assembling Your E-Team

Turnover, new projects, expanding networks and development of new applications are all forcing businesses to hunt for top IT talent. The explosion of the Information Age, particularly in the last couple of years, have revved up today's real estate firms. They're now in full e-transformation mode, aggressively building their e-teams.

Organizations are responding by increasing their hiring and training expenditures. According to a ComputerWorld survey in which 100 IT managers were asked about their 2001 IT budgets, 59 percent said their budgets will increase an average of 10 percent. Network management continues to require a larger share of IT talent, according to the survey. About 15 percent said they expect to spend more on consultants and labor while 24 percent indicated they would spend less.

Today's reality of an IT talent shortage is sidetracking the technology initiatives of many organizations today. Despite the demise of dot.coms in recent months, recruiting agree that the layoffs have scarcely made a dent in nationwide shortages of IT workers.

Before the recruiting process can begin, it is essential that companies develop a strategic process for identifying the number and type of IT personnel needed. Writing for Kforce.com, Joe LaHurd offered the following suggestions:

- Assemble a complete program mission, objectives and critical success factors including hiring plans, number of candidates needed in each area, high-level education plans, timelines and projected costs.
- Develop detailed job requirements for each classification. Include both hard skills and behavioral skills.
- Craft the training plan and curriculum. Consider outside education firms, eLearning or Web- based simulated learning environments.
- Work with recruiters or the internal HR department to fill requirements.

Finding Talented Talent

Once you decide exactly what your IT needs are, where do you find quality candidates that you can afford? Surprisingly, organizations have a number of resources at their disposal to begin their search.

Many firms today are scouring failing dot.coms for talent they can snag. Jeff Taylor, founder and CEO of Monster.com noted in the February 2001 issue of *FastCompany* that traditional companies will begin to bolster their Internet departments by recruiting from collapsed dot.coms.

"Smart companies won't spit on dead dot.coms," he said. "Now that the economy is flattening, a lot of companies are picking up talented people from the dot.com wreckage. They will try to learn from their successes and failures in order to grow more competitive."

Taylor emphasized the importance of recruiting skills, predicting that the next 10 years will bring with it a generational labor shortage. "For the first time in U.S. history, businesses will fold not because their products are bad or their funding fell through, but because they're not good at recruiting and retaining talent."

Other companies are looking in their own backyard to determine if there are any existing personnel which can be nurtured to fill the IT slots. In traditional companies, IT is no longer the exclusive domain of technology experts. While they may not always be on the cutting edge, today's top managers have become more technology savvy, capable of making informed technology decisions.

Indeed, a growing number of companies are expanding the roles of many top corporate executives to include IT-related responsibilities. A recent Forrester Research report, *Pumping Up Internal eBusiness Talent*, concurred, indicating that 3 out of 5 people working on e-business projects come from non-IT functional groups like marketing and business development.

Still other firms are biting the bullet and rehiring those former employees they lost to dot.coms. According to Kazim Isfahani, an IT management analyst for Giga Information Group, former employees represent a golden opportunity for organizations today.

"These potential staffers are familiar with the organization, its people, processes, and technology, which lets them hit the ground running," he explained.. "As an added bonus, the enterprise receives a healthy dose of knowledge capital as a result of the new skills/outlook that the former employee learned at the startup."

A recent Monster.com survey provides additional data that supports the benefit of re-hiring former employees to fill key IT positions. The survey found that 71 percent of responding employers said they are willing to welcome ex-employees back into their companies, but are very cautious about who's being rehired. Of these, 21 percent said they are always willing to rehire former employees because it reduces recruitment time and costs.

Some companies are opting to stay out of the tech talent search altogether by outsourcing their IT requirements. Donald Gulbricki, Vice President of Operations and Systems for Prudential Global Asset Management, suggested in a recent *National Real Estate Investor* article that outsourcing makes a lot of sense for real estate firms.

He explained that his firm outsources many of its technology functions to an Application Service Provider (ASP). "Our fundamental desire is to focus on core competencies," Gulbricki said. "New technology innovations and the growing acceptance of the Internet for remote communications are making IT outsourcing a more attractive solution."

However, when considering IT outsourcing, he cautioned that firms must make sure the selected vendor can provide solid project management skills, understand their specific business needs, guarantee that all functionality will be addressed and

Top Tech Titles: A Guide to IT Classifications

CTO...CIO...DBA...Today's tech industry classifications can seem like a jumbled bowl of alphabet soup. Figuring out who does what in the industry and identifying which types of technology professionals your organization needs can be challenging. Here are a few you may want to consider to fill your IT staffing needs.

Business Applications Manager—Directs overall planning, execution and management of multiple projects and supervises project managers

Chief Information Officer—Involved in business side, focusing on technology infrastructure, making sure implementation of technology is feasible and within company's budget

Chief Technology Officer—Researches and identifies those emerging technologies which would be of use to the company

Computer Operations Manager—Manages computer systems, data processing and communications groups

Computer Operator—Responsible for daily processing and back-up

Database Manager—Directs the group responsible for database design, programming and maintenance

Director of MIS/IT—Top MIS executive for a business unit or division

Director of Networks—Top networking executive; manages voice and data communications

E-Commerce Network Administrator—Manages Web-based network servers and monitors volume of e-commerce transactions

Information Security Specialist—Responsible for maintaining the security of computer systems, network applications and databases

Internet Technology Strategist—Oversees integration of Web reporting, workflow, e-mail tracking, streaming media content, integration and security processes

LAN Manager—Responsible for planning, designing and operating the LAN as well as establishing all procedures relating to LAN environment

Manager of Internet/Intranet Strategies—Manages all Internet or Intranet-related activities, including development, implementation and operations

PC Technology Support Specialist—Responsible for overall PC maintenance Project Manager –Achieves goals and milestones associated with applications or systems projects

Senior Programmer—Develops, tests, and maintains advanced application programs

Senior Systems Analyst—Designs advanced system requirements to solve business problems

Systems Engineering Manager—Directs systems development on the mainframe, mid-range and PC systems which includes security, monitoring and reporting

Technical Services Director—Oversees research, evaluation and integration of new technology, systems development methodologies, training and technical support

Computer Technical Specialist—Provides technical support for operating systems and monitors processing efficiencies

Technology Support Manager—Manages end-user hardware and software support

Web Architect—Responsible for the development of customer applications for Internet development, maintaining Web servers and back-office infrastructure linkage

ensure that conversion issues will be adequately resolved.

Aim First, Hire Second

Whichever method organizations choose to locate potential IT candidates, it is critical that they look closely at candidates' track records, particularly if they are coming from a dot.com environment. A "hire first, aim second" approach could add up to an expensive hiring mistake for companies. According to Forrester Research, to build up e-business skills internally, companies must go beyond matching job titles and hard skills. Instead, they need to examine individuals' behavioral traits to determine a good fit.

Among those traits organizations may want to consider in their IT candidates are the following:

- *Outstanding leadership qualities.* Can they easily communicate the vision and goals of the company to others?
- *Strategic intellectual capacity.* Can they make quick, solid decisions in a competitive environment?
- *Honesty and integrity.* Do they share the company's values? Will your leadership team feel like they can trust them?
- *Work ethic, enthusiasm and drive.* Do they possess an incredible work ethic, extraordinary stamina, and the ability to create a positive work environment?
- *Contagious passion.* Can they get people excited about technonogy-related goals and plans?
- *Technology-centric.* Can they keep the company's strategic goals in mind when planning technology-centric programs?
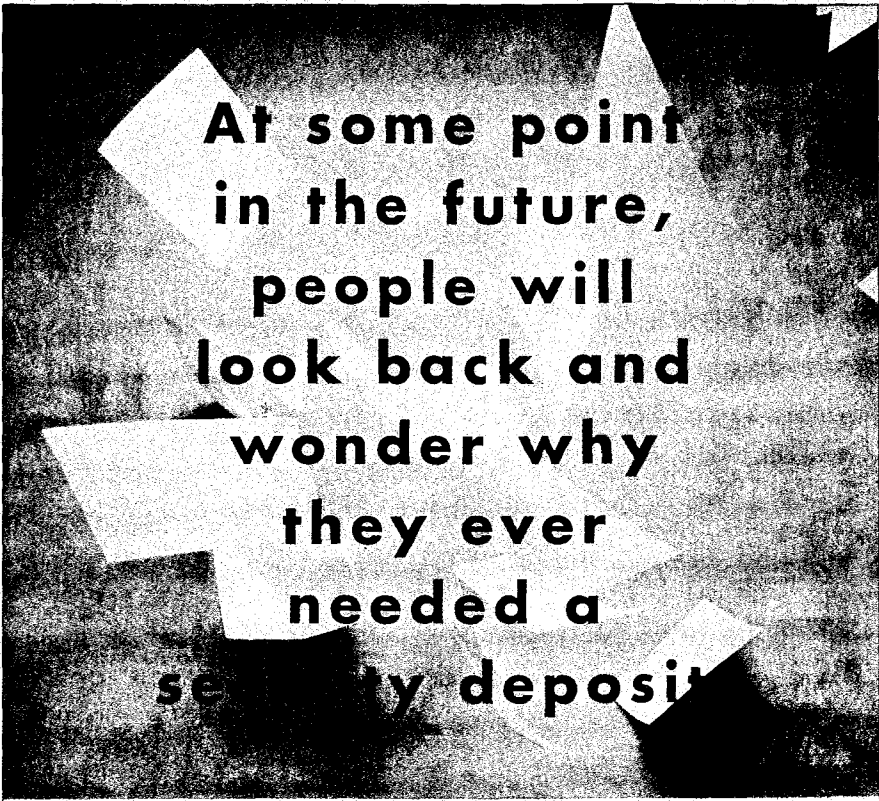- *Humility.* Are they willing to learn from mistakes?

- *Strong observation and empathy traits.* Will they be able to understand technology initiatives from the perspective of the customer and end user?
- *Knowledge of emerging technologies.* Are they not only aware of emerging technologies but can they define how those technologies can impact your business?

- *Attention to detail.* Are they methodical in their thinking and adept at technology integration and process monitoring?

IT Attention Getters

Finding the quality candidate that would be perfect for your IT position is difficult enough, but selling today's IT talent on making a switch can be

equally challenging and costly. With demand greater than supply, IT professionals are demanding—and getting—what they ask for.

While it's true that top technology talent come with a hefty price tag these days, money alone will not draw IT professionals to your organization. What is most important to techies is the work. It must be exciting, challenging and cutting edge to attract their interest.

To successfully attract top tech talent, organizations must develop solid career paths and an interesting corporate culture as well as deliver nonfinancial incentives. One of these key incentives is training. According to a study on IT recruiting released by Unifi Network, a division of PricewaterhouseCoopers 38 percent of respondents offer training in cutting-edge technology as an incentive to current and potential employees; 63 percent of respondents cite flexible work schedules to draw IT talent; while 52 percent provide challenging work assignments.

CB Richard Ellis is one organization that believes in investing in continuing education. The company developed a program to enable key employees to become "e-certified", or more proficient with its in-house computer systems, from e-mail to Internet projects it posts for its customers. Insignia also makes a significant effort in education as it developed a program to cross-train its employees on real estate analysis tools and accounting platforms.

Show Them The Money

When all is said and done, however, money still talks for today's top IT professionals. Despite a slowing economy, they expect and are getting higher salaries. According to an online InformationWeek Research salary survey of more than 10,000 IT staff and managers, IT professionals are expected to enjoy 7-10 percent increases in salary this year.

As reported in *Information Week.com*, consultants at Janco Associates Inc. conducted a six-month survey of 990 large and mid-size companies, with the results showing that the average base salary exceeded $100,000 in 2000, up from $97,000 in 1999.

Retaining Top Talent

Traditional and dot.com businesses alike are also finding that retaining quality technical staff is just as challenging as attracting them in the first place. With their skills so much in demand, IT talent can afford to walk away from a company that doesn't deliver on its promises.

To help ensure that your hard-won IT staff will stick around, consider some of the following retention suggestions:

- *Flextime vs. regular business hours.* Tech talent rarely abide by a 9-5 schedule. They often find evening or weekends to be the best time for completing upgrades and making other network changes.
- *High morale.* Old Economy policies such as restrictions on decorating your office or cubicle, or playing music, can produce a negative effect on morale for the tech employee.
- *Training.* Provide tech talent with the materials and systems they need to experiment. Doing so will lessen the need to recruit these skills from outside the company at a higher cost.

- *True empowerment.* IT staff are inpatient with bureaucracy and red tape. Limit their exposure to office politics which can get in the way of their creativity.
- *Hire adequate staff.* Too often, IT employees find their job responsibilities go well beyond what they were hired to do.
- *Keep financial promises.* Keep your financial promises and explain any variations.
- *Provide training on your business.* Explain how and why the company makes money, and provide an overview of your customers, products and services.
- *Recognize their achievements in any way possible.* IT staff have a real need to feel their contributions are valued by the company.
- *Create incentives.* Nontraditional incentives that will increase retention such as laptop purchases or technology subsidy programs demonstrates that they are being rewarded for measurable performance.

Managing Techies 101

While these retention techniques can indeed help guarantee that tech talent will stay around, one important, although often underestimated factor in the IT talent equation is management. Plain and simple, techies are a different breed of employee and they require a different and more flexible management approach.

As Eric Schmidt, CEO of Novell Inc., explained in *Fast Company*, "You need to make geeks part of the solution and engage them in dialogue about what you are trying to do. They love to tackle a challenge."

And whatever you do, Schmidt advises, never, ever micromanage a

techie. "You can tell them what to do, but not how to do it," he cautioned.

He added, "Make sure they have access to the company's senior managers. They feel like they're changing the world–so you need to make them feel like you're helping them do that."

In Kforce.com, technology writer Joseph DeSetto offered these additional suggestions to managers of IT personnel:

- *Stop clock watching.* Techies don't operate on the same clock in terms of total hours and work schedules. When IT personnel repair a server crash at 2 in the morning, or check in on significant network changes while on vacation, questioning them about spending an additional 15 minutes at lunch shows a lack of understanding.

- *Know value of IT people.* Don't automatically assume new projects need the help of outside consultants. Micromanagers often think their existing staff's skills are inadequate. Remember, your IT people do technical work largely because of its constant intellectual challenge.

- *Limit project updates.* Ease the IT professional's daily pressure by allowing more time between project updates.

- *Avoid quantifying.* Don't waste time trying to determine exactly how much each daily task costs or how much revenue the person generated.

- *Communicate.* Find out what they need to succeed and give them the space to do it. Most IT staffers carry pagers and will

respond in a more timely manner. Hourly status reports are not necessary.

Today's tech talent aren't interested in climbing the traditional corporate management ladder. But they do require a forward career path, recognition and significant compensation. Organizations which create a technical career track within their company as well as developing nonfinancial incentives will increase the likelihood of success in attracting and retaining top IT talent.

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