

Inside Leadership



Change is inevitable for IT careers. But every Cloud has a silver lining.

IT careers and the IT recruitment market are changing fast and forever.



If a week is a long time in politics, it's a lifetime in an IT career. Not just the revolutionary pace at which technology develops, but the speed at which a skill in extreme demand today, becomes obsolete in a year.

The dynamic is such that there are simply no other comparable professions, whereby such a significant proportion of what you learn in college, can cease to be of material value after five years. It's no wonder, that 86% of IT professionals regard "the opportunity for training in new technologies" as having the same or greater importance than "salary" when considering new career opportunities and whether or not to accept a new position.

As executive recruiters, we know IT recruitment to be one of the most complex markets in which to operate effectively. It is certainly the most challenging segment in which to accurately predict likely future needs in the labour market.

When compared with professional careers in Accountancy, Law, Marketing or HR, IT is a considerably more difficult profession in which to estimate a previous candidate's, likely subsequent career path. As any researcher in an executive search firm will tell you, this is a key issue when you seek to virtually track candidates and their career paths, to determine potential suitability for new appointments.

Even allowing for all this, IT careers and the IT recruitment market are going through an extraordinary transition, whereby traditional roles, if they can even be called that, are morphing into different shapes. At the same time, the basis for making IT hiring decisions in recruiting organisations, has also changed significantly.

Prior to the downturn in the economy and labour market, in many organisations, final hiring decisions were made by the line technology manager. Candidates were recruited largely on the basis of their technical skills with little attention paid to softer issues. Several companies now will openly admit, that this has led to problems and that consequently, the

balance of power has shifted back towards their HR functions or groups. As a result, the hiring criteria has shifted with it.

The Head of Human Resources at a large client organisation explains that they now evaluate IT candidates on three levels. The first of these is stability, they are concerned by any applicant who has more than two previous employers in any five year period. The second is commercial perspective, they expect IT candidates to have a rounded interest in how the results of their work will impact on the end user or customer of the application or service. The final one is of course skills related but not limited to technical ability. "Candidates have to demonstrate a wider range of capabilities pertinent to our organisation. Some of these relate to soft skills, we want technology professionals who fit with the organisation culture and who can align to the wider business goals." As with most companies, this particular corporation has had to deal with its own poor hiring hangover.

"Frankly, nobody has the time or inclination anymore to deal with the wasted effort and management resource that gets sucked up by tension arising from poor organisation fit. We want IT professionals with an aptitude for personal development. Candidates that no matter how experienced they are, feel they have more to learn and professionals who understand, that while a significant amount of IT work has a solitary element to it, in an organisation of our size, you can't escape having to work as part of a team."

Over the last ten years, the science of "managing professionals" has become a significant area of research and learning in its own right. It is apparent in the significant growth in influence of HR particularly amongst software development firms, where practitioners describe the critical need to strike cultural balance between creativity and conformity.

Consider the dynamic in careers amongst financial professionals. The growth in financial literacy amongst non-accounting managers, reflects the demand that leaders have broader perspective. Equally, we note that the role of an accountant, continues to develop into a more general business function*. The wider ongoing transformation impacting the future of IT careers, appears to have its roots in how society is rapidly adapting to a technology centric world.

Today, the average person is far more technology savvy. We see it at a basic level with the growth of search engines, online shopping and social media. At another, it's the obsession with and empowerment from (or dependency on?) smart phones and their exponential range of apps.

The knock on of this, is that in business and in our personal lives we not only demand, but now have and take for granted instant access to the data that we need to make key decisions. It seems therefore likely, that in most cases, the future direction of IT change and development will be influenced and driven more by user demand than as previously by the IT function itself.

While the full impact of this on the future shape of IT careers is not clear, we already see ongoing change in our Professional Services client base, whereby IT continues to become more central to operations. Effective IT functions want to add value, to create cost and time saving efficiencies, rather than simply act in a support and maintenance role.

Thinking further ahead, consider the potential combination of cloud computing and SaaS. Organisations engaged in the provision of these technologies, will need to be highly service oriented and customer focused companies. They will employ like minded people into their development and infrastructure support roles. It is likely, that these IT professionals will have a much higher level of direct exposure to end user customers and will therefore need to place as much importance on the service experience of the customer as they do on the purity and performance capability of the technology.

The good news is, that while some purists might not want to contemplate IT roles that demand broader commercial and organisation skills, the future for IT careers looks bright. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics recently published the latest edition of its Occupational Outlook Handbook. According to the US Department of Labor, over the next few years "Employment will grow much faster for IT professionals than the average of all other occupations" and that "excellent job prospects are expected." Cloud nine then.

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