Technical Staff Management

By Barry Blesser and Derek Pilkington © 1999

With the convergence of technologies and the movement of these technologies into previous niche markets comes the need to change the way in which technical staff are motivated and managed. The rapid commodization and proliferation of PC based technologies has enabled these technologies to be used in a wide range of industries. Many of these industries previously developed specialized technologies for their niche and employed technical staff specialized in that field. Hiring new staff for replacement or growth typically involved poaching into direct competitors or similar businesses. Today, as the utilization of commodity technology takes over from industry specialized technologies these companies must seek technical employee from a wider range of industries. While this may create a wider range of choice, it comes with the fact that these technologists are in greater demand, often from companies that can afford larger compensation packages or that offer greater technical opportunities. Furthermore, the individuals recognize that they are in demand and can often appear quite arrogant in the negotiation process.

Many prospective employees know their value, or think they do. In technical fields the hiring process must segment the prospective employees according to their potential value added to the team for which they are being hired. However, once they successfully engaged the issue of keeping a valuable employee starts. Given the competitive market for such employees, the erosion of company "loyalty" and the possibility of virtual employment, the employer must develop new strategies to hold on to employees with high value-added to the organization.

Group identity and rules are changing as we move towards a global market. Connections can exist over vast cultural and geographic distances, allowing the creation of virtual groups. The traditional requirement of a common geographic location provided more stability. Relocating family and changing professional community had emotional costs, creating conservatism in support of long-term professional relationships. Since virtual groups are not location or culture based, there are few constraints in creation or dissolution. In this way, virtual groups isolate individuals: employee, consultant, manager, investor or contractor. As definitions of these relationships converge, individual freedom turns employees into "one-man businesses." Regardless of the formal relationship, individuals within groups who pursue a common aim can be considered joint venture partners. Management of such partner is different than that of traditional employees.

Professionals are beginning to recognize themselves as a consumable with a certain value-added to a group. Compensation is based on the competitive value-added to the group. Individual or group activities can enjoy continuous success only if its value-added remains high and supports high entry barriers. We use these terms to describe commercial activities. Just as a company decides to invest in a product-line based on a positive return-on-investment, an employee faces similar decisions. This leads them to a set of questions for career choices:

- *Does my employer offer a career path? Will the employer invest in my future, or share in that investment?*

- *How do I decide which skills to invest in; how do I market them? What will be the lifetime of those skills?*

- *Will competition reduce their market? How will supply and demand evolve?*

- *When should I change careers? Will the effort justify the return?*

Just as technologies can become commodities, so can skill sets. Demands for new skills are emerging, but with unknown futures. This pattern is not limited to any specific profession; accounting, programming, investing, sales or marketing. Employees who recognize that they are becoming a commodity are unlikely to remain productive as they struggle with their career choices. Furthermore, employees or teams that are only possess old skills will tend to pull the organization backward not forward, stymieing creative and forward looking visions.

Business challenges are becoming indistinguishable from the corresponding individual challenges. Since a business is a collection of people with skills, we can no longer separate business trajectory from the individuals. While we talk about managing business based on acquired skills, we have no corresponding language that focuses on individuals. Various forms of career planning exist, but most use historic models and are not a dominant part of the professional world, nor are theye thought of as a way to keep value employees.

Introducing modern career planning for the individual can insure alignment of individual and company interests. Career planning can be part of an individual's compensation that is not readily available. Career planning supported by the group can offset the loss of cohesiveness produced by geographic freedom.