MANAGEMENT SKILLS IN IT
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To be a great IT manager is to understand that IT success is based upon a blend of skills that mixes IT craft, ability and knowledge with a true understanding of what the organisation is trying to achieve and the context within which it sits. Great IT leaders can get themselves, their teams and their organisations in front of the IT curve, realising opportunities. To be behind the curve is to see only threats.

Behaviours and skills that made IT people successful in the past cannot be relied upon to guarantee similar levels of success in the future. It is true that technical ability and knowledge represent a sound bedrock for an IT leader, however this is not enough in a modern world where information and technology can revolutionise business models, social norms, perceived wisdom and even nation states.

Coupled to this environment is a growing population of digital natives, demanding ever higher levels of integration and intuitive function. But this is the moment for IT managers to make their mark, to take ownership of information, innovation and competitive advantage – even the Financial Times said that those who are able to exploit IT for the benefit of the business are going to be the ‘new rock stars of pay and remuneration...’

To take their seat at board level, IT professionals must address the reality and, in some cases, the hangover of perception regarding their soft skills, which must be at least equal to those demonstrated by professional leaders across all sectors and organisations. The articles and blog posts in this collection explore these issues and suggest ways to become a truly great manager.

Great IT can be inspiring and requires equally inspiring leaders for this vision to come to fruition.

Adam Thilthorpe
Director for Professionalism
BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT
SECTION 1: MANAGEMENT AND PERSONAL SKILLS
I was interested to read that, according to recent CW Jobs research, the lack of ‘soft’ skills is the latest IT career regression factor. My experience, however, is that many IT professionals believe that they don’t need ‘soft’ skills and that technical skills are the only ones needed for an IT role.

For many years, I have designed, developed and delivered workshops to help IT professionals develop their communication, customer service and training skills. So often the IT managers recognise the need for such skills in their staff, but when the staff themselves are ‘sent’ on a course, they are often resistant and have no understanding of why such skills are important in their role. Of course that could be because the managers are ‘sending’ their staff and don’t have the relevant skill to prepare them sufficiently in the first place, but it is also apparent that technical skills are often seen as more important.

One such experience was with a group of IT helpdesk staff for a local authority whose role was to support teachers in schools. They were attending a ‘Customer Service for IT Professionals’ workshop and, as part of this, were asked to represent their customers in some way. Most groups chose to draw a representation, which had disturbing similarities. Customers were represented as stupid, illiterate (in IT terms) and incapable of understanding simple (in the helpdesk staff’s terms) instruction – and these are qualified teachers, remember.

The helpdesk staff’s perception of their customers was compounded by the fact that they saw no benefit in gaining any insight into their customers’ perspective because ‘if they don’t get it … it’s not our fault!’ You may be pleased to know that a few customer/supplier barriers were broken down that day, but not before a lot of soul-searching from some.

Contrast that with another experience with an internet giant (beginning with Y), whose specialists are worldwide experts in some of the narrowest of technical fields and so are often asked to train others in their subject-matter expertise. We were asked to help them to deliver more effective learning. At the end of the workshop, one of the cleverest men I have ever met admitted that he had ‘been doing it wrong all this time’. He absolutely ‘got’ how enhancing his soft skills could help him to be an even better technician. To a man (because, sadly, they were all men) that team benefited from their learning and could see how improving on their soft skills would help them to help others. Maybe it was the organisation that made the difference – they were very open-minded and not threatened by the ‘softer’ demands on them. They had the technical skills, but they also understood that that is not all that’s needed to make us good at our jobs.
So how can we get IT professionals to accept that they need help? Perhaps this CW Jobs research will help, but I doubt that the people who need it will even look at the Computer Weekly article because it is categorised under IT Management, Staffing and Training.

**About the author**
Jooli Atkins FBCS CITP FIITT has been involved in the IT profession for the past 25 years, mainly in IT training. She is the Chair of the BCS Learning and Development Specialist Group as well as being an active member of the Learning and Performance Institute (formerly IITT).

**Links**
Jooli’s blog: Lessons Learnt: www.bcs.org/content/conBlog/11


BCS Learning and Development Specialist Group: www.bcs.org/category/9399

Learning and Performance Institute: www.learningandperformanceinstitute.com
IT people can have great technical skills, which set them up for promotion, but are they the right skills to take them on to the next stage in their professional career? Simon Mitchell provides a valuable insight into some of the difficulties that emerging IT leaders face when moving from an operational to a leadership role and how companies can support them in this critical transition.

Being invited to take the next step into a management or leadership role can be flattering and exciting and, understandably, many accept a rise in salary and status without full consideration of the skills and attributes required to make the new role a success.

Yet as a person progresses into management, skills often become more about people and less about technical competency and those that are not given the support to gain these skills may find themselves floundering.

It is important to realise that leaders are not born with all the skills they will need in their roles and, faced with a skills gap, organisations can take one of two approaches:

- let them acquire the skills on the job (the sink or swim approach); or
- provide structured skills acquisition and other relevant support.

Not surprisingly, the latter offers by far the best results.

In 2008, Development Dimensions International (DDI) carried out a survey of 600 managers worldwide to look at how the transition to a leadership role impacts the individual and what companies can do to support them.

The biggest and most stressful challenge to taking on a new leadership role was found to be the mental shift required for the next level of management, which includes new skills in communication, planning and team-building.

However, some of the stresses of moving to a leadership role were outweighed by the opportunity to make things happen, a greater respect from peers, increased self-esteem and the opportunity to help others succeed.
SO HOW DO IT COMPANIES IDENTIFY THEIR FUTURE LEADERS?

Wanting and having the right leadership skills are two very different things and, likewise, having the ambition for promotion does not mean the person will easily slip into a manager’s shoes.

The first way to identify new leaders is to set clear parameters of which leadership skills will be required in the role and how they will support the company’s overall objectives. By doing this, it is possible to identify candidates that have the necessary skills and mindset to take them into a leadership role.

There are many different tools, tests and simulations that can help support the identification process, ranging from simple tick sheets to psychometric profiles and half-day simulation exercises. For any of them to be genuinely useful, there needs to be an understanding from the start about which leadership skills are essential for the new role.

WHAT ARE THE INDICATORS OF SUCCESSFUL LEADERS?

DDI identifies seven distinguishing features of a leader:

- personal awareness and the motivation to learn continuously;
- a motivation to lead;
- a willingness to get results from others and let others take the credit;
- the ability to juggle many competing tasks and deal with ambiguity in the workplace;
- a good track record;
- speed of intellect to meet organisational needs and objectives;
- an ability to balance results with the company culture.

LEAVING THE PAST BEHIND

Leaders at all levels leave behind elements of their previous role with reluctance. After all, it was past achievement that got them into the new role, and moving away from what they know can be uncomfortable.

Organisations need to recognise this and communicate to their new leaders what they should stop doing, as well as provide a clear path in terms of what they should be doing. This will help leaders understand what is expected of them, minimise workload stress and allow them to slip into their new role more comfortably.

IT’S LONELY AT THE TOP

It is a fast-paced industry with considerable opportunity to fast-track along a career path. However, this means that less experienced leaders are being asked
to take on larger workloads and responsibilities. As a result, they need to manage larger teams and take a more hands-off approach to daily activities, focusing more on strategy and team performance, for example.

Leaders can feel more isolated and afraid to admit that some new responsibilities represent a challenge for them. In many cases, the old support network of work colleagues and line manager may not be the right network to offer them constructive support in their new role.

Instead, in the absence of systematic organisational support, new leaders may look outside of the organisation for their support. This should be a warning sign to an organisation and could be indicative of a problem with the support culture within.

In DDI’s survey, 41 per cent of new leaders cited family and friends as their biggest support network. Work colleagues can also be a big source of support, although the use of work colleagues for support declines the higher up an organisation you go. Mainly this is due to fewer equal peers and fewer again with whom you might want to share feelings of vulnerability.

If a company can facilitate support networks through opportunities to share ideas and learn from others, it can help new leaders to fit in quickly, learn from their leadership peers and navigate their new, more political and ambiguous role effectively.

Classroom development combined with coaching and mentoring provides considerable support to new and emerging leaders, providing ‘safe spaces’ in which to examine and discuss weaknesses and to come up with an action plan of how to overcome them.

The earlier coaching is introduced the better, as it is more likely to be adopted and embedded in the management style, contributing to a sustainable culture of self-development within the organisation. If coaching is left too late or until a problem has arisen, there may be more resistance to change and inertia can set in.

**CULTURE VERSUS SUCCESS AS A LEADER**

Having a supportive coaching culture in place can make it far easier for a new leader to grow and develop. However, no matter how competent a new leader, they may find a career transition harder in a conflicting culture.

If an organisation’s culture is highly process-driven, it is unlikely that a strategy based on innovation will be achieved, as process can stifle creativity and lengthen the time to market. Likewise, in a culture where innovation is evident, a strategy that restricts budget and implements more stringent processes may miss the mark.

Some company cultures are fairly closed, with people working more independently, rather than as teams. The organisation may be more political, more difficult to navigate and there may be a reluctance to show any weakness for fear of it being exploited. In this environment it can be much harder to manage the transition.
ENSURING SMOOTH TRANSITION

The damage to a company caused by inadequate leadership can be considerable. Failure to meet the requirements of a new role has a severe impact on the individual, who experiences loss of confidence and a dent in their reputation, which, up until a career transition, was on a path to success. The company will suffer through lost talent and poor return on investment and the team will suffer through loss of motivation and productivity.

The following are all essential elements to the success of a learning and development strategy:

- Facilitate interventions that allow leaders to understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Not least, doing this will help them get into the right mindset and engage in an ongoing programme of professional development.
- Ensure new leaders know what is expected of them. Be clear about their own performance expectations and those of their team.
- Provide ongoing training that maximises strengths, helps address weaknesses and enables new leaders to develop a developmental action plan.
- Ensure that any learning and development is actually applied effectively at work and is measurable.
- Provide appropriate coaching and mentoring for ongoing support and to help to identify further areas for development.
- Provide other resources and processes to help support both new leaders and, in turn, their line managers.

Investment in the right support early on will enable new leaders to hit the ground running, identify and work on any weaknesses and provide a longer-term stability that can have a significant impact on organisational productivity and overall objectives.

This support should not just be about training, but should also cover the other, less obvious needs such as helping a shift in mindset, gaining an understanding of development needs, engagement and coaching.

About the author
Simon Mitchell is European Marketing Director at Development Dimensions International (DDI). He leads research projects across Europe to understand talent management trends and practices and has authored DDI research and white papers. Simon is also a member of the UK and European Management teams.

Links
Development Dimension International’s thought leadership site includes a range of white papers and research: www.ddiworld.com/thought-leadership

Blog full of short and useful management tips: www.peoplealchemy.co.uk/blog
Finally they’ve made you a manager. Now you can call the shots. Before you jump in though, remember that it’s not the technical skills we’ve developed over the years that make us great managers. Jean Gamester describes how to get the best out of yourself and others in your new role.

MASTER OR SERVANT?

You have the power now. You need to decide how to use it. The easy answer is to throw your weight around. Give orders, praise and punishments. Get them working to your tune. But before you take this route, let me ask you – did you ever enjoy working for those kinds of managers yourself? Do you think those domineering autocrats got the best out of you? I think not. In fact, if you serve your team, then your team will deliver.

Everyone has great potential – we need to create environments where our people can be great. That means that we need to find out what is preventing them from being successful and help them make those things go away. That means a combination of fighting their corner to kill problems and coaching them to work out solutions themselves, so that they are encouraged and empowered to fight their own corner.

We have to support them by providing specific and constructive feedback, describing the things that they do well and providing ideas of how to do things better. So rather than saying ‘Well done!’ we can say ‘I liked the way that design focused on the user experience.’ Rather than saying ‘You’re always late!’ we can say ‘I’ve noticed that you were struggling to meet the last deadline – is there something you could do differently to get the next report in on time?’

THE RIGHT PEOPLE

In Good to Great, Jim Collins describes how important it is to have the right people in your team. If you have people who are self-motivated, passionate and hard-working, then you can concentrate on supporting them so they can deliver excellence. Get them on board and they will be flexible and develop the skills you need.

When we get the wrong people, then we spend all of our time trying to persuade them to work hard, to work together, to stop complaining. My approach is this: if I inherit a team I do my best for them, but if I am looking for people to join it, I am very fussy about whether they are the right people.
THEY DON’T NEED TO BE LIKE YOU

Of course your way works – they wouldn’t have promoted you if it didn’t. The thing is, it works for you. But if everyone was the same as you, then your teams would deliver the output of one mind – yours. How limiting! Imagine what would happen if you pooled the contents of all of those minds and built on the best of all of those ideas.

John F. Kennedy failed to invade Cuba because he created a ‘groupthink’ situation where everyone agreed with him – because he was the boss and no-one felt they could upset the status quo. After that he set up a system whereby diverse, expert views were sought and debated before decisions were made. When the Cuban Missile Crisis happened, he didn’t make the same mistake and the Americans prevailed.

In short, to be truly successful, we need to create an environment where it is safe to challenge and where everyone’s view is respected and listened to.

KNOWING IT ALL

Often a person becomes a manager of an area that they are an expert in – which is fantastic, because they know all the answers. They don’t need to do as much investigation, as much trial and error as the novices. Easy.

But before you jump in there and solve everything yourself, ask yourself this. How did you become that expert? I bet it is because you tried things out, because someone steered you in the right direction. It’s vital that we allow our novices the opportunity to work this stuff out. Otherwise they will be novices for ever and we will have to fix everything ourselves for ever. Or they will join another team where they can learn.

That’s not to say that when the chips are down we shouldn’t sweep in and fix it fast. We can let the situation dictate. But if, most of the time, we stand aside and guide from the side, then our teams will shine.

SOMETIMES YOU DON’T KNOW IT ALL

The day will come when you’re leading a team, but you’re not the expert. The first thing to remember is that just because you’re not the expert doesn’t mean you can’t lead. We managers still know about the principles – whether it’s design, testing or release management. And most of the things that go wrong are caused by, and can be fixed by, applying those principles. The key is that we have to move beyond the jargon and dive into the true cause of what the problem is.

The second thing to remember is that you are accountable for delivery, so it is reasonable for you to understand what’s going on. So it is reasonable for you to ‘distract’ them from important trouble-shooting, for example, to get a clear
explanation of what they think the problem is and what they think they are going to do to solve it. And if their explanation is unclear, then either you need to ask more questions or they need to do more work, because they haven’t worked it out either.

Third, it is reasonable for you to want a plan. Even though they are problem busting and they can’t predict the future, we can still have a checkpoint when you plan to come together again to share what progress has been made. We can still have a plan B. That way they know they can concentrate on plan A without us distracting them until the checkpoint. And we know that there will be a time when you can get back in there and provide direction or congratulations.

PROBLEMS AND FAILURES

You will make mistakes and things will go wrong. The best day of my career was when I realised that I wasn’t a failure because there were problems. It was simply my job to identify and solve them.

What is key is that we remain constantly alert for things that might go wrong (threats) and things that are already going wrong (issues). With threats, we evaluate them to assess their risk – are they very likely to go wrong and if they do, will there be a big impact? With issues, we ask ‘how important are they?’ Do we need to fix them or live with them? Once we understand them, then we need to act on them.

Don’t let problems be the boss of you. You call the shots; you decide which ones to focus on and how. Look them straight in the eye.

Whatever you do, be transparent. Provide no surprises. If there are real threats to your operation, then make sure your boss, customer or project board knows. Tell them what the problem is and what your plan is to resolve it. If you don’t have a plan yet, that’s OK – what’s your plan to get a plan? Listen to those stakeholders – they might have ideas and priorities that affect how to go about fixing the problem.

Malcolm Gladwell showed in his book Outliers that it takes lots of practice to achieve mastery at something. The Beatles performed 12,000 gigs before they became successful. They didn’t just wake up one morning with ‘brilliant’ written on their foreheads. So when the day comes when you don’t do as well as you expected of yourself, give yourself a break. Raise your head high again and keep learning.

We are not defined by the mistakes we have made; we are defined by how we respond to them.

A FINAL THOUGHT

You’re a manager now, so manage yourself. Fulfil your potential through constant practise, getting the right people and challenging them. If we face up to our fears and the problems that beset us, we will always be in demand.
About the author
Jean Gamester is Director of Semaphora, delivering IT and business change. Her background includes leading teams, programmes and projects in a range of sectors including local government, telecommunications, utilities and health care. She is also a division governor in Toastmasters International, an organisation that helps people develop communications and leadership skills.

Feedback and questions are very welcome – contact me at jgamester@semaphora.com

Links
Toastmasters International for developing confidence, leadership and communications skills: www.toastmasters.org

Jim Collins’ website provides free access to videos, podcasts, articles and tools on leadership, management, organisation, technology and many other topics: www.jimcollins.com

Steven R. Covey, author of Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: www.stephencovey.com

Malcolm Gladwell, author of Outliers: www.gladwell.com

Paul Glen, author of Leading Geeks: www.paulglen.com

Reviews of business books: www.betterbusinessbooks.co.uk

John Whitmore, Coaching for Performance: www.performanceconsultants.com/sir-john-whitmore-coaching-for-performance
Gary Flood takes a look at one of the roles that demands bridging the gap between technology and business – the enterprise architect.

Fancy earning around £80,000 – or even north of £110,000 for a lucky few – for a job that combines deep technical knowledge and real knowledge of how a business works? Then step forward all candidates for the demanding but rewarding role of enterprise architect (EA).

‘EAs won’t earn as much as a CIO, but they will make more than most IT professionals and often do very well working on a contract basis,’ says Adrian Treacy, Director at Arrows, a specialist IT recruiter that places EAs.

EA is a job that in many ways you can’t set out to get and it seems to be a role that really suits only a select few, provided they can manage the delicate balance of pleasing everyone, making sure their plans aren’t seen as too airy-fairy by tech colleagues or too abstract by their business peers. ‘To succeed in this role you need a combination of creativity and skills in things like communication and prototyping,’ Treacy says.

‘EAs can play a vital part in any project that’s delivering new infrastructure, services and solutions,’ explains Jason Gan, Solution Architect at Inatech. Gan sees EAs as taking on the hard but vital job of looking at the end-to-end solution, all the way from desktop environment to the business processes through applications and databases to the supporting infrastructure components of networks, servers and storage.

‘You’ll be a good EA if you are happy working with uncertainty,’ adds Bill Estrem, President of US firm Metaplexity, which helps train people in one of the main frameworks used, TOGAF. ‘You need to be able to cope with lots of change. I think of it as being more of an IT “artist” than an IT “assembly line” role.’

‘Sometimes EAs need a bit of help translating their insights for the rest of the business,’ says Denise Plumpton, a CIO with extensive public and private sector experience, including being, until recently, the Director of Information at the Highways Agency. ‘Not everyone understands what they do and they can struggle to sell the strategic concepts they have come to. The bottom line is they do make a difference, but they sometimes have to work at getting there.’

CAREER PATH?

EA is not a role that requires specific qualifications or even jobs to get to. Realistically it’s going to be grey hairs gained from working on big projects mixed with insight
gained from a willingness to not be ‘boxed in’ to your specialism that will get you the job.

Being able to work with and understand what software providers, network engineers and hardware providers are up to is the best way to build up to the 360 degree understanding of the entire puzzle a business’ total architecture represents. Note that EAs are often ‘home grown’, too, as opposed to externally, specifically recruited for an EA-type function.

Typically a fledgling EA would start with a technical role such as database administrator, applications developer or infrastructure architect. If they can demonstrate the ability to communicate with business leaders, they can then complete the move to the enterprise level.

The last point is very important: recruiters say that candidates who win such placements tend to be the ones who are happy to speak with the business and are genuinely interested in understanding the impact and solutions the architecture can deliver.

Yet all of this doesn’t mean that training and qualifications are totally irrelevant – far from it. There are training courses that provide strong foundations in key aspects of the enterprise architect role, and these are mainly around the various frameworks.

BEING AN EA

So what do the EAs themselves think? ‘Being an enterprise architect doesn’t suit everyone. But if you have ten years’ experience or so, understand most aspects of computing and are able to communicate with the business, it can be a very satisfying job,’ says Geoff Young, a senior EA now on secondment to the Ministry of Justice who also runs his own firm, EA Consulting.

With 30 years’ total IT professional experience, Young has combined a range of systems engineering, technical development and project management roles both with suppliers and in end-user contexts to get to his current position.

But it was his growing involvement in the last five years or so with strategic and policy development for a number of government ICT programmes that has taken him into EA specifically, he says – cautioning that defining what an EA does can be a challenge, as it is such a ‘broad church’ job role.

‘The nearest parallel is probably being a PRINCE practitioner – this is PRINCE for projects,’ he explains. ‘You work with frameworks like TOGAF to help define the overall architecture for the entire business. Frameworks help by setting down the rules for designing, but that’s not enough – you need a holistic view based on your own experience that will match the business requirements. This could be for as much as two to ten years out from where you are now. It’s really about moving from the “as is” state to the desired “to be” business-IT state.’

Young takes on board Plumpton’s charge that EA terminology is unique to itself and not familiar to IT colleagues, let alone the business, so that ‘some people just don’t
get [what we do]. But at the same time, it is very satisfying. ‘It’s about being able to think both conceptually, but always in the context of the real business. It could never be considered dull.’

And there is opportunity in this business-IT crossover role. ‘We just don’t have enough people who are truly capable of looking at the whole picture, who can see the way the whole thing works together, from desktop to network to WAN to business process,’ says Gan.

**EA FRAMEWORKS**

EA frameworks manipulate what in the trade are called artefacts, i.e. ways to model the logical organisation of the business in terms of its functions, business capabilities, business processes, people organisation and so on. Some are commercial, some are aligned with specific markets like government or defence, and some are more general.

In the latter camp, there is The Open Group Architecture Framework (TOGAF), though interestingly, this has roots in previous work by the US Department of Defense. It offers support for building system architectures in the sense of ‘a formal description of a system, or a detailed plan of the system at component level to guide its implementation’ combined with help modelling ‘the structure of components, their inter-relationships, and the principles and guidelines governing their design and evolution over time’.

Other frameworks include the US government’s DoDAF or the UK Ministry of Defence’s MODAF. There are also open source frameworks, but they all share roughly the same basic approach.

**About the author**

Gary Flood has been thinking and writing about information technology since the late 1980s, when he entered the industry as a programmer before becoming a journalist. In his 20 plus years as a reporter, editor, columnist and blogger, Gary has engaged with topics ranging from enterprise ICT to the social impact of technology to the successful use of ICT in the public sector, which is now his main focus. Currently, he is working as editor of www.publictechnology.net

**Links**

TOGAF, The Open Group Architecture Framework: www.opengroup.org

The official UK MOD Architecture Framework website: www.modaf.org.uk

FEAC Institute EA Zone: free access to enterprise architecture links, glossary, papers, alumni symposium events and a journal: http://feacinstitute.org/ea-zone

Architecture Matters blog: www.bcs.org/content/conBlog/24

BCS Enterprise Architecture Specialist Group: www.ea.bcs.org