

The Future of IT: BAITing the right skill sets

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by **Stephen Ibaraki**

This is old news, but still relevant, because government still isn't getting it right enough of the time: you should not make an IT investment without good business justification, and IT success depends on the interpersonal and networking skills of IT specialists as much as any other discipline

Take, for example, the November 2006 Auditor General's Report where only two out of seven projects sampled met all the criteria for success – many of the challenges were on the business side, not the technical.

Unfettered, unplanned technology – once the route to organizational agility – ended with the dot-com implosion. IT, like every other area, is now squeezed to get more results from limited resources. Today, there must be real value returned to the organization from IT investments. Driving this global trend are people with the right skills and competencies, who can justify the IT investment, make the "necessary" continuing business case while communicating and working effectively with the business side of the organization – all leading to comprehensive, unified technology business solutions.

So what attributes must you possess for mission achievement, project success, organizational agility through IT investment, and also for IT career growth? The acronym BAIT sums it up: combine **B**usiness skills with a service **A**ttitude; **I**nterpersonal skills with **T**echnical abilities.

I will get to the details soon.

Why does BAIT matter?

Business skills with a service attitude, and interpersonal skills with technical abilities is a combination that resonates with users. It has been well received at the Strategic Architecture Forum; at the Ten City IT Executive Alignment Tour; the National Council of IT Deans Summit; the Ottawa Summit (May 2008, for 70 architects, IT and business leaders from the federal government); and the Global User Group Summit of leaders from 2000 IT organizations

There is a convergence of opinion that interpersonal and technical skills must be focused on achieving business objectives.

The UN-founded International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP) has their International Professional Practice Partnership, which will launch their global IT professional certification in 2009. When you examine their underlying standards, there is a spotlight on BAIT themes.

Finally, when you analyze the social technology and business IT trends, there is an underlying need for BAIT in IT workers. Moreover, future roles in IT will have a business slant, including in new job titles. At conferences, IT architects are remarking on this movement in their organizations and verifying that it is also happening with their colleagues.

Business and core industry knowledge

On the business side, the IT worker must understand and support the business goals and long-term results desired in organizations. These goals can be summarized in the areas of:

- ◆ **Development:** continuing product and service innovation, capability growth, culture improvement. As a side-note, an encouraging agility-focused organizational "culture" trumps even business strategy.
- ◆ **Employees:** collaboration, productivity, efficiencies, satisfaction, development.
- ◆ **Financial:** increased funding, revenue, value; lower costs/expenses; increased surplus, productivity; doing more with existing resources; operational excellence.
- ◆ **Customer/Citizen/Client:** engagement, retention, satisfaction, strong relationships/intimacy.
- ◆ **Competitive:** entering new markets, segments, client areas; growing existing markets, client base; ensuring differentiation and distinct advantage (in the public sector, tackling new problems, renewing focus on the thorny issues).

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Solid business competencies in IT workers are increasingly necessary to ensure organizational agility. This agility is formally defined by: growth; entry into new markets or new service areas; support for new customers or new users or new clients; enabling new products or services to existing customers or users or clients; providing value differentiation and distinct value advantages.

In addition, IT workers should have a good understanding of the "core business processes" in the industry they are working in: government, education, health care, private sector.

Attitude

In my travels and discussions with business and technology leaders, they also cite a good "attitude" as a core attribute they encourage. This was a particularly consistent theme from the invited panel experts in the Ignite Your Career Series. What this means is a service-orientation with a clear focus on customer or client intimacy, and a positive user experience: moving from interpersonal isolation and differentiation as a "geek" to engagement with the full team.

Interpersonal

Connecting is a foundation for all activity today. There's this rule of thumb based upon research that states: 93 percent of any engagement is message and delivery, and only seven percent is content.

Growing Social Technology usage and the rapid rise of Generation Y and Generation I in the workforce accentuate this trend. There is more in this blog:

<http://blogs.technet.com/cdnitmanagers/archive/2008/07/01/are-you-planning-for-generation-y.aspx>.

This means strong "interpersonal" skills are needed for project management, client/customer relationship management and communications capabilities.

As part of my activities, I am the co-host for the IT Manager Connection blog (<http://blogs.technet.com/cdnitmanagers/>), which this year received a Top 10 ranking by Computer World and a Top 6 (out of 400 million blogs) from the Global MVP Summit. In 20 years of interviewing world experts, the "interpersonal skills" connection is a consistent recommendation.

Technical

Rounding out all of this are technical skills and competencies which reflect what you can actually accomplish when confronted with problems and challenges. There is a framework for abilities – starting with knowledge, comprehension and ending with application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation – summarized below:

- ◆ **Knowledge:** provide a list
- ◆ **Comprehension:** give definitions to the items in the list
- ◆ **Application:** applying elements in the list to solve problems
- ◆ **Analysis:** ability to analyze situations to solve problems
- ◆ **Synthesis:** taking a wide and broad scope of experiences and frameworks to problem resolution in an integrated fashion
- ◆ **Evaluation:** competencies refined to the point where you can judge and evaluate the work of others.

Skills are knowledge-based but through practice and experience lead to application, analysis (of problems) and then, finally, synthesis and evaluation. Synthesis means you can take diverse subject areas and integrate them in solving situations. Evaluation allows you to act as a judge or gives you the ability to fully evaluate the performance of others. Competencies are about "application to evaluation." Competencies are the end-goal for career minded IT professionals.

Preparing for the future

From a career standpoint, where is it heading? IT specialists have narrow but deep competencies in one domain or category. IT generalists have a variety of skills though they are not deep in any one area.

For longer-term career growth, the focus will be on multi-skilled versatilists. This group has multiple deep competencies. They will actively seek a wide range of "challenging" roles in their careers. Over time, they will develop broad experience and be recognized as possessing considerable experience in several domains. They will also demonstrate BAIT attributes.

According to some studies, though outsourcing represents only 12 percent of organizations right now – with mid-size organizations outsourcing more than large ones – the area of highest outsourcing growth, at 5.8 percent annually, is in desktop/networking or in the IT specialist area. There is also a trend towards Dynamic Environments. This is due to policy and business-rule based on real-time dynamic IT service allocation stemming from increasing automation and virtualization. Ultimately, this leads away from IT specialists and towards IT workers with BAIT attributes.

Demand for IT technical specialists will drop over time as IT roles increasingly will have a business focus. If you are an IT specialist, it will be good to start preparing for this trend now by having BAIT in your personal goal list.

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And if you manage IT functions or rely on the IT function to achieve your objectives, you might want to get ahead of the curve and create an organizational climate that attracts, develops and supports business skills with a service attitude, and interpersonal skills with versatile technical abilities.

Stephen Ibaraki, an IT consultant and frequent keynote speaker, is the past president of CIPS (www.StephenIbaraki.com).

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