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Canada's Association of Information Technology (IT) Professionals

Resident Bloggers

Stephen Ibaraki

Technology Journalist I.S.P.,
DF/NPA, CNP

Barnaby Jeans

IT Pro Advisor
Microsoft Canada**Multi-IT Specialist with Business Acumen= A Versatilist**

I read Graham's blog "[What's a Versatilist](#)" where he rather eloquently expresses his thoughts about the meaning of the term. This was originally going to be a comment to his post however due to it's length, I'm responding as a blog post.

What we have now: IT Specialists and Generalists

A "**Specialist**" has deep skills but their range is narrow. Their peers recognize their skills but outside of this narrow area or sphere of influence, they are not known or their work may not be as valued. "Mary sure knows e-mail systems from all of her hard work and study in this area." Overtime Mary can build to be a versatilist by taking on more varied roles, broadening her experience, and gaining an understanding of the business elements.

A "**Generalist**" has shallow skills and their range is more wide than narrow—jack of some trades and master of none. So they may have a quick answer but you can't dig deeper for the real gems. Their work doesn't always generate a lot of confidence due to the lack of depth. "Tom talks a good line but our customers say he can't solve any of their problems. He says he got his MSCE in under one month from studying off the brain-dump sites—so he's one of those paper MSCEs. With time, he can become a real asset but he needs experience."

Where it is heading in 2006 and into the future: the Versatilist

A "**Versatilist**" has deep skills and their range is wider than a specialist though at times not a wide as a generalist. They likely have taken on wide number of jobs and their broad experience corresponds to the different roles they have taken on. They are recognized for their abilities in other areas, fields, spheres of influence, or domains as a result. They also are working on acquiring overall business knowledge, knowledge of their industry and understanding the core business processes in their organization. Leadership is a desired direction and skill set over the longer term. Note that being a versatilist is a spectrum where you may be one now and become even a more skilled one as you do more and learn more.

According to Morello from her blog (she wrote the paper, defining versatilists), "Versatilists, however, are able to apply a depth of skill to a progressively widening scope of situations and experiences, equally at ease with technical issues as with business strategy. The development of versatilists will not depend solely on the initiative of workers. Human resource executives and CIOs will have to work with employees to create assignments and experiences that help employees contribute to strategic business objectives. In a sense, IS organizations will become "repertory companies" filled with a core cast of versatile actors who play multiple roles successfully and gracefully in multiple programs, projects and productions."

To become a versatilist, you need to go outside your comfort zone and this can happen by working for [start-ups](#) (I blogged about this one), non-profit groups (why not volunteer?), government agencies, and consumer IT service providers.

In addition you can get the needed broader business and IT acumen by:

1. taking graduates studies in business (see my comments in, "[Most Wanted: a Multi-Specialist with Business Acumen or I.S.P.](#)");
2. taking on varied projects that increase your value—stretch yourself and broaden your skill set.

To be a versatilist, you need to look beyond pure technical certifications to a professional certification/designation which validates your knowledge of multiple disciplines. This then speaks to the topic of "Professionalism" which is the framework for a professional IT certification/designation. In turn a professional IT certification/designation encompasses a: code of ethics, standards of practice, mastery of a body of knowledge and accountability. These provide or accent trust which is so essential today when mitigating and managing business risk. And this mitigation is linked to regulatory compliance (US [Sarbanes Oxley](#); and the corresponding CDN Bill C-198), IT governance frameworks ([COBIT](#)), and IT management ([ITIL](#)).

It's good to add to your base by exploring management frameworks such as the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL). This is a recommendation by Morello to help you work towards being a versatilist. At [CIPS INFORMATICS](#) conference, which has "professionalism" as a theme, an [ITIL Certification Course](#) including Exam is part of the conference. Another useful management framework recommended by Morello is the Capability Maturity Model (CMM).

In the April 7th issue of Financial Post Business magazine (an insert in the National Post newspaper and only available on April 7th), there's an article that addresses risk, IT governance, management and professionalism: "IT Governance: An Opportunity or Hindrance?" by CIPS VP John Boufford I.S.P. I have [blogged about this magazine issue](#) since it addresses areas of importance to IT professionals.

John is also co-presenting with Kerry Augustine, CIPS Manitoba President: speaking on "[Managing Business Risk through IT Certification](#)." This session demonstrates the value of a professional certification/designation to businesses.

There are many flags or indicators demonstrating this direction for IT including recent studies showing the majority of CEOs now understanding how essential IT is for driving business strategy. I was the keynote at a recent career conference and a recruiting expert pointed out a new position at a multi-billion dollar enterprise organization. The VP of Information profile contained a large business strategy component. The newly created position aligned with the definition of a versatilist.

Thank you,
Stephen Ibaraki, I.S.P.



John Oxley
Director IT Pro Evangelism
Microsoft Canada



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re: Multi-IT Specialist with Business Acumen= A Versatilist

Friday, March 31, 2006 7:43 PM by [Barry](#)

Thank you for taking the time to explain this all. I spent years as a developer but I want more. I also spend more time thinking about the business side in my job so this trend is inevitable. We see it but we don't do anything about it? I don't see much coverage of this in the Canadian press. Why not? And as workers, we have to take responsibility and work hard as individuals to support this. Why don't we? It's about time, computer people stop complaining and take action. It's up to us! There's a path and it's outlined in the blogs appearing here. I can see the benefits of gaining the broader jobs and experience you outline. I will take an MBA next and it has its costs; so I know pursuing a professional certification will require this too. All the professions has associated costs--some have yearly costs exceeding several thousand and I'm prepared for this. It's time we take this and run with it! If we screw this up we only have ourselves to blame...

re: Multi-IT Specialist with Business Acumen= A Versatilist

Sunday, April 02, 2006 1:49 PM by [Stephen Ibaraki](#)

Barry, you make some interesting points and it's good that you are taking ownership and control over your future. I believe there's a lot to be gained by incremental improvements on a continual basis. I often advise IT pros to assess their situation at least monthly and look at opportunities to move forward. Ask yourself, "How can I add and gain value and what do I need to do to grow?" This is the hard part since growth means discomfort. In fact, if I'm feeling too comfortable (and I assess daily), I know I'm not growing. I recommend doing a self SWOT analysis. A SWOT analysis is something companies should be doing regularly to ensure differentiation, and competitiveness. However, the same principles apply to career growth for an IT professional. It something I talked about at the last career day conference where I was the keynote.

So what is a self-SWOT analysis?

You assess your own personal Strengths, Weakness--this is the SW part of (SW)OT. These terms are self-explanatory. Then you also analyze external Opportunities and Threats--this is the OT portion of SW (OT). When I say external, I mean coming from the environment around you. External opportunities are events, trends, changes occurring that allow you to grow your career. Threats are disruptive forces that can stall your career. The key is to match your personal strengths against new external opportunities. If there are new opportunities that you can't take advantage of since you don't have the required skills then the skills you lack are weaknesses. I recommend working on overcoming these weaknesses so they become strengths. You also should work on reducing or countering external threats. The prior shift to outsourcing of more commoditized jobs was a threat. To reduce this, you would acquire skills in areas that are difficult to outsource such as those that are mission critical to the organization. Typically, this would require taking a more business focus outlook. I should note that the trend towards outsourcing is reversing (in some areas) and moving these functions inside the organization, especially if they are critical to business agility.

Let me work through an example of a self-SWOT analysis. Mary as an IT pro is great at acquiring new skills since she has to stay current with constantly evolving IT trends. This is a strength. The movement towards a more business focus in IT roles is an external opportunity. Mary takes courses in business and works towards her I.S.P. to take advantage of this new opportunity. Mary is reluctant to interface with business workers and has difficulty in making presentations. This is a weakness so she starts taking courses in communications, and joins a speaking club where she can improve her skills. In her job when there's a request to make a presentation before business managers, she volunteers applying her conquered weakness to these opportunities where she can gain recognition outside of her domain for her valuable skills. 40% of IT specialist jobs are being eliminated. This is an eternal threat so Mary looks to broadening her skill set outside of the specialist area and starts studying business process management. Mary conducts this self-assessment every month and makes changes.

As one final note, I encourage executives to demonstrate leadership in the professionalism and career area.

Thank you,
Stephen Ibaraki, I.S.P.