

Why Technologists Must Learn To Speak Business

Matthew Moran

Well, it happened. The bottom dropped out. It's high-noon for high-tech. The DotCom world got hit by the real Y2K bug—reality

I don't mean to spread doom and gloom. I won't sit back and gloat, saying "I told you so." but...."I told you so."

Through a good portion of the nineties and even as warning signs were cropping up at the inception of the new millennium, high tech careers were considered an ivory tower of opportunity. Technologists viewed their positions as immune to the fluctuations in pay and prevalence that more mundane careers, those of lowly mortals, faced.

But that attitude has changed. At a recent computer user's group meeting a full 20 percent of the attendees were out of work and looking. In the past, all out of work technologists flippantly referred to themselves as "consultants" and at the mere mention of their availability IT management and headhunters would appear from behind curtains and doors with offers of wealth, prestige and perks, such as free soda, laptops, and an unreasonable dress code.

You could always tell the technology staff, striding victoriously through the halls, dressed in Keanu Reeves, Matrix-like garb, honored as purveyors of magical elixirs and other mysterious yet highly valued commodities. But that attitude has changed with the economy and technology professionals are learning the hard lessons of career and finance.

A few years ago I started giving a presentation with the same name as this article (Why Technologists Must Learn To Speak Business). At that time I was warning technologists, and informing business owners and management, that technology was not some panacea of opportunity and growth. I preached the message that technologists, in order to ensure their appeal in the marketplace, must focus on understanding commerce and the particular industries or companies they served. I warned them to understand their position; that of a support arm of the organization.

They are not, and never were, the central focus of the organization. However, in the times of unprecedented growth many companies attempting to take advantage of, and understand, emerging technologies, found that good technical talent was hard to come by. Bidding wars skewed the marketplace with untested college graduates and paper-certified professionals earning astronomical figures in relation to their non-tech peers.

The ill-fated dotcom revolution further twisted the otherwise conservative outlook of commerce as a whole. Venture capital money poured into companies with little or no analysis of a realistic return on investment or overall feasibility. High-tech startups became a cause for a Hollywood type fanfare and Silicon Valley businesses believed the glamour and hype. Few voiced concern and those who did were marginalized.

Now, as quickly as companies began adding ".com" to their names, the new cliché is "dotgone" and those who remain are frantically re-painting their virtual signage in more conventional manners. The Internet has become what it always was, a medium for information and commerce, nothing more and nothing less. And technologists, those who are still employed, are realizing that technology has become, once again, a tool to support the business objectives within a company or industry.

But instead of cause for alarm, this is cause for celebration. I want to temper the above assessment of the excesses of technology with a gilded message of hope. The high tech sector is still one of the greatest career paths an individual can take. Opportunity abounds for the person who is willing to learn both technical how-to and the inner workings of business and commerce. And this has always been the proper place for a true high-tech professional.

I remember when I started my career with Blue Cross of California. I was surprised with how many of the staff developers had backgrounds in accounting. But this makes perfect sense. The accounting professional, one who has worked in the trenches of auditing, budgeting and cash-

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flow, has always been effective at understanding the need for information within an organization.

This explains why the big-8 accounting firms transformed themselves to the big-8 business consulting firms and further morphed into technology consultants.

Information & automation is the commodity of technology. All useful technology, from an IT department standpoint, serves the goal is making information available to the broader organization, or automating the delivery of product or service. The effective use of technology provides the nontechnical, working staff with tools and information needed to perform day-to-day tasks. It provides management the tools to analyze their business in order to assess its current effectiveness and chart its future direction.

Understanding this critical link, the business objectives of an organization and the technology that can support and aid in achieving those objectives, will always be in high-demand. For technology professionals who learn to understand and speak the language of business, true opportunity will always abound. Understanding your role within an organization will further cement your ability to remain gainfully employed.

But how is this done. Are there techniques and methodologies to assist the high-tech professional in achieving this balanced approach in their careers? I believe there are. Furthermore, I believe that anybody wishing to do so, can master this balance to a greater or lesser degree. There will be specialist to be sure, those who focus more intently on either the high-tech side or the business analysis side. However, the methods and approach below can assist those on either side of the equation to be more effective.

Concept Over Process

The first idea in creating an effective high-tech professional is a conceptual understanding of business in general and more precisely your specific business. In a fashion this equates to, and is synonymous with, the more popular idea "Begin With The End In Mind" as outlined in Seven Habits for Highly Successful People by Franklin Covey.

Strong conceptual knowledge is rooted in answering core questions. These questions start with broad definitions and ideas, like a series of concentric circles, eventually leading to more precise questions and hence more precise understanding. How effectively you both ask and answer these questions will correlate to how effectively you match technology to business objectives.

What is the goal of business?

The first question is the simplest. The goal of business is to make money. In effect, to be solvent. Even the non-profit organization must ensure that it has adequate cash-flow to perform its service. While this seems obvious, it is a question that is seldom asked and is, as often as not, answered incorrectly. Keeping this answer in mind as you perform your work will help you proactively see areas to improve efficiency and cut cost. Believe me, if you can do those two things your career will be secure.

The next series of questions relates to the particular business, or businesses, you service.

How does this business achieve its goal, that of making money? What products or services does it provide? How is that product or service delivered, marketed, and improved? What technologies are in place now to assist in

the production and tracking of this business? How can the current technology be improved or optimized? What technologies are available or being developed that can improve in the delivery of product or service, and in the tracking of this business?

These questions involve interviews with management, production staff, tours of the organization, and reading marketing and sales materials. In short, understanding where client wants to go.

If they ask for a specific technology you should be cautious. They may not be asking the right question or addressing the true business need. In many cases, clients have simply heard or read about a solution that seems to address a pressing business need when, in fact, closer analysis provides understanding that leads them away from that very technology. Do not blindly

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implement technology without a clear understanding of what the client's business challenge truly is.

The impetus, I believe, is on the technology professional, to understand management's objectives. It is not management's job to understand the technology. Your client might be 100% right in their choice of technology but if you are not asking the right questions, none technical - business related questions, you may implement the technology flawlessly and provide a flawed solution. Meet them in the middle. Understand their business.

Learn the Language

The high-tech professional is charged with staying up to date on technology. This task is both time-consuming and can become daunting if not carefully managed. To do this, continuous reading and training is required. This can lead to an individual relegating any study or reading time to technology articles and manuals. However, in order to understand the working of business, time must be spent reading non-technical materials.

This can take the form of broader business news such as the Wall Street Journal. There are several good business books that will help you gain insight into the ideas of executive management. Some of my favorites include: "Pour Your Heart Into It" - the story of Starbucks, "7 Habits of Highly Successful People" - Stephen Covey, and "The Goal" - Eliyahu Goldrait.

As a consultant, there are two titles I have found to be excellent resources: Flawless Consulting by Peter Block and The Business of Consulting by Elaine Beich. While both are geared towards the consultant and consulting industries, they cover particular strategies for understanding and effectively communicating with management. And, in truth, the high-tech professional who actually views management and the end-user as clients, who need to be satisfied and retained, will further cement their career stability.

Additionally, while I do not necessarily believe you need to go out and get an MBA, there are several good MBA summary titles that cover

concepts and terms used in business. Just as the high-tech world has it's own language where acronyms abound, business also has its particular expressions. A solid grasp of the proper usage of these expressions will help you understand management requirements and separate yourself from your peers who cannot speak that language.

A recent study jointly conducted by KMPG and ComputerWorld focused on asking executive management if they felt their IT dollars were well spent. A huge majority of them responded negatively, sighting a general distrust of their IT department. The largest barrier was language. CEO's and other executive management felt that the IT department did not understand or address the business direction of the company. They felt that IT professionals hide projects behind technical jargon. Many viewed their technology as a costly and necessary evil in regards to their business. This is a huge problem.

The following clearly demonstrates this phenomenon:

While serving as CIO for a company we went through a phone system conversion. This involved several meetings with a variety of vendors. Three telephone system vendors did presentations. Two of the vendors spent an hour each talking exclusively about their product. They covered a myriad of features, including several we didn't care about.

Only one vendor asked us to explain our business.

He spent his time asking and analyzing how we used our current phone system, what features we were looking for, what we wanted to accomplish. His onsite analysis led to a better understanding of our business. He was able to pro-actively show us features that fit our business, including additional features we had not thought about. He offered suggestions on how these additional features might fit our business. Many were good ideas. In practice he became a consultant, not a salesman, and he won the deal.

Technology professionals must learn to do the same. Most CEO's and executive management care little for the underlying technology. They are really concerned with how it addressed the current business challenge. During high-level

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meetings, unless otherwise requested, technology professionals should ban any technojargon from their conversation. If more detailed technological information is needed, management will ask. Otherwise, spend your time understanding what the business is trying to accomplish.

Become A Business Partner

Becoming a business partner requires a shift of attitude and perspective. Regardless of whether you are full-time staff or a contractor/consultant, having a business partner attitude will bring benefit to you, your career and to the organizations you serve. If you have done your homework and understand business in general and your particular business, this task is made easier. In fact, one builds upon the other.

The business partner mentality takes you down the road of actually caring about your business. You become a stakeholder in the projects you are involved in.

It moves you beyond simply trying to optimize or automate delivery and access to information. It will lead to a desire to monitor, to a greater or lesser degree, the industry surrounding your business. It will lead you to look for the interdepartmental relationships in the organization, and projects that may not be directly tied to yours but which involve people and processes you are impacting or coming in contact with.

The ultimate result of this perspective is self-serving in most cases. However, it can lead to turning down work as well. As a stakeholder, you may be offered a project that takes you outside your comfort zone or skill set. While some may be closely related and you can effectively transfer knowledge to the new project, you may be struck with the realization that there is a better vendor/solution to the project; one that does not directly require your involvement.

As a true business partner you will need to inform your client of this fact. Your total involvement might simply be a referral to a more appropriate vendor, consultant or internal resource.

While this results in lost work in the short term it cements a relationship with the client. They will know that they can trust you to be real in your assessment and to provide solutions outside of your scope. In many cases, they will call you just because of your contacts. In the long run, you will be aware of where the client is going, giving you a rare competitive edge into their business.

Conclusion

Solutions to an organization's business challenges are the IT professional's product. Consistently providing solutions will ensure your career longevity and advancement. The three ideas above provide the necessary foundation required to make this happen.

While the IT job market will always fluctuate, the technology professional who has the ability to address business on its own terms, will remain in high-demand.

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