CIOs Need to Look for Project Management DNA When Assessing Candidates

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IT is becoming an increasingly competitive function. As technology becomes more intertwined with business processes, technical skills are now as important as business skills. Add to that an increased focus on getting things done. CIOs are finding that, now more than ever, they need highly qualified professionals on their team with top-notch project management skills --- people who know how to make things happen!

In fact:

- According to a new survey by Forrester Research project management skills are in high demand --59% of CIOs say they plan to train their staff in project management this year with an additional 29% planning to hire project managers.
- Demand for contract workers with information technology skills is on the rise in the U.S. and Canada, with enterprise resource planning (ERP), Web development and project management skills leading the way, according to the HotGigs 2007 IT Contract Workforce Report. The report is a key measure of IT skills in highest demand in North America

Given the fact that IT is arguably one of the fastest changing areas in business, it's no wonder that there is such a demand for project management skills. Hardware has commoditized while application vendors have consolidated causing many jobs to be less specialized and ripe for outsourcing.

At the same time, however, IT has grown in importance becoming a strategic weapon. Increasingly, IT is tasked with accomplishing results through vendors, and both in-house and outsourced staff. Projects are being done faster and despite the commoditization and consolidation, are often more complex, not less. The talent for juggling many balls, dealing with a broad array of personalities all the while meeting schedule and cost goals is in short supply.

Having the Right DNA is Key

While some project management techniques can be taught, there's an inherent DNA that a project manager must possess in order to be successful.

An investment in project management training will give you modest improvements but don't more than the ability to use new tracking tools or enhanced reporting and team communications. Project managers must inherently be strong in organization, have the ability to multi-task, and be reasonably outgoing.

Specifically, they need to be highly focused with both excellent organization skills and people skills. They must be able to pay attention to detail and see the big picture simultaneously. And that whole package is hard to find.

With talent tight, the ability to cast a wide net and assess that core skill set is critical.

For the creative hiring executive, there's good news. Many aspects of project management skills are easily transferable across functions, companies and even industries. Look within the IT function in any industry, for example. In addition, some software development project managers and even new product development leaders may be able to transition to IT programs, enabling CIOs to broaden the net they cast when looking for these specialized people.It may be far easier to teach a technically savvy manager new technology than attempt to reprogram their core strengths.

Pinpointing the skills that a project manager needs to possess can be challenging. However, there are several effective ways to assess these skills:

- o Look for a track record of success. Does the candidate have a series of programs that he led under their belt? Ask how they achieved those successes—look for how much glass was broken or which corners were cut.

- o Try to tease out where the candidate had challenges. While change management may be on the top of the list, other problems such as problem personalities or time management indicate a lack of key skills.

- o Test for complexity. Assess how the candidate did their day-to-day job and handled the demands of the position. How did they recharge their batteries? Did they burn out themselves or others in the process?

- o Observe details in your interactions that may reflect how well a candidate will do. Pass on those who lack follow up, who forget to send you promised items, or who appears to be a little too abrupt. These things seem basic, but too often a hiring manager with what they think is a hot candidate on the hook, will look the other way on too many of these key indicators.

Too often executives are focused on taking the brightest technologist or people manager and trying to wedge them into a role that needs to be filled. In the case of project managers, have an open mind around where you can attract talent from and what really makes a project manager successful. You may find that you have some excellent talent in-house that is interested in making a career move. Additionally, you might discover that when you think deeply about candidates, your initial top choices may not be your most productive hire.

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