

General Information

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Building The Data Center Staff Zero In On Candidates With Good Communication Skills & A Willingness To Learn

One of the most important jobs for a data center/IT manager is hiring and building a staff with the right mix of skills and knowledge to help the enterprise succeed.



IT and data center experts say that successfully building an IT staff is a process that takes honest, careful evaluation of the enterprise's needs, current technical capabilities, and corporate culture and then filling out the necessary skill sets, using contractors and part-timers to help with temporary needs. These experts offer the following tips in hiring the right mix of people with the right skills.

■ Hire For Critical Functions

Managers should first start with a macro perspective, honestly looking at the tools and architecture the enterprise has in place, and determine critical points of potential fail-ure, recommends Greg Reitz, associate CIO for infrastructure and operations for the Rochester Institute of Technology (www.rit.edu). "Run that against a map of the skills you have in place and determine what skills you still need," Reitz says.

"You should know your core requirements," says Tom Silver, senior vice president, North America, for Dice Holdings (www.dice.com). "Someone has to know the skills that they need and then stack their [human] resources against that. If you're not sure if it's going to be an ongoing need, you might want to start by bringing in contract help."

Look for people who actually add value to the IT/data center operation, adds John Luludis, president and co-founder of Superi-or Technology Solutions (www.superiortechnology.com). "Focus on highly skilled, self-motivated workers who inject value into the organization," Luludis says.

Additionally, administrative functions and low-level technology skills (such as cabling and maintenance) should be outsourced. These skills, though necessary, don't add any value that differentiates an enterprise from its competitors.

"Some roles lend themselves to part-time or temporary workers," says Reitz, who has access to a number of co-op employees and part-timers through the university system. Reitz and Jeanne Casares, RIT's CIO, fill out their staff with part-time students as needs dictate, but some needs, such as legacy code, are suitable only for permanent full-time employees.

■ Hire Employees Willing To Learn

No matter how much certification and experience a person has, he or she doesn't know everything, and technology is ever-changing. An employee needs to be able to grow with a company, says Jorge Lopez, IT director for The Continental Group (www.thecontinentalgroupinc.com). "If they don't want to grow, you need to make some changes," he says.

That growth should include the willingness to learn integrated skills, according to Luludis. Integrating roles across IT enhances collaboration and benefits the entire enterprise. "Fragmentation occurs when facilities management and hardware management are separate," Luludis says. "Otherwise, you have separate silos of skills. That's more difficult to manage and it costs more to operate that way."

In order to find employees who can successfully accomplish new tasks, Silver recommends looking at prospects' track records for the ability to find ways to get things done. This means project management skills are important; self-motivation is another important attribute.

It's also the IT manager's responsibility to keep the staff active, Lopez adds. "If someone is bored, he will go somewhere else."

■ Seek Nontechnical Skills

"Soft" skills, such as communications and listening, are more important now than ever, says Patricia L. Ferdinandi, founder and president of Strategic Business Decisions.

"The technical people have to be able to communicate with the business side," Ferdinandi explains. "They have to look at [IT] as a customer-service type of organization. They have to be able to communicate with nontechnical people in order to give them what they want."

"IT is a service. We have to produce for our clients. But to do that, the IT staff has to be able to communicate with their clients," Continental Group's Lopez adds. "IT runs the business."

If one of the property managers isn't getting the reports or information he needs to operate the property, it's up to IT to solve the problem, which it can only do with effective communications with the internal customer, Lopez says.

■ Establish Expectations In The Interview

"Start out all of your conversations [by] letting candidates know what your priorities are and what you are looking for. It will help put you both at ease. You'll be setting expectations throughout the hiring process, start out by doing that and things will go more smoothly," says Kenneth Gonzalez, managing partner of Engaged Consulting.

The more refined the skill, the longer the hiring process is likely to take. Although national unemployment is near double digits, unemployment in IT is running only about half of that level, with many skills in short supply, Dice's Silver says.

Along with the expectations for the skills the prospect needs to have in order to be hired, frankly discuss the organization's

Key Points

- Carefully assess the organization's IT needs and available skills, then hire to fill any holes.
- Hire employees who are willing to learn and adapt so that they can grow with the enterprise.
- Communications and other "soft" skills are needed along with technical expertise.

culture, Silver recommends. "To thine own self be true," he says. "Describe the environment during the interview. Is it collaborative?" Some workers are more comfortable in such an environment, while others are more comfortable in a different environment.

"You can hire someone for technical skills and lose," Gonzalez says. "They may be a good technician, but may not fit with the rest of the team. It's better to identify that early than to have it come back and haunt you later when it becomes a problem."

■ Test Prospects

Although certifications for various skills show a certain level of understanding, every company is a little different. Gonzalez recommends testing the employee's skills in the company's unique technology environment. b>

"Give them a problem," Gonzalez says. "Simulate what it's like in the world that you expect them to operate in or that is based loosely on your current situation. Don't give them all the info. Make them work through it and ask questions of you. The point isn't about the answer that they give, but the process that they use to get the answer. It will tell you a lot about how they think."

Luludis also says to look for employees who can "think on their feet," so they are prepared to solve most unforeseen issues. ■

by Phil Britt

Survey: Hard-To-Find Tech Skills

What is the most difficult skill set or position to fill today?

1. Java/J2EE
2. Security
3. Software Developer
4. SAP
5. Database Administrator
6. .NET
7. Oracle
8. Sharepoint
9. C#
10. Active Federal Government Security Clearance

Dice.com conducted a hiring survey in May to see which tech skill sets were most in-demand in the hiring process for SMEs.