

Ramp up your staff with versatilists

The days of dividing staff into areas of specialization may be over. You need individuals with a rich portfolio of knowledge to fuel business objectives. Learn five steps for hiring and encouraging a staff of versatile employees.

David Lease is a “versatilist.” As the chief architect of [WAM!NET Government Services](#), you can tell that he's a "versatilist" by what he does:

- Helps design, build, and manage large US government IP networks
- Participates on the WAM!NET business development team
- Translates router-speak into a language even government procurement officers can understand
- Sits in on marketing meetings and speaks to the media about the company's technical issues

And by what he knows:

- The inner workings of complex IP networks
- The IT business value and function of teams in both his fields of endeavor
- Hardware, software, and applications and development of the same

And, more to the point, he claims that he has the “ability to cover many disciplines, not all of them necessarily technical.”

The term *versatilist* isn't a new concept, but it is a new word for a recognized trend in IT, away from specialization and toward, well, versatility. Employee versatility and finding employees who already are or are willing to become versatilists “will be the new watchword for career planning,” said a recent [Gartner](#) study, “Value of People: Building Versatility.”

What versatilists are, and what they aren't

“Enterprises that focus on technical aptitude alone will fail to align workforce performance with business value,” the Gartner study said. “Instead, they need to build a team of versatilists who build a rich portfolio of knowledge and competencies to fuel business objectives. Review rewards and acknowledgments to ensure that versatility is rewarded.”

That's a clear warning—and darn good advice, said Joe Santana, director of training at [Siemens Business Services](#). “With flat or even smaller budgets and fewer people, managers need to make the most of the people they have,” Santana said. “They can no longer see people as specialty tools. And their people need to become less like specialty tools and more like Swiss Army knives.”

Those “Swiss Army Knives” are the versatilists.

That begs the question: Just what is a versatilist? The Gartner study describes a versatilist by explaining what it isn't, a specialist or even a generalist. “Specialists generally have deep skills and narrow scope, giving them expertise that is recognized by peers but seldom valued outside their immediate domain,” the Gartner study said.

“Generalists have broad scope and shallow skills, enabling them to respond or act reasonably quickly but often without gaining or demonstrating the confidence of their partners or customers. Versatilists, in contrast, apply depth of skill to a progressively widening scope of situations and experiences, gaining new competencies, building relationships, and assuming new roles.”

Always a need for versatility

The need for versatilists isn't a recent thing, through the name is. A decade ago, there existed in IT and other business circles an employee known as “the systems person,” Lease said. The systems person not only took care of the network, but often was responsible for internal helpdesk, Web development, and other duties. This person was a sort of an all-around tech. If anything “IT-ish” needed to be done, it would be referred to this person, who either would know right away what to do or would scramble to learn how.

That employee, however, was not considered the norm at that time. Usually “the systems person” existed only in smaller organizations that already were running lean and mean, where the IT department might have been only a few individuals or even a single person. Throughout most of the IT industry at the time, individual specialization was how IT business was done. It was, after all, the IT boom period when there were plenty of jobs and not enough people to do them.

Times changed. IT budgets and staffs were slashed but the workload continued to increase. As the IT economy continued to decline, many employees were able to hang onto their jobs because they could do more than one. Employers also began ditching employees who couldn't and looking for more who could. This trend spawned some interesting—some said laughable—help wanted advertisements, which often sought employees with wide ranging experiences, such as networking, Web and application development, help desk, and nontechnical (marketing and accounting).

But it's no laughing matter. IT managers who want more versatilists on staff can take definite steps toward making that happen, Santana said. Those steps are:

1. Hire them

This part often is not in the IT manager's hands. Often hiring takes place down in human resources, where hiring experts seldom are IT savvy. However, HR can be encouraged to hire techs who look like they might be versatilists, Santana said. IT managers should work with HR to look for techs with hardware *and* software skills combined with diverse experience, such as networking and Web

development. They also should seek techs who are excellent communicators, have good organizational skills, and can look at themselves and what they have to offer in the company's overall business strategy. These aren't traditional strong points for most techs but the prospective employee who does have those skills should be given higher priority over a tech who doesn't.

A benefit of hiring versatilists is they tend to be contagious. "By feeding these people into the organization, you encourage those who already are in the organization to examine their own skill sets and reevaluate their own value within the company," Santana said.

2. Encourage the talents existing employees may have but haven't developed

One way to do this is to pair employees from diverse sections of IT, Santana said. For instance, a database manager could be paired with a software developer, perhaps in an effort to develop better database management software. Employees also should be encouraged to seek training outside their areas.

Another way to do this is for an IT manager to determine what skills he or she has available in the IT department, what skills will be required in a given business enterprise and see if any missing skills can be developed among existing employees. Once the manager knows the distance between the skills on hand and those needed, he or she can take steps to close that distance.

3. Reward teamwork

This should be a natural next step after pairing employees. Reward employees who resolve issues and develop new products as part of a team "as opposed to rewarding people for having individual kills," Santana said.

The reward process should itself become a team effort, Santana said. Employees should decide which team should receive a certain award based on who they feel contributed the most on a given issue or project.

4. Managers should learn and pass on how they work within the overall enterprise

This may initially smack of training one's successor but Santana countered that it encourages a department to work more fluidly. If the entire department understands what they do as part of a process, not just a set of tasks, the tasks are completed much more quickly and efficiently, something that reflects very well on the department manager. For example, a project has been assigned to IT and three steps are required to complete the task. The manager should share those steps with the department and tell how those steps should be taken, in what order, and how they will know when one step is complete and the next is ready to begin.

5. Managers should include business topics in their training

While many IT managers were trained during a time when IT was a mystical department that did what it did with a certain amount of secrecy, that just won't fly now. IT managers must have enough business savvy to understand how IT can fit into the company's overall business strategy and how it could even drive and develop new products. "It is absolutely crucial to be able to link IT very tightly in the business," Santana said.

For many IT managers, all the above will mean changing the way they manage their departments, Santana said. "Change your coaching from drilling down to a specialty to encouraging individuals to develop a wide range of skills," he said.