

Technical consulting really is, well, downright technical

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Published: March 20, 2009

Tags: technical consulting

<http://csbj.com/2009/03/20/technical-consulting-really-is-well-downright-technical/>

Ever hired a technical consultant, only to swear six months later that, surely, he or she had a “stand-in” during the interview?

Perhaps the employee’s problem-solving skills were nonexistent, or his style of consulting clashed with others in the company or, perhaps, despite the title “technical consultant,” he couldn’t consult a manual — much less anything else.

If business owners or hiring managers don’t hire correctly for the position, the estimated cost of turnover is 30 percent to 150 percent of salary, said Jeff Ward, president and founder of Culture Index, a Chicago-based consulting firm.

“Historically, how objective is a resume?” he asked. “People will embellish anything and everything they’ve ever done.”

So how does a business ensure the person it’s hiring has the skills the company needs?

One way to bring objectivity to the hiring process is by applying a benchmarking survey — which measures a person’s motivational needs, interpersonal styles, leadership style, job fit, potential job satisfaction and group dynamics, etc.

The key to hiring is selecting the right person for the right job — hiring “a round peg for a round hole” ensures the employee will be “self-motivated and take a lot of satisfaction in the job,” Ward said.

Technical consultants are more self-confident than others, and don’t merely gather data — they are analytical and, of course, technically oriented.

“They like to work with data, systems and processes,” Ward said. “They also tend to be independent-minded, detail-oriented and introspective. And they’re problem solvers — resourceful. Accuracy is important, and they are thorough, strong on detail and follow-up.”

Employers probably have a preconceived notion about what specific traits they need in a tech consultant, so creating a profile gives them a benchmark to “hold a prospective candidate against, to see how close they are,” Ward said.

Understanding the culture of your organization cannot be underestimated.

"If you think you want a very strong tech consultant," Ward said, "but you have a family oriented culture — then that tech consultant may be very disruptive," even though he or she would do well elsewhere.

"If you pick the right people and give them the opportunity to spread their wings, and put compensation as a carrier behind it — you almost don't have to manage them," Ward said, quoting Jack Welch. "But don't make a hiring decision in a vacuum — look at multiple data sets," he said, including the culture of the company, whom the technical consultant reports to and the problem-solving style of other technical consultants in the company who are doing well.

"Ultimately, what we measure is how people think — not as much their qualifications or degrees — and how closely does their experience align with the job," Ward said.

And don't be fooled into thinking it's simple enough to hire someone and then teach them to be a technical consultant.

"I can't train someone how to be a problem-solver or a leader — a lot of that hardwiring takes place at a pretty early age," Ward said. "We measure who people are — not what people are."

But not everyone agrees that problem solving cannot be taught.

Tim Hobbs, president of Springs-based Hobbs Technical Consulting LLC, said that, as a nation, we have to improve our skills to be competitive in the international marketplace.

"The Japanese have ingrained in their culture how to make (the necessary) improvements," he said. "Every problem is a learning opportunity, and problems have to be solved logically. You can't just 'Easter egg it' — look over here and there, and maybe we'll hit the jackpot and find the problem."

He credits his problem solving abilities to the training he received while in the Navy, as an electronic technician and interior communications specialist.

The systematic approach taught him to analyze thoroughly, without the proverbial jumping to conclusions — which can be disastrous on a ship or submarine.

Hobbs has been a technical consultant for a local semiconductor company for several years and also is an adjunct professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

"You have to know what's normal, before you know what's abnormal," he said.

Then, a solution must be chosen based on the need of the business — is it cost-sensitive or time-sensitive? If it's the latter, for instance, and a vendor says that ordering a part will take two weeks, then "choose the less-probable solution that can be executed in one day."

Seventy percent of technical problems are self-induced — as in, ahem, human error. Many times the problem-solving involves "equipment strategy — getting your hands off the tools," Hobbs said.

Of the remaining 30 percent that are actual equipment problems, "only 10 percent is very complex and requires theory-based thinking."

So, 70 percent of technical problems can be solved by streamlining training and then holding people accountable to follow procedures.

In Hobbs' experience, all too often, workers adjust the dials on complex production machines, despite protocol, because something's not quite right — and the results can range from mildly damaging to catastrophic.

And, although it might seem obvious, humans tend to do the opposite of what's necessary, whereas consultants should "tackle the biggest problem first — the one that has the biggest impact on business and production," Hobbs said.