As the supply of IT graduates continues to fall far short of the demand for them, companies must work hard to recruit and retain their best talent. While money and benefits are certainly critical incentives in this battle, so too is effective management. IT managers often have a significant and direct impact on their employees’ level of job motivation.

However, in an IT work environment, where effective teamwork is critical, personnel management is particularly tricky. The step upward in the organizational hierarchy from being an effective technical team member to being an effective team manager and leader is fraught with difficulty. IT organizations often promote technically qualified personnel with little assurance that they will become successful people managers. The effects can be disastrous.

THE CHANGING FACE OF THE IT MANAGER
The nature of the IT manager’s job in today’s fast-paced environment demands not only a clear understanding of the role of IT in achieving the vision of the corporation, but also excellent and in-depth business knowledge combined with outstanding management skills.
ing people skills. No wonder that many top executives face enormous difficulties in finding and hiring good technical managers. Listed below are some detailed reasons why finding good technical managers is a major challenge for many companies.

- **Skills to align technology with business needs are essential.** IT has changed from a pure technical function to one that is highly integrated and interwoven with other business functions. This demands an individual who has a solid understanding of the business, combined with an in-depth and current set of technology skills.

- **"Soft" skills are essential for survival.** A combination of effective technical skills and good business knowledge unfortunately meets only 50 percent of the requirements. In a tight labor market, managers must be able to motivate their employees and ensure that employees find their jobs challenging and rewarding. This requires IT managers to have “soft” skills such as good communication, teamwork management, ability to motivate, and vision. Thus, IT managers must be willing to embrace both transactional and transformational leadership activities. Transactional leadership refers to skills that facilitate successful team interactions. Transformational leadership refers to skills that influence, inspire, and stimulate group members to more effective performance.

- **Talent for managing a diverse working population is critical.** The landscape of people that make up the IT community has changed significantly during the past decade or so. Today, immigrants from all over the world make up the IT community. With more women entering the IT workforce, the IT labor landscape has changed significantly, and managers who are not prepared to deal with the issues that a diverse workforce creates may not serve their organizations or their constituents well. Thus, older bureaucratic models of managing people are no longer valid. Managing IT personnel means becoming both a coach and a facilitator for diverse types of employees. Some years ago, these were desirable skills; today, they are the necessary skills to function in IT.

- **Ability to initiate and manage change is necessary.** Change management has become an integral and vital element in an IT manager’s portfolio. As the Internet and E-commerce relentlessly continue to change the business landscape, the IT manager must embrace organizational change, understand the significance of technology changes, and help his or her troops ride each change wave that sweeps the organization in a meaningful and rewarding manner.

- **Ability to foster innovation and risk-taking is required.** More than ever before, IT managers must foster the entrepreneurial spirit of their employees as they work within the confines of their organizational structure and its procedures. Innovation, creativity, and risk-
taking are the new hallmarks of a successful company, and this new paradigm demands a new type of significantly less risk-averse IT manager.

These are some reasons why the required behavioral traits of successful IT managers have changed significantly in recent years. Hence, companies must be willing to reassess their requirements and qualifications for them.

Four Myths Many Companies Believe About IT Managers

Although the required management style has changed significantly during the past decade or so, many organizations continue to hire and promote IT managers based on old, outdated, and unproductive paradigms and principles. Unfortunately, many of the old models are based on myths that can derail a company’s IT department and lead to loss of valuable employees. Consider now four of these myths.

- **People with good technical talents will necessarily be good managers.** Wrong — there is no evidence to confirm this point of view. Quite to the contrary, many technical wizards lack good managerial skills because the traits and attributes required to succeed in a pure technical job are significantly different from those required to do well in management. Hence, blindly promoting technical wizards into managerial jobs does great disservice to the individual, his or her reports, and the company at large.

- **Reward talented technical professionals by promoting them to management.** In many companies, managerial positions are viewed as a reward for hard work and commitment, a testimony to one’s contributions to the company. This sometimes can set up employees for an unproductive and unhappy career choice. Technical professionals may feel out of their league when managerial tasks and duties are thrust upon them and yet may feel compelled to assume a management position in order to go up the corporate ladder. If the career track in the organization is limited, employees may feel compelled to move into a management track, regardless of whether it is in the best interest of the organization or not. Companies with strong retention records provide a variety of career tracks to build on the strengths of their employees rather than directing them to choose the management track in order to climb the corporate ladder.

- **Everyone can eventually be taught to be a good manager.** Wrong — management training can often hone existing skills or teach people some structured managerial skills. However, it is impossible to take a technology professional with little or no people skills and aptitude for management and train that person to be a good manager. Management may simply not be the calling for some employees.

- **A bad manager is a problem, but not a serious one.** Wrong — of all the myths, this is the most dangerous. A bad manager is a serious
problem to the success of a company. He or she can deter the progress and success of the organization and can inflict serious wounds on the morale of an organization. In fact, bad managers can drive loyal employees to leave the company.

These are a few of the myths that underlie the behavior of some organizations toward technical management and influence the promotion patterns of technical employees within a company. It is, therefore, important to carefully identify and analyze the myths that drive an organization. It is worthwhile to examine the validity of these myths and how these myths influence the human resource decisions in a company.

**STATES OF MIND**

Individuals rarely choose to be bad managers. Still, evidence shows that even after many years of experience, some individuals never become good managers. Instead, they continue to repeat the same mistakes and drain the organization of its vitality and strength. Why do some managers fail to recognize the consequences of their ineffective style and work toward improving it? There are five states of mind that prevent managers from effectively addressing and modifying their management style. These states are true not only for technical managers, but for managers in other areas as well.

- **The problem does not exist.** Bad managers wear dark and thick blinders and are often oblivious to the concerns of their employees. They are in a state of denial that a problem even exists and hence lack any strategies to effectively address their weaknesses. This state of denial often leads to enormous frustration for the employees.

- **The problem is the company culture.** Bad managers are quick to blame the corporate culture for their individual failings and weaknesses. In other words, such managers often act on the belief that it is the corporate culture and not their chosen management style that is creating the problem. On the other hand, good managers seem to have an innate talent and ability to overcome some of the deficiencies or weaknesses in the organization’s culture and promote a healthy workplace within their unit.

- **The problem is senior management.** Bad managers also tend to blame senior management for their individual bad styles. By pushing the blame upward, such managers renege on their responsibilities and fail to bring resolution to employee problems.

- **The problem is bad employees.** Pushing the blame downward and blaming subordinates is another way bad managers relinquish their responsibility. In other words, such managers believe and perpetuate the belief that it is their subordinates who are the source of the prob-
lem. Such managers perpetuate the theory, “I would be a better manager if only I had better employees!”

- **The problem is temporary.** While some problems are in fact temporary, bad managers tend to think all problems related to their management style are temporary. “It will go away if I ignore it” can be a guiding motto for such managers. Employees working for such managers often have low morale and feel as if they are in a rudderless ship.

Regardless of the state of the mind of the manager, the foregoing five states of mind lead to inaction, inability to isolate and address the problem, finger-pointing, and low morale. These states of mind when combined with some other poor traits of managers (see Exhibit 1) can cause serious problems for the company and lead to loss of valuable talent.

**TYPES OF TECHNICAL MANAGERS**

Based on observation and study, the authors find that poor IT managers can be classified into one of the following categories:

- Aggressor
- Meddler
- Teenager
- Wimp

Characteristics of each of these classifications are shown in Exhibit 2.

**Aggressor**

Aggressors often act as the “king of the hill” and do a poor job of synchronizing their technical vision with the requirements of the business.
These individuals are often overconfident in their IT vision and therefore fail to make an effort to educate other business units about the validity or strength of the vision of the IT department. Further, aggressors are indifferent and do not make any effort to align their vision with that of the rest of the organization because they run their shop the way they please. They often make technical decisions with the intent of proving that their vision is somehow larger and better than the collective wisdom of the organization. The tendency to march to one’s own beat often leads to confusion and lack of direction or purpose among employees. Because the vision of the individual manager is not synchronized with that of the organization, many projects may have to be redone or abandoned. Employees may be reluctant to disagree with such managers for fear of reprisal, and may choose to be silent even when they know the project is likely to fail. In fact, employees working for aggressors may sometime be eager to sabotage some initiatives, leading to runaway projects, (i.e., projects that are over budget and behind schedule). Turnover is high, and morale is low in an aggressor’s unit. Aggressors also have a tendency to run the IT department as their “own little kingdom.” A very aggressive and domineering communication style may leave employees intimidated and resentful. Finally, employees working for aggressors feel undervalued and fail to recognize their contribution to the “big picture.”

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**EXHIBIT 2 — Characteristics of Technical Managers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aggressor</th>
<th>Meddler</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Vision is not synchronized with organization; no attempt made to do so</td>
<td>• Disjointed and unimpressive vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Operates a “little kingdom”</td>
<td>• Technology details are an obsession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dictatorial management style</td>
<td>• Ambiguity along with constant interference are the hallmarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Treats employees as subordinates rather than professional colleagues</td>
<td>• Employees in a constant state of flux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do-what-you-are-told style</td>
<td>• Meddlesome communication style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ignores employees’ emotional needs</td>
<td>• I-know-what’s-best-for-your-emotional-needs attitude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teenager</th>
<th>Wimp</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Immature vision of technology</td>
<td>• Vision changes from day to day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bandwagon mentality</td>
<td>• Don’t rock the boat; Just agree with everything and everybody!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Often creates a new catchall slogan but fails to prepare for the future</td>
<td>• Will do anything to avoid confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Confrontational communication style</td>
<td>• Quick to point fingers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fails to mentor employees</td>
<td>• Any technology will do!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don’t bother me with your problems. I have my own!</td>
<td>• Ambiguous communication style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Believes employees should self manage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Meddler
The technology vision of this manager is small, disjointed, and unimpressive. Meddlers have only a limited understanding of the corporate vision and their role in fulfilling that vision. Meddlers suffer from “technology hangovers,” — a syndrome in which managers tend to hang on to technologies that are dying. Ambiguity and constant interference are the hallmarks of such managers. Technical employees working for such managers often tend to do the bare minimum and avoid being innovative or creative.

Employees are in a constant state of flux as things change frequently and without reason or discussion, under this manager. Procedures are likely to be invented on-the-fly and are often inconsistent. In other words, under this manager different rules apply for different individuals. A very meddlesome communication style may lead to employees who feel devalued and irritable. The tendency to micromanage all technical details fails to empower employees and often leads to lack of involvement on the part of employees.

Teenager
This type of manager has an immature vision of technology and its role in the success of the organization. Such managers have a tendency to climb onto the latest technology bandwagon, regardless of whether or not it is suitable for the company, often leaving employees angry and confused. The teenager frequently comes up with a new theme or phrase to capture the attention of senior management and not to solve problems. This often leaves employees drained and unwilling to embrace new ideas, resulting in the “this too shall pass” syndrome. A defiant and confrontational communication style may lead to derailed projects and employee animosity. These managers are often unprepared for the future and unwilling to mentor their employees. A hands-off approach to the emotional needs of employees often leads to high turnover and low productivity.

Wimp
This type of manager is a true embodiment of the “yes” person. Like the teenager, the wimp’s technology vision changes frequently to accommodate the needs and desires of different key individuals. These managers are too eager to say what senior management wants to hear and often changes their technology opinions and views depending on pressure or requests from various sources. Lack of consistency and an inability to stand up for issues are the hallmarks of such managers. They fail to earn the respect of their employees who often march to their own tune and this, in turn, can lead to “mini kingdoms” within the department. IT
projects under such managers are often chaotic and disorganized, and employees within the same department may not have any knowledge about the activities of others in the department. Their communication style is marked by a misplaced eagerness to please, leading to indecisiveness and poor decisions.

**RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

A bad boss is one of the primary reasons for high employee turnover in IT. Companies that ignore this problem do so at their own peril. To ensure that only the most qualified become IT managers, companies can

- Reject and discard the flawed assumption that individuals with excellent technical expertise will easily become or naturally transition into excellent managers.
- Create prestigious technical tracks so that traditional managerial rewards do not become the only way to be recognized and rewarded.
- Offer a probationary “tryout” period for the individual to engage in the management track. The “tryout” period should be just that, not a sign of failure as a manager.
- Provide good, specific managerial training on issues and functions important to the company.
- Solicit feedback from employees and ensure that managers carefully review and develop an action plan for self-improvement.
- Address any problems employees have with managers in an effective and nonconfrontational manner. Never let a problem persist because this sends the wrong message.

Clearly, the identification of effective team management skills potentially present in highly skilled technical employees constitutes very important business for IT human resources management. Much time and money have been wasted on invalid procedures in the past. It is necessary for the organization to commit itself only to those selection procedures that can be shown to have validity for its own management goals. For example, human resource professionals have long known that biographical predictors and situational tests administered in what are called “assessment centers” have the highest probability of being valid. Paper-and-pencil personality tests have the lowest. Identification of managerial talent in IT organizations can be a tough problem, but it is one that must be solved in order to provide necessary leverage for the success of IT projects.
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