Payoff

As enterprises shed their vertical organization structures, the changes are resulting in new expectations for IS professionals and their career development strategies and behaviors. This article describes specific steps IS professionals can take to grow their careers in today's marketplace in which multiple skills are highly prized. The article also introduces a new way of approaching IS-related job descriptions.

Introduction

With organizations downsizing, rightsizing, and engaging in business process reengineering, IS professionals can no longer count on promotions, upward mobility, and expanding career opportunities. Nor can they count on seniority or anyone else to look out for them to pave the way for career advancement. The entire concept of a career in IS is being redefined. In the past, people expected long-term stable employment with one or perhaps two employers. For many people today, the reality is short-term, unstable employment with any number of employers. Individual IS employees must now view themselves as true professionals who possess a set of core competencies that they continuously refine, fine-tune, and use within the context of personal business plans.

These core competencies constitute the IS professionals’ product line, and the current employer is but one location at which IS professionals can market themselves. This represents nothing less than a complete makeover of the way in which IS professionals approach their career prospects. The alternative—chronic underemployment interspersed with occasional periods of unemployment—can be personally and economically devastating.

Mid-career professionals and middle managers are usually the people most affected by organizational restructurings. As their jobs are eliminated, these professionals are exiting businesses and organizations by the thousands, and there is little possibility of the majority of them being rehired by their former employers. The economy is not generating the supply of professional and managerial jobs needed to meet the demand, and there is an oversupply of well-qualified people.

Rapidly changing technologies have outpaced the competency development of many mid- and late-career systems professionals, and frequently, employers prefer to hire younger (and less expensive) people who may either know the new technologies or are expected to learn them faster than the older employees they are replacing. As far as career ladders are concerned, older employees are falling off.

The historical promise of technology to eliminate headcount is now a reality. IS professionals have long considered themselves to be change agents, bringing the sometimes unclear benefits of new technology to their users/clients. However, new technology is beginning to bite into the job security of IS professionals. The IS infrastructure is reengineering itself, and as a consequence, fewer workers are required.
The Paradox of Ubiquitous Technology

A variety and mix of hardware and software is finding its way into the enterprise's business units where businesspeople assume IS-related tasks and responsibilities. The growth of IS-related jobs and career positions is actually taking place outside traditional corporate computing departments, and those participating in this growth tend to be non-IS people. This extension of technology into the enterprise's business units raises the issue of what the future IS infrastructure will look like and whether IS will continue to exist as a career field and, if so, in what form.

There are various scenarios that examine these issues and their implications, and an important aspect of these scenarios is the fact that the number of people preparing for careers in IS has been declining for several years. To a large extent, the reason is that IS is not perceived, by those planning careers, to be a field that offers expanding and interesting career opportunities. Indeed, the opposite is true. Nonetheless, IS has a challenging public relations task ahead of it if the field is to attract talented people.

As the lines of demarcation between IS departments and the business units they serve continue to become blurred and the walls separating IS professionals and their users/clients come down, so do the career ladders once used to scale these walls. Business professionals and IS professionals are becoming more and more indistinguishable; advancement in IS-related careers increasingly requires experience in business units.

Action Steps for Advancing a Career in IS

In this environment, IS professionals can successfully chart a career course for themselves by undertaking these practices:

- Learning to think “outside the box” and becoming more comfortable with risk.
- Understanding themselves, what motivates them, and what career anchors (e.g., influence, control, status, task accomplishment, being a member of a team, independence, structure, challenge) are important to them.
- Developing personal business plans to promote themselves as value-adding products with distinctive, marketable competencies.
- Identifying key players in the organization—outside the IS infrastructure as well as within it—and knowing the scope of their responsibilities and how IS can help them.
- Conducting a personal SWOT analysis to determine strengths and weaknesses and what career opportunities and threats exist in their present job and career paths.
- Expanding their focus from that of employment to employability (i.e., learning to think as much about expanding career horizons and new skills sets as about maintaining their present position).
- Becoming excellent time managers, in order to concentrate time and energy on opportunities that can enhance personal marketability.
• Building an ever-widening circle of contacts in and outside IS. This includes becoming active in professional associations in order to expand an individual's knowledge base and circle of contacts.

• Developing mentoring relationships with people in and outside IS (e.g., offering to mentor peer managers and professionals from business units while seeking mentors among more senior business unit personnel).

• Taking courses in (and paying for them, if necessary)then practicing such soft skills as persuasive presentations, effective writing, interpersonal communication skills, internal/external consulting, managing change, influencing, and negotiating.

• Volunteering for work-related assignments that are above and beyond the usual but that can expand skill sets, career horizons, and contacts (e.g., task forces, temporary assignments in another department or location, and company/job-related volunteer work).

• Not staying in any one assignment too long, to avoid career stagnation.

• Being proactive and self-directed and viewing every assignment as an opportunity to expand career horizons.

Moving Beyond the Comfort Zone

Probably the most difficult of all the action steps, but the one that provides the context for all the others, is the first: learning to think “outside the box” and becoming comfortable with risk.

Familiarity, a relative degree of security, and a reasonable sense of accomplishment are no doubt important for personal well-being and productivity; if allowed to expand indefinitely, however, this comfort zone soon becomes a confining, career-threatening backwater.

Comfort zones can be a paradox, because the competencies that have made IS professionals successful can also relegate them to career stagnation. For some, the pain of making a personal change is still greater than the pain of staying where they are. Only when the pain of staying with the status quo outweighs the pain of learning and growing will they become proactive about adding new skills to their portfolio.

Developing a Personal Business Plan

One of the most challenging action steps is developing a personal business plan. It is challenging because it requires that IS professionals think of themselves in a new way: as value-adding products with specific features, functions, skills, and abilities. Many professionals find it uncomfortable to think of themselves as products, yet with a glut of well-qualified people seeking fewer job opportunities, this is precisely the way in which prospective employers view potential employees.

IS professionals should prepare at least two personal business plans: one for career advancement opportunities that may lie within their current organization, and a second plan for career opportunities outside their current organization. It is important to learn how to move laterally as well as vertically, which is why it is helpful to have a separate business plan for each possible career move. (More than two personal business
plans may, in fact, be necessary if the career development opportunities are different enough to warrant different approaches and strategies."

The personal business plan is not a resume or a substitute for a resume. A personal business plan, like any business plan, needs to be continually revised and updated. A continually updated personal business plan enables a person to turn out a resume that is a first-class marketing communication.

The Information Systems Professional as a Value-Adding Product

The fundamental question that a corporate business plan must answer is: why should a customer or investor be interested in Company A’s product instead of Company B’s? In the case of the personal business plan, the customer or investor is the individual (or individuals) for whom the IS professional wishes to work, but the fundamental question remains the same: why this person, why this product?

The personal business plan must describe the features, functions, and benefits of the IS professional as a value-adding product. This means a detailed description (not an abbreviated summary, as in a resume) of the individual’s expertise, competencies, and skills. In addition, a personal business plan needs to look forward and answer these questions:

- How will a prospective manager, colleague, or new employer benefit from my expertise, competencies, and skills?
- How will this expertise, competencies, and skills enhance the business of the prospective manager, colleague, or new employer?
- Why would this prospective manager, colleague, or new employer want to hire me instead of a competitor?

The Importance of Personal Marketing

The issue that usually most bothers IS professionals about proactive career development is the realization that they must market and sell themselves. Marketing and selling (and they are not synonymous) seem to be distasteful to many who make their careers in the IS field, but this does not relieve IS professionals of the responsibility for promoting themselves as value-adding products.

The personal business plan is a marketing document and as such needs to include:

- A description of the marketplace where the IS professional—the product—can make a significant contribution. This can be an internal market (e.g., a team, task force, department, or user/client business unit) or an external market (e.g., another employer).
- Information describing how the IS professional as a prospective colleague and employee can satisfy the needs of the market and enhance its value.
- The marketing and sales strategies used to reach prospective internal and external employers.

More specifically, the IS professional’s business plan should include a description of:
- Technical knowledge and skills.
- Types of projects completed successfully and for whom/what internal business units.
- Business problems these IS projects were designed to solve.
- Results accomplished.
- General management knowledge and skills.
- IS-related management experience, including project team leadership, task force management, self-directed team participation, and coordination.
- Cross-functional work experience, including projects with more senior business unit colleagues or managers.

Personal promotional information includes:
- Professional association memberships, officerships, roles, and responsibilities.
- Accomplishments, including IS-related innovations and new products and services.
- Awards and recognition for job- and career-related accomplishments.
- Articles and books written, audience presentations, and courses developed.

Personal marketing channels include:
- Human networks, the best marketing channel of all: contacts in and outside the IS organization and the enterprise who know the IS professional's strengths and skills and the contributions they can make.
- Mentors, a key marketing channel: those strategic individuals who are in a position to see opportunities for growth and play a major role in the personal marketing process.
- Satisfied users/clients who are willing to be references for their IS service providers.
- Professional associations that schedule programs and conferences where IS professionals can expand their horizons and make broad-based contacts.
- Publications, both IS and non-IS related, for which IS professionals can write in order to become more widely known and respected.
- Personal descriptive information, including (but not limited to) a resume. This written profile can include specific skills, expertise, accomplishments, and other contributions.

The personal business plan is, of course, of little use unless IS professionals take the initiative and systematically develop human networks and professional relationships outside of their IS organizations. This requires giving up the relative safety and security of their departmental comfort zone and initiating contacts with colleagues and managers throughout the larger organization.
Environmental Scanning

A disciplined approach is required to develop human networks and build an ever-widening circle of professional relationships. This process, called environmental scanning, entails several techniques.

First, to enhance an understanding of the business and its strategies, proactive IS professionals must read those journals, newsletters, and magazines that contain industry-related information they can use as they build relationships with their enterprisewide colleagues. In other words, IS professionals should read non-IS business periodicals so they can communicate more effectively with their non-IS colleagues in business units. For IS people, a lack of information beyond their immediate technical specialties contributes to the difficulties growing their careers and communicating how information technology can create new business opportunities.

Second, proactive IS professionals should seek out and volunteer to serve on cross-functional teams that are (or will be) responsible for business process reengineering. Involvement in cross-functional teams can help career-minded IS professionals accomplish several things, including:

- Enhancing visibility to the key IS and non-IS personnel who are influencing organizational innovation and transformation.
- Learning more about the business.
- Developing the same cross-functional competencies that business people have.

As a result of work on cross-functional teams, proactive IS professionals can establish value-adding relationships with key managers and professionals in IS and in the business units of the enterprise. Teamwork enables IS professionals to demonstrate that they are flexible and can make a contribution in creatively using information and information technology for business benefit. This is the message that enhances and builds careers.

The final technique is developing, personally communicating, and demonstrating at every opportunity a market-driven, customer-focused orientation. This includes viewing those who use and consume IS products and services as clients or customers, not as users. The manner in which people describes or labels individuals and groups has a great deal to do with their behavior toward them. The word user conjures up a less-than-desirable view of those with whom IS works and to whom it provides services. On the other hand, the words client and customer inspire a more positive view of consumers of information services. This more positive perception enhances professional relationships and opportunities.

Of Charts and Boxes

Changes in Job Descriptions

Just as the ability to think outside the box is a core competency for IS professionals, it is important for IS management not to become hemmed in by restrictive organization charts that make it difficult to be responsive to their clients/customers. Organization charts and detailed job descriptions are artifacts of vertical, hierarchical, bureaucratic
organizations, and they are becoming a thing of the past as IS organizations work to become flatter, more fluid, and more flexible.

The “that's not my job” attitude that often pervades organizations that are tightly structured with layers of job descriptions has no place in an environment of IS/client collaboration. In reengineered organizations, job descriptions with their detailed litany of specific tasks, duties, and responsibilities are among the casualties. Some organizations have scrapped old job descriptions in lieu of streamlined, generic job titles and profiles that help to motivate and energize employees. The benefit is that the IS organization and the people working in it are free to move swiftly to anticipate emerging client/customer needs and respond to quickly changing business situations.

An IS organization may be so hamstrung by its organization chart, job descriptions, and salary levels that every time a technical or business change demands a revised set of job expectations, it is required to work through the corporate human resources office and evaluate all IS job descriptions. A great deal of time is chewed up in nonproductive, peripheral activities; the specificity of job descriptions can be strangling. The net result is usually that IS clients/customers and corporate management become displeased as IS productivity suffers.

**Example.**

When an IS organization moves away from static, technically oriented job descriptions to more situationally driven profiles, it is usually because the IS executive is committed to everyone on the IS staff understanding the business and displaying an ability to function in a collaborative, self-directed manner. Interpersonal skills among IS professionals are prized and different working styles are tolerated.

Often job descriptions mirror the IS executive's staffing preferences and are very situational—that is, they focus on broad responsibilities, expectations, reporting relationships, and relevant skills, traits, and experiences. They are also innovative in that they include descriptions of what defines success in each particular job or role, as contrasted with a description of the parameters surrounding each position.

Not everyone—nor every IS organization—will or should move in the direction of more innovative job descriptions. However, the cardinal principle of organization still applies: strategy precedes structure (or stated another way, structure follows strategy). Enterprise and IS organizational strategies guide how best to organize the IS structure and to develop job descriptions.

**Conclusion**

This article has described innovative ways in which forward-thinking IS professionals can advance their careers in reengineered or decentralized organizations. The road to the top is far from certain and less clear than at any time in the history of the IS profession. Some readers may find the suggestions in this article uncomfortable, for they may require more risk taking than people are comfortable with; nonetheless, these career strategies are an outgrowth of the real need for IS/client collaboration.

**Author Biographies**

Stewart L. Stokes, Jr.

Stewart L. Stokes, Jr., Jr., is senior vice-president of QED Information Sciences, Inc., in Wellesley MA, responsible for management education and interpersonal training skills.