The shift of organizations from management-focused to team-focused and operated necessitates a vigilance in developing individual professional development plans for employees, particularly in the IT profession.

The trappings of success—a position in management, a corner office, and a long title—have been replaced by coordinated, project-focused work teams comprised of the organization's experts. This new environment leaves employees questioning their value, if not their roles, in the organizational structure. Without the common measurements of success, employees struggle to identify their contribution to the organization.

Skills assessment and professional development planning are essential to developing world-class employees for a world-class organization. The skills matrix that will be presented will help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of your current IT staff as well as provide a template for the makings of the ideal IT department. The matrix also serves as the cornerstone for individual professional development plans focused on ensuring each employee's value and contribution to the organization.
Developing and Maintaining a World-Class IT Staff

The twenty-first century ushers in with it a new way of looking at professionalism. In a world where cubicles have replaced corner offices and titles are often omitted from business cards to make room for an Internet address, how is the average employee supposed to know she's made it? The trappings of success, particularly in the higher education environment where the average computer center is seated several feet below street level, are evaporating. Traditional measures of success are being cast aside in favor of more subtle rewards which come with making a measurable contribution to the organization.

The problem in this paradigm adjustment is that nobody is telling employees about the change in the measurements of success, nor are they communicating the employee's relative value to the organization. Helping employees measure their personal success in this new environment requires an emphasis on the new measures of success--team orientation, coordination, contribution, and expertise. As a manager, articulating the role of each employee in the organization and shaping the future of each employee is a challenge; it is, however, the hallmark of superior management.

Drawing on information from a multitude of sources outlined in the bibliography which follows this article, as well as from personal experiences at Datatel, the development of a skills matrix is recommended as the first step toward developing a world-class IT staff. The skills matrix serves as the cornerstone of workforce planning and retention.

Developing a Skills Matrix
Assessing individual competencies is an essential component in the development and retention of staff, particularly in view of the employee's need to be reassured of their value in the new organizational paradigm. "...many companies are beginning to define for employees what it takes to move to the next level by defining key behaviors, or competencies, need in their work force," according to the May 1995, Personnel Journal.
A skills matrix is a simple tool to allow you to assess the skill sets on your team. Begin by developing a foundational matrix which outlines the skills required for the organizational unit as a whole. Be certain to cover the most basic skills that are required in your department, including telephone skills, problem solving, written communication, multi-tasking. Identify those items which are an essential requirement for all departmental employees.

When the foundational items are complete begin to develop a list of the more specialized skills required to meet departmental obligations. Think beyond your current staff. In fact, the matrix will be most valuable if you develop the skills list with a vision of what will be necessary to meet departmental needs three to five years from now. It may be that you have no one who has these skills today. The purpose of the matrix is to provide an eye to the future as well as a planning and development tool for today.

Once you have completed the complete list of skills, assign a weight to each item. Because of the broad mix of skills that any one individual may possess, it is difficult to assign weighting factors which total to 100 percent. Use scales of 1 to 5 or 1 to 100 percent for each skill. When loaded into a spreadsheet program, these weights will be multiplied against the respondent's answers and when totaled provide an overall score for the respondent.

Weights should be assigned to each skill by the manager prior to an employee completing the matrix. Weights should be the same regardless of the employee completing the matrix. The purpose of the matrix is to provide you with a view of the ideal staff, as well as a discussion point for developing a professional development plan for each employee. Weights should be kept off the employee's skills matrix instrument, so as not to bias employee responses.

While the employees are completing their individual assessments, the manager should be completing a departmental assessment and vision matrix. The manager should assess the current demands of the organization for IT support and outline on the matrix the level of and intensity of skill required to meet the demand today.
and three years from now. The projections on the manager's matrix will provide a benchmark for recruiting and hiring staff.

A spreadsheet application is ideal for data storage and manipulation of the skills matrix data. Session attendees will receive a sample of a spreadsheet matrix.

Each employee's matrix should be weighted and scored providing the manager with a snapshot of the core competencies of the individual from employee's perspective. You will be amazed at the skills that will be uncovered through this process. Employees that you have filling a narrow role often have developed skills which would transfer to other departmental functions.

The individual skills assessments should be plotted with the managers vision matrix on one spreadsheet and totaled. This will provide individual reference points as well as an overall view of what it will take to develop a world-class IT staff.

Developing Individuals
Using the individual skills matrix responses, the manager should meet with each employee and review the responses. Together they can begin developing a professional development plan for the employee which meets their mutual objectives. The matrix provides a less personal entree into sometimes difficult discussions regarding the employee's position within the organization, as well as provides an opportunity for the manager to layout his vision for the employee over the next three to five years.

The review of the skills matrix is only the first step to achieving productive and happy employees. Regular, personal communication is critical to keep the employee focused and to reinforce the employee's value to the organization. At Datatel we use an instrument called a 90/90 review to stay focused on departmental goals and employee development. The 90/90 review was developed by Datatel manager Ron Tucker for use in managing Datatel's operations (or IT) department.

The 90/90 review is based on the philosophy that a manager should spend at least 90 minutes every 90 days working individually with employees. As the included
sample review form illustrates, the 90 minutes of discussion is focused on the employee's accomplishments over the last 90 days, the development of goals for the next 90 days, and a review of professional development milestones and specific plans for action. Most Datatel employees enjoy the "no surprises" approach to the review process. Keeping in contact keeps everyone focused.

**Developing a Departmental Plan**
The skills matrix provides the data essential for the manager to prepare for the IT department of the year 2000. With a quantifiable view of how close or far you are from reaching your world-class view, you can develop specific strategies to bridge the gaps that were highlighted by the matrix. The data is also effective in justifying new staff in times of limited hiring, and threatened downsizing. The manager who can articulate the gaps in expertise and who can pair these gaps with the institution's requirements will be successful in attempts to build a world-class IT department.
References


