Know-IT-alls have winning edge

Infocomm specialists need to power up their game by knowing as much about server knowledge as service standards, as the country gears for 55,000 new IT jobs by 2015. By THAM YUEN-C

Specialise but wear multiple hats.

That is the emerging challenge companies are giving to infocomm professionals in light of the 55,000 new jobs that will be created by 2015 under the Government’s IT masterplan.

Because Singapore’s IT industry is moving up the food chain, professionals have to move along too.

And to make sure they remain globally competitive, the Infocomm Development Authority has called on companies, infocomm organisations and educational institutions to share their views on developing IT manpower for the future.

The consultation will end in two weeks.

“In the past, ICT projects here were very much about gaining productivity and speed,” said Mr Wilson Tan, president of the Singapore Computer Society. “Now, the focus is on developing the creative component and also providing digital services regionally.”

So with Singapore looking to create a globally competitive IT workforce, it is no longer adequate to just possess hardcore technical skills from Java programming to networking.

“Businesses now expect more from IT people. They need to know how to add value by improving the ways businesses do certain things,” said Mr Roger Olofson, associate director of IT at recruitment firm, Robert Walters.

For Electronics Arts, this means that game developers, programmers and producers also have to double as project managers and team leaders.

“These positions require strong understanding of technology, project management, budget management, programming, leadership and vision,” said Mr Chris Thompson the gaming company’s vice-president for Asia-Pacific.

Plus half of all IT professionals now employed work in non-IT companies, mostly managing infocomm projects.

“Because IT cuts across the different strata of business sectors, domain knowledge becomes very important,” said Mr Tan.

To stay relevant in the coming years, infocomm professionals will need to work at bridging the tech side and the non-tech side.

So a programmer working to develop a lab test ordering application for a hospital must know how a doctor works and what kind of information he needs to order a lab test, said Mr Linus Tham, chief information officer of the National Healthcare Group.

And Web developers building websites for airlines will have to understand how airline ticketing is done.

Going regional, going global

In recent years, Singapore has also become the preferred location for many large multinational companies consolidating their IT operations. Especially for banks and IT companies.

Citibank has a few thousand IT people based in Singapore, that also support the bank’s other offices worldwide.

Yahoo also has a regional office here that hires Web programmers, mobile developers and software engineers that develop products for the region.

“Only three to five years ago, there was no one interested in outsourcing to Singapore. Companies were outsourcing to India, China, Malaysia. Now, this is one of the biggest drivers of the demand for IT professionals,” said Mr Olofson.

Now, almost 20 per cent of job vacancies here are for IT positions, said recruitment firm, Hudson.

Serving global customers has also made it crucial for IT professionals to adapt their work to different cultural and business settings.

“The most important skill set that a technical or non-technical applicant can bring to Yahoo is knowledge of local market dynamics, combined with a thorough understanding of how technology can transform people’s lives and the national economies across our region,” said a Yahoo spokesman.

For OCBC Bank, IT people who are “culturally sensitive, enthusiastic and willing to take up cross-border assignments” are preferred.

To prepare infocomm professionals for the changing landscape, schools here have already started to cross-train IT and infocomm students.

At Singapore Management University, both undergraduate and graduate courses at its School of Information Systems combine classes in both IT and business.

“Part of the training is on how to design and deploy IT solutions in the context of complex business processes,” said dean of the School of Information Systems, Mr Steven Miller. “We want students to understand how to weave business and IT values, how to apply technology within banks, supply chains, health care, across the different domains.”

At the National University of Technology (NTU), IT students are also given international exposure with attachments overseas under the school’s Global Immersion Programme, said associate professor Seach Hock Soon, chair of NTU’s School of Computer Engineering.

“We believe that in today’s competitive environment, employers are looking for graduates who are not just competent in IT skills and technical knowledge, but who also possess a global outlook, leadership and real-world experience.”

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