



TenStep Supplemental Paper

6 February 2004

CIO's and Senior Managers also Need to Constantly Retool Their Skills

Everyone has read about the need to continue to learn and grow throughout their careers. In the IT field, people often think about the technical people who need to keep up on their technical skills. Many senior managers even make it a point to provide their staff with opportunities to keep up with new technology. However, who looks after the senior managers?

The answer, of course, is that as a senior manager, you must accept responsibility for your own career development. If you are lucky, you might have a progressive manager who looks out for you as well. But, you cannot count on that.

Retooling is different for managers than it is for technical staff

The retooling process for managers is different than for the technical staff. Senior managers are not going to be able to get hands-on experience in many of the technical areas. You probably don't want to go there to begin with, and even if you do, it is normally not practical for senior managers. So, how do you keep up your IT skills when you are a senior manager, or even the CIO? Here's a list to consider.

Recognize where the technology and industry are going. First, understand where the IT industry and technology are going. You need to be able to converse on the general state of the industry and the major players. Don't feel bad if you do not know all of the obscure technical startups that are creating niche products. However, you need to know the general trends. You needed to know, for instance, about Bill Gate's famous memo making Microsoft a web-centric company. You need to know about open source issues versus proprietary products. You need to know the industry impact of viruses, about software quality problems, about offshore sourcing trends, etc. These are the topics that are on the front page of every trade magazine, and you need to understand how they could impact your business.

Attend seminars and short training classes. Most every medium and large city has IT-related seminars every week. Usually these are put on for free, or for a nominal fee, by vendors. These are the kinds of events that managers should attend. It doesn't make sense to attend a five day training class in Visual Basic or Java. However, a half-day, free seminar on Java and how it could impact your business might make perfect sense. You probably think you don't have the time. Well, you need to make the time.

Have a role in technology projects. This will give you a chance to be exposed to a new technology. Go out of your way to ask questions. You may never have the opportunity to get hands-on - managing people and projects is the closest you will get. Take advantage of the situation to learn all you can.

If you cannot be a direct participant or a direct manager, look for opportunities to be a stakeholder. You still get invited to many of the key meetings and can take advantage of project discussion, demos, challenges, benefits, etc.



TenStep Supplemental Paper

Books and magazines. These old reliables are still valuable.

Computer-based training. Again, technical CBT classes have been around for a long time and are an old reliable way to learn. Your company may even have a CBT library. Take a few classes. You may have to do it on your own time, but it is worth the effort.

Search the Internet. You can find everything and anything there. There are usually dozens of sites offering different perspectives on a variety of technical skills. Take advantage of it.

You cannot do everything at once, but keep a steady pace

Keep up-to-date on things! Read a good set of trade magazines. You don't have to read everything, but keep up on the trends. Look for short seminars and inexpensive training classes. Every month, keep track of the learning opportunities you take advantage of. In any given month, this may not be a big deal. Looking back over a year, it will be a big deal.

Knowing where the technology is going and how it affects your company makes you much more valuable in your job today. If your technical skills are old, you have very little ability to impact the direction your organization goes in the future.

The other benefit is that if one day you decide to leave your current employer, you have some story to tell to prospective employers. No one expects you to be an expert on everything, but don't be a dummy either.

Take the job-posting challenge

It doesn't matter if you are the CIO or a senior IT manager. Keep focused on your own skills as well as the skills of your staff. Make sure that you can contribute fully to the technical direction of your company, while at the same time making sure that you have the well rounded skills you will need if you have to look for a new job.

Take the test. Look at the job postings on the internet job boards and in the paper. See what employers are looking for. If you were laid off today, would you qualify for many of these positions? If not, start retooling.