Techies Need Soft Core Skills

People, Management Skills Trump Good Design

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GRBJ REPORTER

GRAND RAPIDS — Profitable Growth Partners LLC founder Randy Bancino became painfully aware of the project implementation problems that plague corporate technology managers during his tenure as CIO of the multi-billion-dollar Alticor Inc. Despite having the best talent and latest technology, a lack of soft skills at the ground level led projects to be over budget, late, ill equipped or to otherwise fail.

Statistically speaking, a successful software or information technology project is about as common as a base hit in professional baseball. Depending on the study, industry estimates of project failure range from 55 percent to 80 percent. The larger the project, the more likely it will fail to meet budget, deadline, user requirements or even be completed — with supply chain management, enterprise resource planning and customer relationship management programs failing more than 70 percent of the time.

"When we'd analyze why projects failed, it was almost never because the technology didn't work or because people didn't understand the technology or we didn't hire the right vendors," said Bancino. "It was almost always a lack of soft skills in some of our people."

For all technical people, whether it be in information technology, biomedical, structural engineering, legal or one of dozens of other fields, soft skills such as project management, time management, communication and conflict resolution tend to be overlooked competencies. In some roles — software integration, for instance — it can be a full-time job just keeping up to date with changing product specifications.

"Their concern is that they really need to know the technology, so it's easy to put the soft skills on the back burner," said Bancino, who also served as Quixtar's vice president of sales and marketing and as a longtime instructor in Western Michigan University's MBA program. "But if you back up and look more critically, it's those skills that will make you more successful."

Soft Core Skills for Hard Core Technical People is one of several customized training packages available through Profitable Growth Partners, the company Bancino launched last fall with fellow Alticor alum Claire Zevalkink. Many of the same concerns transfer to the firm's other offerings, including those aimed at new managers and leaders, woman managers, teambuilding, cus-

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Claire Zevalkink and Randy Bancino show companies how to train their people to better use technology.

tomer service and high-performance strategies.

"When you're working in teams, it's the soft skills that will make you effective," said Zevalkink, formerly Quixtar vice president of marketing and communications. She noted that the most common cause of technology project failures — some studies suggest as high as 95 percent — is the inability of a technical person to speak in terms that a non-technical person, such as a salesman or customer, can understand.

"That's a skill not a lot of technical people recognize that they need," she said, adding that the problem is common in all areas of specialty, particularly for attorneys, accountants and medical professionals.

This can be especially problematic for technical people as they move up the corporate ladder, Zevalkink said. "Now they have a staff of people, they're giving presentations to customers or upper management, and they just haven't learned a lot of the skills that they need." **BJ**