

Opinion

Knowledge Worker 2.0: The skills you need to adapt

By Michelle LaBrosse

Computerworld

November 16, 2009 11:19 AM ET

Computerworld - Knowledge worker. I remember the first time I heard that term. It was in the early '90s, when futurist Alvin Toffler was talking about the knowledge economy. (Though it was Peter Drucker who coined the term, in 1959.)

But even after having been around for over three decades, the phrase had a sci-fi ring to it, and it carried a bit of uneasiness, since it signaled a big change in the American dream, one where the future would belong to those who used their heads and not their hands.

Today, of course, the term is half a century old, and in a world where "Google" is a universal verb, being a knowledge worker is firmly part of our "new normal." That leads me to wonder, What will the next version of the knowledge worker look like? What are the skills that IT professionals need to succeed right now and in the years to come?

Here's my assessment:

Business acumen. Your IT skills are not enough. Think of them as your foundation. But what makes you an invaluable employee or contractor is your ability to understand how to solve problems that beset the business. When you are working on a new project, ask yourself what is at play from a business perspective. How can your ideas positively affect the business? In what ways can IT solve business problems? When you can connect the macro to the micro, then you open up the opportunity to participate in a larger discussion.

Open-source thinking. If we think of the phenomenon that is the Linux operating system in purely human terms, we can see that it is about connecting peer-to-peer knowledge and creating networks of expertise. If you can be seen as a leader who knows how to build upon the ideas of others and create superior solutions because you know how to capture the best from a human system (that is, your team), you will be poised to rise above those who are focused solely on their individual contributions.

Over-communication. I couldn't bear to write the word "communication" for fear that you would pass over this point, figuring that you've heard it all before. We've all been exhorted to communicate so much that we just shut it all out. An IT buddy of mine once told me, "I got into IT because I didn't want to have to communicate with anyone, and now that's all I hear!" But if you hope to succeed without good communications skills, you need to hear this painful truth: Communication is not enough. You have to over-communicate. Say the same thing in different ways until people hear it. You have a lot of information to convey, and if you want your message to get through, you have to keep it simple, make it clear and repeat it often. And remember, don't bury the lead at the bottom of a lengthy e-mail!

Active unlearning. Adaptation isn't possible if we keep doing things the same way that we did them before -- especially in an environment that is changing. As Einstein said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." In order to succeed now and going forward, you have to be ready to unlearn. Don't accept as sacred what you knew yesterday. Instead open up to all the new possibilities that you may not know of today.

Evolution management. We all love to cross things off the list, but few things are rarely done; rather, they are evolving. Think of a Web site. I've heard many people lament that they just want their Web sites to "be done." As anyone knows who has ever managed one, they are never done. Look at both your work and who you are as projects that are always in motion and never quite finished. This is not to say that there aren't milestones that mark goals and progress, but the finish line is always moving as the environment changes.

An entrepreneur within. Even if you work inside a company, the more you behave like an entrepreneur the better. Entrepreneurs move quickly. They are adept at changing. They are always on the lookout for opportunities -- not just for themselves, but for the people they work with and for. With outsourcing an ongoing IT trend, exploring and cultivating the mind-set of an entrepreneur could give you a head start if you find yourself on the outside looking in.

Project management prowess. I often say that project management is the art of getting things done. And in any economy, what do people value? Results. No matter what you are working on, make sure you are focused on what success will look like and what your role in managing that success will be. If your project management skills are weak, consider getting a PMP certification. That can be particularly essential for IT contractors who may be working for the government

or for large corporations that see the PMP as an important baseline of project management knowledge.

Virtual team management. With many project teams dispersed in different time zones and containing people from different cultures, people who are successful managing people they don't see every day will be the new management gurus. Also, understanding different ways that different cultures communicate is important. Take a course in cross-cultural communication and ask people about their own communication preferences. If you work on a virtual team, schedule regular meetings via conference call or in online meeting rooms. Track and share your progress with your team. Be open about your successes and your failures. Engage your team in coming up with better ways to communicate and be more efficient. People like to be part of the solution, so don't feel you have to have all the answers.

This is what has been successful for me, as I've adapted from military officer to research scientist and now to serial entrepreneur. Try a few of them on for size and see what resonates for you as your work to adapt and stay relevant for all the opportunity that the future holds.

Michelle LaBrosse, PMP, is the founder and CEO of [Cheetah Learning](#) and author of the books *Cheetah Negotiations* and *Cheetah Project Management*.