10 TIPS FOR... SUCCESSFUL IT RECRUITMENT

Hiring a new employee is one of the most expensive, stressful and time consuming things a business can do. However, the dearth of talent in the Middle East, combined with a focus on experience over qualifications, can result in an even bigger headache for any CIO. ACN brings you its top 10 tips for successful IT recruitment.

IT TEAMS ARE A LOT LIKE THE technology that they are responsible for. However stable the platform or core skills base, there is a constant need for tweaks and additions; for ongoing maintenance in the form of training and qualifications, and for the addition of new blood to keep pace with technological evolution.

But CIOs can't afford to focus on IT qualifications alone. The IT team is a vital part of the engine that generates any organisation's competitive edge. Soft skills are as important as a host of technology-specific certifications in an environment that requires vision, business sense and above all, team players. Recruiting and sustaining these teams in the Middle East is one of the CIO's greatest challenges in a market where people with superior skills combinations are at a premium and can effectively chart their own careers.

"Qualifications are essential," says Alex Shelton, head of telecoms recruitment, Middle East, at SNS, a joint venture with the global company Networkers International.

"They are a benchmark for how good a candidate is, and employers are very specific about the qualifications they want. For example,

if they are looking for someone with CCNP, they will only consider candidates who have that certification on their CV. No-one else will do.

However, most employers also realise the importance of experience gleaned in the workplace, and that a qualification in isolation is not enough.

"Generally, companies in the Middle East look to recruit mid-level positions from within the region. The issue with this is that often, candidates have the right qualification, but don't necessarily have sufficient experience in applying that qualification in a real world environment. And if they can't find the person they are looking for within the region, organisations here will tend to keep the job open rather than cover the costs of recruiting from around the world."

That, however, is an increasingly unsatisfactory option for the hard-pressed CIO, who needs a complete IT team to run the business support infrastructure and often, to develop significant projects designed to take the business forward and generate competitive edge.

"Finding real talents among the crowd of many with similar skills,

qualifications and experience, people who are self-motivated, willing to put effort into improving their skills to cope with rapid technology updates, is almost impossible in 'Middle Eastern culture'," says Mohammed Aslam, regional general manager at one of the region's leading training companies New Horizons. "The most important skill is having the ability and willingness to learn in a fast moving and developing environment," echoes Hala Dabboussy, principal partner services manager, for emerging regions at Symantec.

Aslam suggests there is almost too much emphasis placed on the value of experience, which in itself makes candidates more expensive and more difficult to hang on to. Instead, he suggests CIOs should focus on identifying younger, less experienced candidates they can nurture and develop on the job.

"Experienced consultants are very expensive and too demanding, and they are usually head-hunted for specific projects with high compensations," he says. "Also, they require a lot of investment to build their skills and once they've acquired them, they are hard to retain." ▸

Mazen Jabri,
Global Knowledge

10.
DON'T IGNORE THE SOFT SKILLS

Certification is a good guide to a candidate's technical skills, but it's equally important to look at their communication and problem-solving qualities. They will be joining a team that already has specific focuses and priorities, and they will need to fit in as well as, ideally, bringing new ideas and vision to the IT department. Good multilingual communications skills are increasingly important. A commanding personality might be essential in a particular role.

"A candidate's ability to adapt to new technologies – and even more, an ability to self-learn – should play a big part in selection," says Mohammed Aslam, regional general manager at New Horizons.

"Candidates who are self-motivated will be excited to grab the opportunity to learn and excel, without forgetting their passion for IT. Time management is also important – the key to success in many IT projects. CIOs should look for proof of this, as well good judgement, integrity, decisiveness and initiative."

9.
TRUST QUALIFICATIONS WHEN HIRING CONTRACTORS

CIOs in large enterprises are often recruiting on a project-by-project basis, which puts them at the mercy of the contractor market. New Horizons' Mohammed Aslam warns that this can be expensive, but in many cases the position is for a fixed term and the CIO needs to trust qualifications.

"This area of the world is heavily contract-based as there is a lot of work that needs to be completed quickly, so many contractors are brought in from the West to set up large networks and infrastructure," says Charlie Sell, technology manager at specialist recruiter Arrows Group.

"This means they need strong knowledge of the processes, and qualifications prove that. Hiring people with these qualifications allows companies to 'hire blind' – without meeting the candidates – as the qualification shows that they'll be competent."

8.
FOCUS ON THE RIGHT TECHNICAL CERTIFICATIONS

Flagship qualifications that certify a candidate's skills in important, vendor-specific technology are a great signifier of skills – provided they have been attained at a reputable training provider. But CIOs should make sure they know how to 'play' the skills market in terms of relevance, and the level of achievement represented by a qualification.

"CCNP and MCSE qualifications are regarded as highly valuable in the Middle East as they're from Cisco and Microsoft – global companies that are recognised anywhere and have the same processes worldwide," says Sell.

"CCNP certified professionals – mid-level professionals – are probably the most in demand in the Middle East," states Alex Shelton, head of telecoms recruitment at recruitment specialists SNS Middle East.

"Candidates with the highest CCIE certification – or indeed a dual CCIE – are very hard to come by, but very desirable. Other key qualifications include JNCIA. Again, candidates with the highest JNCIA are very rare," he adds.

7.
ASSESS THE NEED FOR PREMIUM SKILLS

For all the emphasis on technical skills, CIOs should look at the composition of their IT teams and look at the combination of qualifications that will add the most substance. Today's IT professional should be able to handle multiple technologies – but it is still rare to find one person with a comprehensive skills set. CIOs might need to look further afield for the right person.

"Very often, CIOs find it difficult to attract experienced candidates with skills to handle multiple complex technologies," says Abdulrahman Ubare, head of technical operations at outsourcing specialist eHosting DataFort (eHDF).

"The calibre of candidates in terms of skills sets varies, and this has made it difficult for a CIO to hire a candidate locally. As a result, it is likely that CIOs have had to hire two candidates for one job. This has often led to them looking outwards into other Middle Eastern and Asian countries to seek human resources who are more appropriately skilled," adds Ubare.

6.
INVEST IN TRAINING

Hala Dabboussy,
Symantec

Good quality candidates will be attracted by the promise of on the job training, particularly if they are given the opportunity to achieve industry standard certification. Some CIOs might worry that they are simply adding weight to an employee's CV, which will enable them to move on more swiftly. But combined with other incentives and a focused development programme, training is an important incentive to stay and learn more in a good position.

Hala Dabboussy, Symantec's principal partner services manager, says that putting a permanent employee through a course to get a qualification is a great attraction tool, and a way to take on people at a junior level and build a skilled workforce: "In order for the CIO to keep a team of high quality staff they need to make sure that they are well trained on the products they will be handling. CIOs need to offer their staff regular training sessions when new releases are launched and encourage them to expand their skills by learning new technologies that complement their existing skills."

5.

MAKE TIME AVAILABLE FOR STUDY

If CIOs can overcome their nervousness at investing in staff training, they also need to show their commitment to an employee's development by providing them with the resources to study for qualifications. Without it, your investment could be for nothing. "Companies and organisations need to give their employees enough time to prepare for the training and ensuing exams, as well as time to access the lab," says Mazen Jabri, managing director at IT training and business skills provider Global Knowledge Middle East and Africa.

Jabri advises that employers can should consider offering financial assistance as well. "They should provide financial subsidies to help cover the cost of the certification. In return, they can expect the candidate to commit to at least two years of service to the company," he says.

4.

SEEK PROOF OF SKILLS, NOT JUST A CERTIFICATE

Vendor certification is important of course, but a certificate is only valuable if the employee can demonstrate their ability to use the skills it represents and convert what they have been taught into a practical situation. Anybody who has been trained by a reputable third party should be able to do this.

"Earning the certification is not necessarily proof that you are skilled in the particular area you trained for," says Ubare. "What matters most is the experience you have in dealing with the product or technology, and how you can utilise that experience in solving problems on the job."

3.

MEASURE THE BENEFITS

It should be relatively easy to measure the benefits of investment in training and certification. The impact on an employee's performance and technical capability – and their contribution to the IT department's productivity should soon become apparent. But it should always be followed up through mentoring and monitoring.

"The ideal way of measuring the benefits is to compare their work before the course, with that produced afterwards," says Jabri. "The time and money invested in an employee's qualification will reap its benefits through increased efficiency and productivity of the candidate. This will be in addition to the value of downtime saved and return on investment in IT assets, all of which can be measured in monetary values," adds Jabri.

SNS' Shelton agrees that it is important for organisations to track progress and suggests that the responsibility for this should fall on an experienced member of the team. "Employers need to look at whether the employee is using their newly acquired qualification to deliver on a project, and I would advise assigning a more senior member of staff to monitor their progress."

2.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH IS NOT JUST GOOD, BUT ESSENTIAL

CIOs should beware of relying on the certificate itself, and pay close attention to a candidate's real life experience, particularly if they are looking to plug a premium skills gap – a mixture of new and old technology abilities, for example, or compliance and auditing experience – and the impact of a poor choice will be more significant, and possibly, costly.

"Unfortunately, certifications nowadays are used as keyword to speed up the search for individual recruits," says Aslam. "However, reference checks from previous workplaces are vital, and the CIO or IT manager must conduct a technical interview to at least draw a line under the basic skills that the candidate has," he adds.

Mohammed Aslam, New Horizons

1.

PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Candidates with diverse skills will potentially have a wider positive impact throughout the IT team. They are likely to be flexible, keen to add to their knowledge, and used to being part of a team. But they also need incentives.
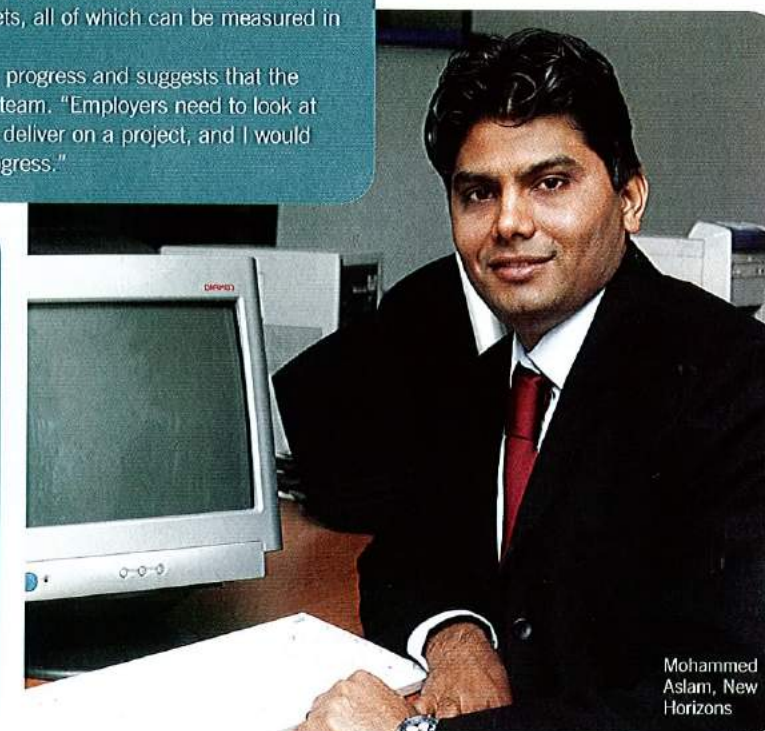
"An individual training and growth plan that matches the organisation's needs is key," says Aslam at New Horizons. "CIOs must understand each recruit's strengths and build a dynamic career plan that illustrates their goals and rewards. The plan should also clearly state the outcome expected in terms of performance, flexibility and development."

He adds that it is vital for CIOs and IT management to keep staff motivated once they have settled into their new role. "Stress the fact that this is not a routine job. It is dynamic, fun and comes with great rewards."
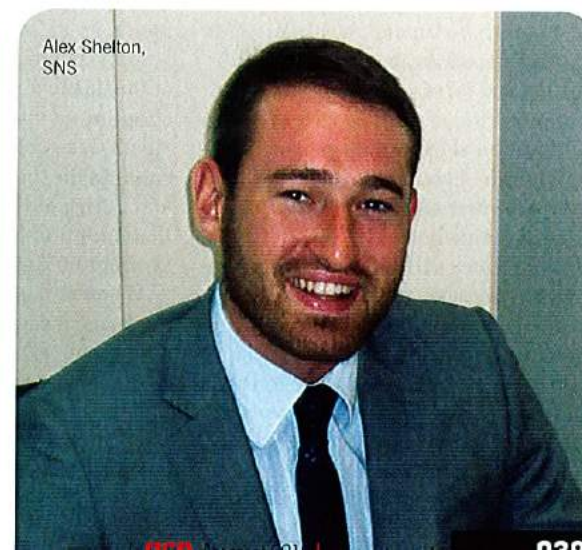
Alex Shelton, SNS