

# MIND THE GAP

Much has been made of third-platform technologies such as cloud, mobility and Big Data analytics. However, with trends moving so quickly, businesses are being forced to import skills from abroad in order to get the best out of these new trends. How can the local IT scene ensure a healthy availability of local talent?

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he problem with finding the right talent isn't limited to the Middle East, according to some. The technologies that CIOs are urged to harness these days can still be described as

emerging, meaning that the talent required to run such technologies is also emerging. If the third platform of computing has shown us anything yet, it's that most organisations aren't ready to embrace it.

"The skills gap is a global phenomenon, specifically when it comes to cloud, mobility and Big Data analytics, as well as applications," says Travers Nicholas, Manager, Systems Engineers, EMC.

Because of this, Nicholas opines, a new approach needs to be taken when it comes to hiring the right talent for emerging technologies.

"What we're seeing is that successful organisations are adopting a new approach that combines an element of talent sourcing and internal training. Finding the talent

is the biggest challenge for organisations, which is why they must also focus on internal training," he says.

"Traditionally, it was all about finding the right talent 'out there', however today, it is equally important for us to identify candidates already within the organisation, who are capable of learning, and possess the skills and willingness to make the transition to the third-platform technologies. Once those people are identified, it is about supporting them through the learning process."

Despite organisations improving their methods of training skilled employees, some claim that the skills gap between the Middle East and the rest of the world is getting larger. They say that this is

especially true when it comes to third-platform trends, meaning that, if the Middle East is going to embrace them, organisations here need to re-think how they attract new talent.

“The skills gap in the Middle East is vast, and the rapid rate of expansion in the region is set to widen that gap in 2014. Whilst the internal development of expertise continues to grow, it remains, however, too slow to keep pace. With emerging technology introduced from western corporations increasing, local talent is simply not sufficient to meet the demand,” says Stefano Capaldo, Regional Manager, Middle East, Firebrand Training.

Capaldo explains that a number of factors have contributed to the shortfall in regional IT talent. He points to a lack of development at grassroots levels, explaining that secondary school education does not focus on the skills required for a career in IT. He also says that the region takes an outsourcing approach to IT, which undermines the development of local talent—“Locals lack the appetite to learn IT,” he says. What’s more, the region simply lacks the volume of local experts needed to cope with the range of expansion, he adds.

These points are echoed by Kerry Kwoutsikos, Regional Manager of Resellers, Middle East, QlikTech, at least when it comes to Big Data analytics. “Whilst there is a significant gap between specialised skills in ICT and the local talent pool, the gap is even more severe when relating to Big Data analytics,” he says.

“The key reason for the lack of specialist skills is partially due to the increased number of businesses using data analytics. The rise of Big Data, cloud and mobility are a fairly new phenomenon and businesses are led to leverage this new opportunity immediately.”

Rajesh Abraham, Head of Product Development, eHosting DataFort, explains that the Middle East’s high



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turnover of human capital—due to the transient nature of expatriate life—also plays a factor in the widening skills gap when it comes to IT in the region.

“The IT industry struggles to find suitable replacements for specialised staff and rapid technological advances impacts the availability of superior talent. It is becoming imperative to re-train existing IT professionals and encourage them to pursue necessary training and certifications on a regular basis,” he says.

Despite the doom and gloom, one voice stands out as saying that the regional IT skills gap is not as severe as it may seem. Indeed, he believes that organisations have, on the whole, acknowledged the problem, and are taking encouraging steps towards addressing it.

“The gap is not severe. Though there are not many people with the new skill sets, there is an increasing surge in the number of people who are re-skilling and learning new techniques. In the areas where there is demand, like mobility, yes, the gap exists and it needs to be addressed, but organisations are aware of it and are scheduling new training sessions, and hiring people with expertise in the new technologies,” says Biswajeet Mahapatra, Research Director, Gartner.

Perhaps a bigger worry for the Middle East, Mahapatra suggests, is the ability to identify just what skill sets you need for a particular project. This can often be where organisations let themselves down, leading to a perceived lack of skills, whereas the problem could simply be in not identifying what talent is actually needed.

“The most important thing is to first understand the skill sets required for the right kind of project. All new projects will have elements of different technologies, but you do not need the best-in-class for all the components. You will require a solid understanding of the project, appropriate vendors to set up the correct enterprise architecture and the right people to implement it,” explains Mahapatra.



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“To do that, one needs to have a clear understanding of the current available skill sets and have a training plan aligned with upcoming projects to ensure that the people with the right acumen work on the new technologies, and are available and ready at the right time. For some projects, you require external help, which can be implemented by hiring a few experts in niche areas, or get external consultants, who would help the existing talent to ramp up faster.”

Abraham, from eHosting DataFort, agrees that enterprises need to identify what sort of talent they need before beginning the hiring process. Indeed, he believes that this is the key to ensuring that businesses find the right people to implement and manage their projects.

“To ensure that businesses find the right people to implement and manage their projects, they need to have a hiring strategy which focuses on finding the right IT skills specific to the technology. This includes having the necessary training and certifications, experience with the product or technology and how they can utilise that experience in solving problems on the job, the right soft skills such as communication, problem solving skills and the ability to adopt and learn new technologies,” he says.

Firebrand Training’s Capaldo adds that the local

culture of getting a bargain should be challenged— hiring cheap doesn’t always mean hiring right.

“Governments will pay for highly qualified experts, yet the benefits of training to SMEs is still under-appreciated and therefore under-funded,” he says.

According to EMC’s Nicholas, the onus is also on employees themselves to stay updated about emerging trends. “If you stop learning, you stop being relevant because the technology industry changes and evolves so quickly,” he says.

“You must continue learning and the third-platform transition is probably the most significant transition we will see in our life times from a technology perspective. So it is one that everyone should have a plan for; every individual, every business unit, every IT department, every application department and every enterprise, needs to have a strategy for the third platform.”

Middle Eastern organisations are beginning to wake up to the need for skilled employees, and Capaldo expects the skills gap between here and the western world to begin closing as time goes on.

“The western world has been implementing emerging technologies longer than the Middle East, and maintains the wealth and infrastructure necessary to develop the skill set of expatriates more quickly. However, as the Middle East accumulates wealth and continues to invest in the infrastructure necessary to train local expertise, that gap will begin to close,” he says.

According to Gartner’s Mahapatra, the region is already home to a highly talented workforce. All that’s needed is for organisations to manage that talent intelligently.

“There are brilliant people in all areas in this region,” he says. “If organisations are ready to pay the right compensation, and invest in training and exposure, then there is no area where people in this region will be lacking.” ■



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