Three Pillars of Success
Pillar One: The Right People

by Frank Ziller

An IT organization with the right emphasis on aptitude and attitude is more agile than one with an emphasis on skills and experience.

Experience teaches that successful organizations operate in environments where objectives are simple and straightforward. Despite the complexity arising from continuous changes in law firm technology, three fundamental pillars provide a reliable template against which to build business technology success: 1) the right people, 2) the right processes and 3) the right technology. This triad provides a framework for law firms to build their IT operations to support day-to-day business needs.

The Three Pillars Overview

To understand the three pillars in combination, imagine yourself at an amusement park looking at the towering structure of the roller coaster.

The collection of roller coaster cars zooming around the tracks will be our metaphor for the technology pillar. Technology is a combination of tangible and intangible assets. Every organization has a set of tools and equipment — purchased or borrowed, physical like servers and intangible like ideas and innovation — and a resulting technology footprint.

Processes can be thought of as the rails for the roller coaster track because they help make the ride predictable each time around the track. Official and unofficial processes, the most overlooked components in businesses, govern how people behave and how technology is used within an organization. Complex technology environments in law firms necessitate robust processes to ensure internal users of the firm's technology remain safely in motion.

People are the custodians of the roller coaster. They examine and maintain the cars, understand the rails and see how the component parts of the system fit together. Without knowledgeable operators who can ensure a safe and predictable ride, the system is doomed. Even the best technology and most effective processes are destined to fail without the right people.

Focusing on the Right People

Regardless of recruitment tools or recommended staffing ratios, evaluating and hiring individuals requires the right fit. Consider the following four attributes:

» **Aptitude:** The inherent technical and social capabilities with which a person is born

» **Attitude:** A person's mindset relative to other people, processes and technology

» **Skills:** Context-specific knowledge gained and applied to people, processes and technology

» **Experience:** Know-how through doing; the aggregate practical contact a person acquires with people, processes and technology

A greater amount of emphasis should be placed on aptitude and attitude when selecting members for your team.

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These four essential attributes are not equal. A greater amount of emphasis should be placed on aptitude and attitude when selecting members for your team. This assertion strikes some IT managers as heresy, but that is precisely why so many technology organizations struggle with their personnel choices. Those who hire based primarily on experience do so at their peril. Why? Consider our hypothetical employee candidate, Andy. Andy has over nine years of experience with Microsoft Office and Microsoft Exchange; because those skills and experience were sought, he was offered the position. But Andy's aptitude is limited. He struggles to adapt to new operating systems and hardware, and his Microsoft-specific technology confidence alienated colleagues at his previous employer. But, in terms of the skills sought for the position, Andy knows his stuff.

In retrospect, competing candidate Brenda would have been a better fit in the context of our four attributes. She has less than one year of experience with MS Office but demonstrates a broad understanding of other applications, works with multiple operating systems and writes code. Brenda also exhibits a can-do attitude with an eagerness to learn new technologies. Though her skills and experience are limited compared to the position description, she possesses important advantages. Skills and experience can be more easily coached, trained and obtained if someone has the right aptitude and attitude.

Another pitfall that comes with placing undue emphasis on skills and experience is an IT team that is less ambitious and dynamic because their skills are aligned with a depreciating technology. Over time, the technology vendor comes to have a greater influence in which products' features and benefits are considered indispensable because the employees have skills and experience centered on that technology. This has the potential to create an echo chamber as employees lobby to preserve the status quo.

When hiring for aptitude and attitude, you will find the acquisition of skills and experience occurs more naturally. Brenda likely would be more flexible with the introduction of new technology and could more easily undertake the transition to a competing enterprise software package. Remember, we define skills as context-specific knowledge gained and applied not just to technology but also to people and processes.

Selecting personnel based on good attitudes has another advantage. Most IT managers consider only the mindset relative to coworkers; they neglect attitude relative to processes and technology. Returning to our amusement park analogy, personnel with good attitudes are more likely to suggest new safeguards for the roller coaster riders or improved maintenance of the cars. They perceive themselves as part of the operation, not merely as employees with a set of skills or experiences. A good attitude fosters not only teamwork but also novel ways of addressing internal customers' needs and the policies or processes to ensure their success.

People Create a Safe Ride

If people are not your greatest asset, they should be. Personnel decisions made across all three pillars — people, processes and technology — will help ensure your organization's IT success. The roller coaster will always have its ups and downs, but the right people will help ensure a safe and enjoyable ride. **P2P**