

opinion

Value Added

by Tina
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I was fortunate to land in a soup-to-nuts project the first job I had out of college. I had everything to learn and there was at least one of everyone to learn from. We had scientists, kernel coders, application programmers, database programmers and administrators, documentation specialists, system administrators, networking and telecom jockeys, and so on. Despite all the different flavors of computer professionals on the project, I noticed one universal theme: Those who understood the whole picture were the most valuable.

Since I had everything to learn and didn't have a particular specialty yet, I benefited from every person on the project. While there, I did some programming, project management, technical training, documentation, and database and system administration. I was like a sponge, and there was free-flowing knowledge running steadily throughout the hallways and conference rooms of that project. I did my best to come up to speed on my own, but when I had questions there were always folks to go to for answers. There was so much to learn and, luckily, so many really good people willing to let me learn from them.

As I came out from under my initial input overload, I began to notice that I wasn't the only staffer who sought help from colleagues. In fact, there was information exchange going on for everyone, regardless of their experience or seniority. After a while I noticed a trend, though: There were some folks who were the top question-answerers, and it was almost as if an unofficial org chart was reflecting it. It was these folks whom the experienced staff went to when they had questions. And it was these same people who had the last word in meetings and to whom everyone deferred when the strategic decisions were being made.

Since their authority was clear, though not official or necessarily aligning with a title of "manager," I began to assess what it was they had in common. Were they the scientists on the project? The kernel programmers? Soon I realized that it wasn't their profession or title which they had in common but their body of knowledge. In every case these local sages were the people who knew more than just their area of specialty. For the programmers, that meant they knew the kernel as well as the applications and networking. For the network folks, it was the guy who could talk with the kernel programmers. For the sysadmins, it was the one who could administer the network applications as well as the local machine, and for the database folks it was the person who understood the OS and its administration, too.

In every case, these people were able to bridge the gap to their peers. On this particular project, which drew on so many different disciplines, those who could do so were key. But I've observed this type of employee is always key, no matter where they work. It's like they are translators in the tower of Babel, the hub of a communications wheel. For their ability to do and understand more than one thing, they are more valuable and more utilized than their peers.

Thinking back 20 years, I realize that additional value hasn't changed. The people who understand the way things work, top to bottom, are still the most valuable and influential folks on any project. In this economy, being that person may mean you keep your job or get the next one. Take every opportunity to broaden your body of knowledge; not only will you bring added value to your project, you'll also add value to your resume.