Book Review

The IT Career Builder's Toolkit

by Matthew Moran, Cisco Press, Indianapolis, IN, 2005. 280 pp., $29.95 (softbound). ISBN 1-58713-156-0

Reviewed by Charles Ashbacher

Not so many years ago, computer skills were in such short supply that if you possessed them, you were guaranteed a high paying job. Furthermore, they also made up for many other shortcomings that you may have had in other areas. Weaknesses such as an inability to communicate in anything other than high-level geekspeak, limited attention to personal hygiene and a lack of interest in the business model of the company were all forgiven if you could only solve technical problems. Those days have vanished, companies are now able to be selective in the IT people they retain and hire, so technical knowledge is no longer the key to employment that it once was. With the move to outsourcing to countries such as India and China, companies can get technical expertise that they have difficulty communicating with for a fraction of the cost. Therefore, to remain employed in what is still the most dynamic and exciting field there is, you must adopt a holistic approach to your career in IT.

As the title implies, the purpose of this book is to provide you with the tools to build a complete career in IT. In part I, the principles of career building are presented, defined and placed in context. The single most important point in the book is stated early and often, "A job is not a career." By this, the author means that any particular job is but one component of a serial movement through your employment history. For, even if you stay in the "same" job for years, in IT your tasks and responsibilities change so much over the years that it is as if you have changed jobs several times. Your task in the last chapter of the first section is to define yourself, why are you in IT and what your aptitudes and desires are.

The second section is devoted to filling your toolkit. It is significant and appropriate that only one chapter of the six in this section deals with technical skills. And then, only to explain how you should present yours. Many people in IT are justifiably proud of some of their technical accomplishments. However, that is all in the past, and it may have been on a system that is no longer used. When describing your successes, the emphasis should always be on the transferability of your skills rather than their narrow range. The second
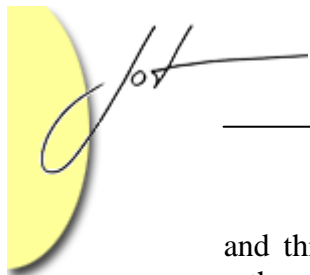
and third major points raised in the book appear here. They are, "Focus on solutions rather than technology" and "Communication skills are transcendent."

In the third section, effective ways to apply your toolkit are described. How to make contacts, how to conduct yourself during warm and cold contacts, and how to interview and negotiate terms are all covered. Even the smoothest of interviews can be turned into the awkwardness equivalent of wearing fur to an animal rights meeting when you move on to salary issues. This is the one area of the interview that you must prepare for, if you do not, it will be obvious and your ability to plan and organize will be questioned. I consider the advice here to be sound, know what you want in terms of salary, but don't be rigid. Make sure you consider all fringe benefits, including the ability to learn new skills and the possibility of future advancement and bonuses. This is another area where knowledge about the company and the industry can be very helpful. If the company is poised to possibly experience significant growth, then you can accept some personal risks regarding a lower starting salary.

Section IV describes options other than the traditional IT job. Working at home and consulting are the topics of the first two chapters of the section, and their presence and the contents are thoroughly predictable. However, the third option, moving into management, is not something many IT workers would consider. Which is unfortunate, because they should. There will always be a dire need for managers who posses the all-too-rare combination of technical expertise and business acumen needed to survive in the current IT world.

The final section is called "The Value-Added Technologist" and deals with how you continue to add value to yourself as an employee as well as to the company you work for. The most successful labor relations occur when there is a reciprocal value-added relationship between the employee and the employer. By making yourself indispensable and thinking about what you can do for the company, you can fulfill your side of that critical equation.

One of the most significant features of this book is what is missing, no mention of certifications. As many employers have discovered, they are not all that they have been advertised to be. Employers have found that the skills that really matter are the ability to solve technical issues, adapt to new technologies, communicate effectively with everyone from customers to the highest levels of management, and work smoothly within a reciprocal value-added relationship between the employee and the employer. This book teaches you those skills, it is far more valuable than any technical book. These are skills that will get you a job, allow you to keep the one you have, or show you how to move from the one you have to the one you want.