

## Solving IT Skills Shortage & IT Staff Retention Challenges

### Real or Perceived, an IT Skills Shortage Requires a Solution

Perhaps there is, indeed, a global and local skills shortage. Perhaps there are factors at play contributing to the perception of a skills shortage that is greater than it actually is. Either way, companies need highly skilled IT professionals and often for very specific purposes. If you are experiencing difficulties finding the skilled staff you need, something needs to be done.

From our experience, we'll confidently suggest that at least some of the people you need are already in your business ... right there in your IT department. It's time to change the way you look at your current staff and rethink your hiring practices in order to find the required skillsets *and* contribute to staff retention.

### Tactical Advice Part 1: Cherry Pick from your BAU Team

Every IT department is divided into two parts: essentially the Business As Usual (BAU) Team – sometimes called the break/fix, Run or Operations team – made up of people with very specific technical skills who keep the business running, day-to-day; and the Projects Team, brimming with fresh ideas, adapting the old and adopting the new, aligning their efforts with business strategies and objectives.

New, emerging and disruptive technologies are putting the focus on the Projects Team. The pressure is on organisations to find additional resources to help this team leverage technology to add business value. The temptation is to look outside for fresh talent. Few think to look to the BAU Team for these resources since, hey, they already have a job. In fact, they are keeping the business running, aren't they? And their skills are to fix things not to create new things. Right?

Not to mention their significant contribution to keeping a company's customers happy by keeping their systems, applications, services, website and information sharing capabilities etc. running smoothly. If your company is at all focused on the concept of the Net Promoter Score (NPS) then you know that reliability and quality of service delivery are key drivers, and areas of focus for the BAU Team. We understand that management teams

wish to create and foster a system of developing and encouraging customer loyalty, and may therefore be reluctant to disrupt a well-functioning and stable BAU team by moving people to the Projects Team, for fear of rocking the NPS boat. We get that, but we urge these management teams to reconsider.

## **Is there an IT Skills Shortage in Australia?**

We keep hearing and reading about an IT Skills Shortage. Many say it is a global issue. In fact, a recent study from Harvey Nash / KPMG tells us that “the majority (65%) of CIOs worldwide feel hindered by the greatest technology skills shortage since the global financial crisis nearly a decade ago” (via Technology Decisions).

Closer to home, at the end of 2015 the local SAP MD issued a call for Australia to address its critical IT skills shortage (via ARN and iStart). The head of a tech start up wrote, for the AFR, “There simply isn't enough tech talent to satisfy the demands of both corporate Australia and the growing technology start-up ecosystem.” Recruitment companies are happy to confirm the IT skills shortage faced by Australian companies (via The Australian).

For an official word on the IT Skills Shortage, we checked out the Australian government’s 2016 IT labour market report. Interestingly, the stats tell us that despite a pick-up in demand for IT pros over the last year, two-thirds (67%) were able to fill their vacancies. Positions that proved difficult to fill included roles for senior ICT security specialists, senior web and front-end developers and senior analyst and developer programmers. Study participants indicated oversupply of some industry specialties alongside shortages in other areas. Many said that large projects offering healthy salaries could “quickly ‘soak up’ available candidates, leading to a rapid decline in the available supply”.

One comment that we found quite significant is that employers are highly specific in their requirements and so vacancies often remain unfilled despite attracting applicants who possess most of the relevant skills.

The basic job of the BAU Team has not changed in decades. They maintain and fix things. While they’re doing so they acquire specific knowledge of the business – what will work, what won’t, when the peaks are, where the risks are etc. etc. etc. To be clear, BAU Team members possess another valuable asset besides their technical skills: business knowledge, specific to your organisation, gained while helping to ensure your business keeps ticking along, day to day. They know what the business needs to operate. They understand the particular quirks, demands and needs of the business and each day they deliver the right IT to meet business operations. It is the very knowledge and experience organisations strive to retain ... and it is what companies lose when a BAU Team member leaves.

If you’re keeping your tech people in roles because they are considered critical to the business (like day-to-day IT operations) but at the same time assigning IT professionals to

work that prevents them from blossoming into new and emerging technologies, you could be holding them (and arguably the organisation) back. You may just have skilled technicians withering away or stagnating in roles they've outgrown, creating easy targets for recruiters looking to poach for a competitor's development shop!

Familiar faces, as opposed to a fully greenfield Projects Team, will help to instill confidence in the moves the business makes, reduce time to market because they already know your business, and help to avoid glitches. In the process you will forge new competencies and enhance company knowledge. Ultimately you are creating a career path for your IT professionals, valuing and nurturing these employees and contributing to improved IT employee retention.

Of course, we recognise that not all existing skills are transferable, and that you'll probably need to invest in training. In today's environment your BAU teams need to become more agile, anyway, incorporating automation, orchestration and scripting into their skill sets. The changes are rapid, creating two-speed IT in its wake, as hard tin gives way to infrastructure as code. Training is something you'll need to do regardless.

## **Tactical Advice Part 2: Backfill BAU with the right skills.**

With rapid technology changes and greater demand for IT staff, we say it's time to treat your IT team as you do your on-premises infrastructure. Just as you assess what you need to keep on premises and what you move to the cloud, you need to figure out what roles you must maintain in-house and what roles you can out/insource. For some roles – especially when you're facing a skills shortage – it may be time to move to an as-a-Service model.

Envisian has been moving in this direction for some years now. We've been building a network of skilled technicians, architects, engineers and data experts, providing them with the latest, in-depth training to deliver operational excellence into your environment. These skilled experts are available on temporary contracts to fill long or short term assignments, helping organisations respond rapidly to change, save money and stay ahead of IT skill shortages. We call this service Envisian's [Expertise on Demand](#). It delivers at several levels.

1. We can backfill the technical jobs in your BAU Team as you move staff with technical skills and key business knowledge over to the Projects Team.
2. We can offer guidance to the Projects Team as they make decisions about which technologies for which people and which systems best meet business objectives.
3. We can provide independent, cost-effective, specialist knowledge of vendor technologies best practice, as you implement and configure latest versions/upgrades and integrate them across your IT environment.

## Our Advice in Action

Envisian is currently working with a large Health Insurer and a major University to backfill/boost BAU Teams and guide Projects Teams, providing professionals with top skills at all levels to quickly meet specific demands and enable these organisations to be agile and progress their technology transformations.

For example, in a BAU Team of six, we moved the top two guys into Projects and backfilled with skilled contractors. Our client moved the next two guys on their BAU Team to the top two positions, with our contractors coming in at the 'bottom' so to speak. Thus the whole team moved up a notch, opening up new possibilities for its members. In the meantime the Projects Team got a great injection of company knowledge.

Recently, we augmented our client's BAU team with one of our VMware experts. His assignment was to implement and configure the vSphere environment upgrade to the vendor's Best Practice, but the value of his work went further. The injection of expert knowledge enabled team members to expand skills and do their jobs better, and helped the company integrate the virtual environment with new storage arrays, including migration.

Both organisations are now ready for the next round of projects with an upskilled BAU team.

The flow on effect is interesting. We're finding that our presence also benefits the people in these organisations – providing opportunities to extend their skills and open new career paths.

## Retraining & Retaining

According to a report from the ACS – the professional association for Australia's ICT sector – there is a "major shift" underway in Australia's economy, thanks to digital disruption.

Excerpt:

"While employers are demanding a range of ICT-specific skills, there is also increasing demand for ICT workers with more general skills. This reflects the increasing integration of ICT in core business functions, and the importance for ICT workers to consider the broader business implications associated with technological use and change."

"While ICT degree graduates have recently picked up, they represent only 1% of the existing ICT workforce each year. This suggests that our greatest resource for developing the digital skills demanded by Australian businesses now and in the future is the current workforce. Developing the digital skills of both existing ICT workers and the broader Australian

workforce will be an important factor in ensuring that there is an adequate supply of ICT skills to support the growing digital economy.”

[Australia's Digital Pulse 2016](#) via [Delimiter](#)

It's not just about finding the staff you need and ensuring you retrain your staff to keep their skills current to manage disruptive technologies, it's also about keeping your employees once you've hired them and invested in them! Around 8 in 10 Australian CIOs are concerned about losing their top IT employees and best performers to competing organisations (via [iTWire](#)). The Sydney Morning Herald, [in discussion with recruitment firms](#), identified that there is “a new breed of IT worker born out of Australia's IT skills shortage and the rapid pace of technological change” that is “highly mobile, highly sought after, and tend[s] to ‘upskill’ off their own bat.” The SMH says that, when it comes to Australia's top tech talent, “the ball is most definitely in their court.”

### Final Recommendation

Avoid an IT skills shortage by promoting from within and leveraging external expertise as-a-Service (such as Expertise on Demand from Envisian) to design, implement and support technology transformation while providing options for career progression to your best and brightest technology stars. Put the skills you need in place, set up the organisation for future growth without losing company knowledge, while improving conditions for your IT staff and contributing positively to employee retention. Win – win – win.