Ten traits managers look for in a new hire

by Mike Sisco, ITBMC

Let's face it; life is not always fair and people are not necessarily treated equally no matter what you might hear. An IT manager or CIO has significant responsibility in a company and an obligation to build a team that can produce.

If you are applying for a new position, give yourself an advantage by putting yourself in the hiring manager's shoes for a moment and considering what he or she wants in a new employee. You may not be strong in all of these attributes but being aware of them can be a great benefit as you approach the interview.

Before we get into the ten traits, let's establish one key assumption. You have the technical skills and experience to perform the role effectively. This is always the first screening criteria when hiring a new position. In today's market, every new technical position tends to produce 20 or more technically competent candidates so let's focus on the areas that can make a difference in the interview.

I've often coached young managers that every new hiring situation presents a rare opportunity to build the right team. Unlike sports teams where you can simply buy what you want and "fire at will", business operations have human resource and fairness issues that they must deal with. You need to be as precise as you can when making a new hire.

This doesn't mean a manager has to hire anyone to meet HR obligations. In fact, you should always look for the strongest person for the role. I'm proud to say that some of my best hires have been minorities and women and I have always had high-performing teams. I believe strongly that you need to look at the individual and his/her capabilities and potential fit for the specific team you are building. That means evaluating both the technical and non-technical skills of every candidate.

As far as I'm concerned, you can throw out education level. Certain degrees may be issues for a particular job that you have to consider, especially in an educational environment; but for the most part it is not all that important. Other factors offer considerably more value to a hiring manager.

Before you discount me for saying these things, let me explain. I view education as an important asset for anyone. However, when I'm looking to hire a strong IT manager or programmer, education isn't nearly as important to me as his/her track record of success. I'll take experience and a successful track record over education every time. On the other hand, if you are hiring for an academic institution, a degree or even an advanced degree may be a prerequisite for the job; it all depends upon the context of the position and the organization.

When I coach managers on how to hire effectively and build a strong organization, I suggest they need to be "selfish". What I mean by this is that you want a team that can do great things and accomplish a lot for your company. You also want a team that can operate somewhat independently and can "take care of business" without having to be led every step of the way or cajoled to do their job.

The following ten traits listed in the following section are things to think about when preparing for your interview. Give each one a little thought and you can develop examples that highlight several of these attributes in your interview.

Key traits managers want in employees

1. **Self starters** - Give me 10 thoroughbreds over 15 average runners every time. Managers want employees who take initiative and want to do a good job. Being proactive is an excellent trait as long as it is consistent with the mission. I'll pay more for each individual in the team of 10 but less overall for the team of 15 and will accomplish more.

2. **Adaptable** - Our IT world is constantly changing and those who are adaptable tend to achieve more. Managers need employees who can adapt to change and can maintain high levels of productivity even in uncertain times.

3. **Understand client service** - People who understand the importance of client service know that clients, or users, are the reason we have an IT career. They also know how to take precautions when working on issues that can cause system downtime and loss of productivity for their "clients".

4. **Team players** - Managers need staff members who can work well in teams and who the team can rely on. Too many excellent technicians lose their value to an organization when they can't work effectively in a team environment. Examples of working successfully with mixed teams of IT staff and users can be a positive indicator of teamwork and a tangible asset.

5. **Committed to success -** Managers want people who know when they need to stay after hours to take care of a situation and who do what it takes to succeed individually and for the team. True performers come through under pressure and when it counts.

6. **High sense of urgency** - It's hard to teach someone to have a high sense of urgency if they don't already have it. Having a strong sense of urgency places an emphasis on getting important issues resolved, and IT managers need people who know when it needs to be "all hands on deck".

7. **Technically adept -** Obviously we need technically competent people. Competence doesn't necessarily mean the employee has to have all the

answers. People who are capable of finding the right answers to solve new problems are very valuable resources to the team.

8. **Solid communication skills -** Having the ability to communicate effectively with others is no longer a desirable trait; it's necessary in most IT positions. A "super programmer" is limited if he can't communicate well with a business user or analyst to develop a new enhancement or fix a problem. Strong verbal and written communication skills can set you apart from many of your peers.

9. **Strong follow-up skills** - This trait means a lot. Nothing is more frustrating for a manager than to have an employee drop the ball by not following up on a commitment or issue. It can probably do more harm to the credibility of the IT organization than anything else. Strong follow-up skills show commitment and an understanding of client service.

10. **Low maintenance -** Managers want people who require low maintenance and can work somewhat independently as needed. An employee who can take minimal direction and run with an issue while taking appropriate steps to validate he or she is on the right track is a valuable asset to an organization.

When interviewing for your next position, take a moment to ponder these skills and find examples to bring your strengths out in the interview. Regardless of what you might think, managers hire people they can relate to and who they think will make a positive contribution to the team. It's not always about the technical skills you list on your resume. In fact these "soft skills" can make the difference between you getting the job versus someone else.

One last tip: Interviewing is stressful work for most of us. Try to relax and enjoy the interview and learn about the company you are visiting. Hiring managers like to see people genuinely interested in becoming a part of something rather than simply gaining employment. They also tend to hire people they like and believe will fit into the organization, so be yourself and smile. It can pay off.

Mike Sisco is the CEO of MDE Enterprises, Inc. an IT management training and consulting company and has been an IT Manager and CIO for more than twenty years. For more of Mike's practical management insight, take a look at his ***IT Manager Development Series*** *at* www.mde.net/cio*.*