Staffing the Information Superhighway

Staffing a networked workplace is less about finding technical wizards who can balance a budget as it is about a search for qualified professionals who can adapt to these new tools.

BY MAX MESSMER

There's been a lot of talk about the information superhighway, the fabled gateway to globalized network communications. In fact, employees from many firms already travel the highway on a regular basis from a home computer or from the office. With the advent of networked information systems and on-line services, millions of professionals worldwide have access to timely, detailed information at the touch of a keyboard.

But as companies begin investing in these advanced communications tools, questions about staffing arise. Will future accountants also need to be skilled computer programmers? Are financial analysts going to moonlight as systems analysts? Not likely.

While computer literacy will certainly be key to managing in a networked workplace, the skills, background and experience that make professionals successful in their chosen industries will not change. The tools they use will improve or be replaced by new technologies not yet developed, but there is no replacement for talent and experience.

The pool of candidates with a combination of business and computer skills is expanding exponentially. Young college graduates entering the workforce today are products of the PC revolution and either own or have access to a computer for work and play. Likewise, seasoned professionals in corporate or private industry have taken part in—either willingly or kicking and screaming—the steady technological evolution of the workplace. From central processing units to laptops, the past 30 years alone have seen companies incorporate ever-faster, more efficient business tools.

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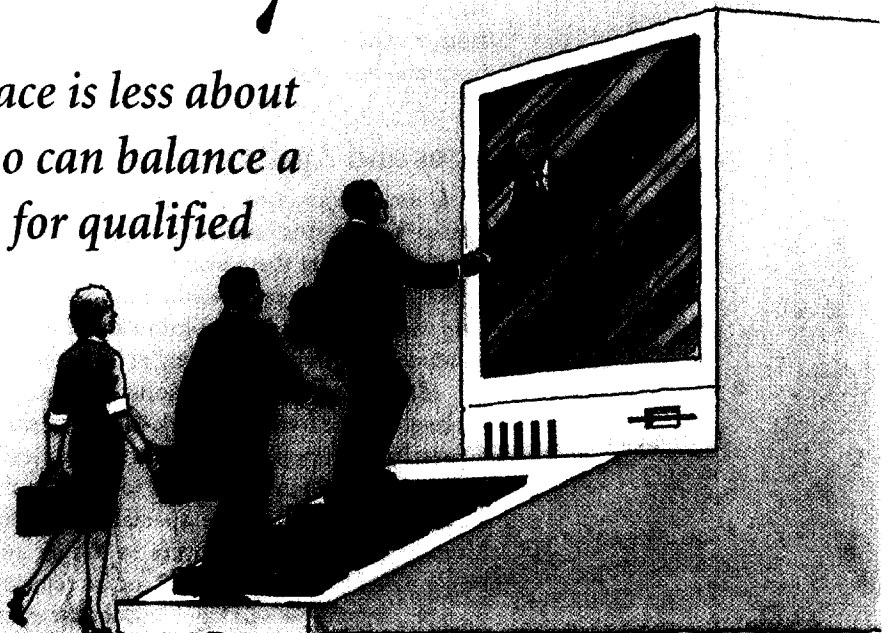
If you're looking for candidates who have experience with networks and information systems, you should create job descriptions that require this type of background. This will narrow the search considerably and aid in your recruitment. Once you have a pool of candidates with the appropriate backgrounds, you can test their knowledge of the software package your firm uses by asking specific questions about the program during the job interview. You can also design a hands-on test to determine an applicant's level of proficiency.

Another method for finding qualified candidates is to contact a recruiting firm that specializes in placing the type of applicants you're looking for. These companies should be able to put you in touch with accountants, attorneys, human resources professionals and others who have experience using a network. Advanced information systems have entered the mainstream, so candidates are likely to be culled from a wide range of large and small corporations and businesses.

Egos and Aptitudes

With the introduction of high-technology in the workplace, it is important for managers to reassure staff that these new tools are designed to make their jobs easier—not eliminate them. One way to do this is by committing time and resources to providing training at all levels.

Managers have two options: contracting with an outside trainer to work with their staff, or employing one or more information technology professionals in-house to oversee the transition. The in-house specialists can be hired as temporary employees to design and implement the desired project, or be retained on a permanent basis to troubleshoot the operation and provide technical support.

At Arthur Andersen, a Big Six accounting firm in the process of linking its more than 70,000 employees via network technology, training on the new system is being conducted using a combination of in-house experts and professional instructors. When the firm implemented Lotus Notes, a popular groupware package, representatives from Lotus conducted a two-week course at Arthur Andersen's Chicago headquarters to train systems administrators from the accounting firm's local offices. The administrators then trained the staff in their respective offices.

According to Paul Hicks, director of information services for Arthur Andersen's San Francisco office, the firm's training program is designed for everyone in the company. "We haven't customized it for different levels," he explains. "For our managers and partners it is self-elected. They participate because they want to use the new technology. There is a demand by managers to have access to information."

Hicks, however, said that some employees are still hesitant to make the transition to advanced communications systems. "Some of our people have been in the business for a number of years and have been doing things a certain way all this time. They have a hard time seeing the benefits of the new system. They're used to dictating information, not typing it themselves.

"The exceptions are the senior-level employees who travel a lot," he says. "They want Lotus Notes because they can dial into the system at any time using their laptop computers."

Coopers & Lybrand, another Big Six accounting firm, is also in the process of setting up a network that will link its more than 13,000 employees and enable them to share and update information in "real time." Training on their new system, which also incorporates Lotus Notes, is being handled by the firm's MIS department.

The invention of the modem turned the concept of telecommuting into a reality, enabling individuals with a personal computer to complete their work at home and send it back to the office via a telephone line. Similarly, communications networks have made it possible for companies to form work groups made up of specialists at many different locations. A typical marketing work group might include a project manager in Seattle, production specialists in Los Angeles, salespeople throughout several geographic regions and a research team in New York. Each member of the work group provides input on the project via the network, and all of the members have access to the information stored in network files.

The key to successfully managing any network depends on the willingness of its members to work as a team, despite having little in-person contact. In addition to adequate training and technical resources, staff members should be shown the advantages that the network provides both to themselves and to the organization.

Elf Technology, a Washington-based systems developer, uses work-group technology to create customized communications networks for law firms and their clients. The network facilitates faster turnaround time on projects and

provides an outlet for employees at all levels to exchange and retrieve information. The use of the software has allowed management to be more accountable and lets clients know exactly how billable hours are spent.

Bullivant, Houser, Bailey, Pendergrass and Hoffman, a Seattle-based law firm, can provide clients with up-to-the-minute information via the Elf network. "This innovative technology has given us a competitive edge because we are able to manage our people and processes with our clients' objectives in mind," says Donald Murray, a senior partner.

Using work-group technology, the law firm and its clients collaborate on all aspects of cases in process. The network acts as a forum for receiving updates on pending litigation, budget information, case summaries, even planning and strategy notes made by everyone involved in the case—attorneys, clients, secretaries, paralegals and associates.

Advanced communication systems add a new dynamic to management, and prompt the question, "How do you manage a work group whose members are located outside of a centralized office?" Here are some suggestions:

● **Choose carefully**. If you're hiring an employee who will become a member of an off-site work group, try to find out if the candidate works well with minimal supervision. Check references by speaking with former employers and coworkers to get a picture of whether or not the individual is a team player.

● **Trust your instincts**. You don't need to see team members in action to know if they're productive. Look at the quality of work you're receiving and listen to fellow group members for clues to the performance of the employees in question.

● **Maintain a strong presence**. This can be achieved by following up with employees via the network or in person. Ask for regular updates and make yourself available for questions and input. Some network systems provide computerized updates.

● **Establish trust**. Display confidence in your employees' abilities and let them know you value their expertise.

● **Provide feedback**. Let employees know when they're doing a good job.

Advancements in communications technology also affect the way managers supervise employees who are on-site. As companies become fully networked, finance, accounting, marketing, operations, customer service and sales departments all will be linked. Information will be exchanged within and between departments, effectively ending the cumbersome paper trail common in large corporations.

At Arthur Andersen, the implementation of advanced communication technology initially added to the paper trail for some employees. According to Hicks, the firm's e-mail messaging system was originally accessed by administrative assistants, who presented their senior-level supervisors with a printed version of the message. Today, however, the accounting firm is making full use of the network. "More and more people are sending and receiving their own information," he points out.

Hicks added that his firm has created its own Arthur Andersen Internet for research and communications between its worldwide offices. It has also produced its own reference information on CD-ROM for its employees.

One of the most significant adjustments managers will face in the transition to a networked workplace is the issue of information access. Much of the gatekeeping practices that have long been a part of corporate culture will be replaced by open lines of communication accessible to workers at all levels. Companies may have difficulty making the leap from a controlled environment to one allowing a freer exchange of ideas and information. As technology develops, however, these firms will have to make the transition or risk losing their competitive advantage.

It's clear the Information Age is upon us, and changes are in store for businesses. But this transitional period is not unlike other periods in our history when new technologies were introduced to make us more effective in our jobs. It is important to remember that in this century, the telephone was a new invention. Today, we can't function without it.

The implications for staffing in a networked office are no different than during previous periods of workplace transition. (Remember when personal computers were new?) Companies will need to teach employees to use the systems, and employees should be open to learning. The best case scenario would be for companies to involve employees in the transition from the development stages so that they understand why changes are being made and are reassured that there will be a place for them on the Information Superhighway.

Together, companies and the professionals they employ will then be able to merge onto the Highway at record pace. **MR**

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