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Teaching Project Management Skills



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By Lindsay Edmonds Wickman
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Information technology is no longer just about creating a product; it's also about managing the process of development.

"The IT industry initially was operating more like a fly-by-night kind of operation," said Hans Jonasson, senior instructor with ESI International. "There were a lot of studies in the '80s and '90s. One organization, The Standish Group, [looked] at the status of the software industry, and they found that less than one-third of all projects [were] successful. That was the wake-up call, and some people said, 'Maybe it's not enough to just sit down and program something. We have to make sure that we understand what a customer wants, what are the time frames, what are the business goals, and we have to organize [that] process.'"

As a result, project management is a growing trend, and more organizations are expecting their IT professionals to have some experience in this area. Jonasson used the analogy of a vacation: You don't just go on vacation. You have to plan and prepare.

"You don't just go down to the airport, buy the tickets and then see what happens," he explained. "You do some research, you decide where you want to go, you plan, you get hotel rooms [and] you get your tickets. That's really what project management is."

To teach the skills necessary for project management, trainers should use case studies or simulations in conjunction with lectures and discussions.

"It's critical because a lot of people learn by doing, and they learn [from] their mistakes," Jonasson said. "[For example, if] I did this in my simulation or my application and people quit on me, why did that happen? To be able to analyze the impact of project management decisions, you [can't] just do lecturing. You have to practice, you have to discuss [and] you have to analyze why you [made] these decisions and what other options did you have?"

Teaching project management, though, is different from teaching technical skills.

"When you do traditional technical training, there normally is a right answer and a wrong answer, so it's relatively black-and-white," Jonasson said. "In project management training, that is not the case. When you have a discussion, you get a question, [and] the answer is, 'It depends.' So it's much more scenario-based."

For this reason, trainers who are teaching IT professionals about project management should do an icebreaker before class begins to get everyone loosened up.

"IT people initially are a little bit hesitant in opening up, being open-minded, getting into the gray areas. So it's important in the beginning of the class to do some team-building, icebreaker kinds of activities to get everyone comfortable," Jonasson said. "If you just go in and do your lecture, you will lose them."

As with any training, it's important to provide support after the session ends, too.

"One of the things we do in ESI courses is have an action plan that students develop during the class where we look at what we have talked about in the class, what lessons have you learned and now how do you bring that

back into your work environment?" Jonasson said. "Ideally, the students will meet back at work with their supervisors and say, 'Here are some of the things we picked up in class; now how do we use that in our environment?' Ongoing support within the organization when they get back from the classroom is critical."

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