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The Softer Side of Training

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 Back By **Lindsay Edmonds Wickman** — **November 2008**

As IT departments grow more and more aligned with the business, it's critical for IT employees and leaders to be able to communicate with their peers across departments. Technical trainers must effectively teach the skills necessary to be successful in this type of environment.

"Almost all projects that support business these days are supported by an IT component, and as such, IT needs to mesh with business needs [and] objectives," said Julie Zinn, executive director of project management and business skills programs at [ESI International](#). "With that as an underlying premise, it's important that IT professionals, especially leaders, can speak the language of the business and interact in a business environment. You have IT at the executive table in business meetings all day long as projects are being planned, implemented and rolled out."

With IT at the executive table, IT leaders need to be attuned to what is happening in the business. Too often, Zinn said, these employees become engrossed in the day-to-day operations of their jobs and don't take notice of what's happening around them.

"Think of the individuals [who stare] at their laptops in the proverbial cubicles; they don't lift their head up to look at what's going on within the organization [or] think about how [their] work is contributing to the larger goal," she said.

Zinn said technology professionals need to learn about critical thinking, decision making and communication skills. Luckily, organizations have been providing this type of training more and more in the past two to three years.

"We have these really extraordinary technical people, but if those people can't share what they know, if they're not communicating what they know [or] if they can't talk to customers, the value of that technical knowledge is greatly diminished," Zinn said.

"I think for so long, [people assumed] that as someone moved up [in] their career, [they'd] become better communicators, strategic thinkers and creative thinkers. Some people improve their skills because they've been around the block, but I don't think that's always the case. Organizations, if they're not currently, should be focusing on [soft skills] development."

Because IT professionals tend to be more analytical, it's important to teach them soft skills in the same way you would teach technical skills.

"They need tangible approaches, processes [and] frameworks to learn how to communicate better, how to think differently [and] how to have a business-savvy mindset," Zinn said. "If you give them tangible ways to learn these skills, they're more likely to stick."

She also recommends using face-to-face instruction when teaching soft skills.

"IT professionals, like anybody, [are] strapped for time. But due to the nature of soft skills, I think it's very helpful to have face-to-face components where they're actually interacting with other people, and you can

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facilitate that online," Zinn said.

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