

Americans outwork their peers in other industrialized nations, UN study finds

U.S. workers put in more hours in 2006 than their peers in other countries, thus increasing their productivity and stretching their advantage over other industrialized economies, according to the United Nations' International Labor Organization. "The productivity gap between the U.S. and most other

PRODUCTIVITY

developed economies continued to widen," the Geneva-based ILO said in a recent report. "Increase in productivity is mainly the result of firms better combining capital, labour and tech-

nology." The U.S. economy produced US\$63,885 of value per employee, 1.4 % more than 2005. The United States was followed by Ireland, with productivity up 1.5 % to US\$55,986, and Luxembourg with productivity showing a slight gain of 0.1% to reach US\$55,641. *Bloomberg News*

Blending IT skills with business brains

WORKPLACE EVOLUTION

BY DEREK SANKEY

CALGARY • Any information technology worker can tell you it's difficult to keep up with the break-neck speed of change in their field, but now those specialists have another task to add to their to-do list: Develop better business skills.

A growing disconnect between the worlds of information technology and business is resulting in high failure rates for IT projects, causing researchers and corporate trainers to urge both sides to learn each other's lingo for the benefit of the bottom line and their own careers.

"The skill set as just a technical person is no longer good enough," says Richard Lannon, an IT industry veteran and a corporate trainer who specializes in aligning business enterprise and information technology skills.

He launched Calgary-based BraveWorld Inc. in part because of what he perceived as the inability of business executives and IT professionals to align themselves with common business objectives. Some clients are creating two separate streams of IT workers: those with purely technical skills and those with the "business-technical" skills to move up the corporate ranks. Some firms have created business offices dedicated to IT professionals furthering their understanding of the business side of technology, he says.

"They've literally taken these people out of their IT department and put them into a business analysis office ... with the idea that



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Richard Lannon founded BraveWorld Inc. to help the IT and business worlds get more in sync.

interfacing with the business client and really understanding their needs will translate into business solutions," Mr. Lannon says.

There is evidence to back up his claims. A team of researchers at the University of Western Ontario's Richard Ivey School of Business recently conducted in-depth interviews with IT professionals exploring how the workers keep up-to-date and cope with increasing expectations.

"One of the reasons for the kinds of failures in IT projects we've experienced is they propose things the business doesn't necessarily need; they try and implement it in a way that doesn't reflect how the business works," says Nicole Haggerty, a researcher in the management information systems group at UWO. "The sense is that if they increase their business skills ... they'll be better

at conducting IT deployments and therefore the business will benefit."

But it's a two-way street. Most business executives know little about how the IT industry works beyond the basics.

"Equally, business has an obligation to have some level of IT competency beyond [using] Excel or Word," she says.

Her research also found a surprising disregard among business and IT schools for each other's domain. Only about half of business schools, for example, have required courses giving students an in-depth understanding of the relationships between business and information systems. "If they do teach technology, they teach people how to use it, not how to appreciate it strategically as a strategic lever in organizations," Ms. Haggerty says.

Mr. Lannon says this growing disconnect comes from technological advancements, coupled with a reluctance by some companies to acknowledge the reality of how much their IT strategy impacts the bottom line. "Organizations now look at IT as either a strategic partner or as a support services group," he says.

IT professionals who invest time and energy in developing better business skills are usually the ones who climb into senior roles, whether out of frustration with trying to keep up at the purely technical level or a desire to blend IT and business effectively.

Ms. Haggerty recognizes that every occupation requires regular skills upgrading, but says the need is intensified for IT workers, since the changes aren't cumulative like most fields.

CanWest News Service

Document misdeeds

LEVITT

Continued from WK1

He later denied the behaviour at trial. While the court noted any employee would know accessing pornography on their employer's computer is forbidden, it said for an employee of seven years this is not cause for discharge.

Two years later, several discretions added up to the company dismissing Plotogea, including his disappearance at a Chicago trade show after being warned his attendance was mandatory and when confronted about it, claiming he had attended the company's booth; a pattern of lateness and again improperly used the company computer during working hours, this time to design plans for a home he was constructing. Despite being warned, a few months later when the company was particularly busy, he spent 60 hours of company time working on those same plans. Heartland was convinced Plotogea had lost interest in his job and was focusing on his own house-building business. The last straw came during the annual plant shutdown, when Plotogea failed to perform his functions, resulting in the plant not being "ready to go" when production resumed. Plotogea's response to his dismissal was: "I have been a jerk and deserve this."

Such self-awareness, however, did not prevent him from suing nor did it prevent Justice Reilly from concluding that with 11 years of service, even this cumulative string of misdeeds was not cause for dismissal. The court said Heartland had alternatives

including a demotion, a change in responsibility, a reduction in pay, a suspension, providing working notice or a specific warning. According to the court, any one of these might have eliminated the problem and been less draconian. Plotogea was awarded nine months' severance.

However, that was reduced to two months as result of Plotogea's failure to seriously seek employment. While claiming to have delivered 127 résumés, even on his own evidence his efforts were perfunctory, he failed to speak with anyone, filled out no applications, replied to no advertisements, sought no job search assistance and submitted an amateur resumé that would attract no interest from prospective employers. In short, it was clear to the court Plotogea's interest was in pursuing his house-building business.

Employers who don't want to get caught in such a case should consider the following:

■ Since the judicial deck is stacked against employers, document all misconduct, do not overlook anything and discipline employees for each infraction;

■ Rather than rush to termination, attempt lesser discipline for all but fraud before dismissing the employee;

■ Scrutinize an employee's job search. You may have more success reducing your damages through this than by asserting cause for dismissal. I have won cases by producing evidence of the availability of work for employees who are suing their employer.

Financial Post

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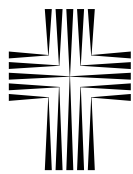
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