ENTERPRISE CAREERS

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Strong writing skills essential for success, even in IT

By Paula Jacobs

No matter how good your technical skills, you probably won't move up the IT career ladder unless your writing measures up.

"One of the most surprising features of the information revolution is that the momentum has turned back to the written word," says Hoyt Hudson, vice president of IS at InterAccess, an Internet service provider in Chicago. "Someone who can come up with precise communication has a real advantage in today's environment."

Whether you are pitching a business case or justifying a budget, the quality of your writing can determine success or failure.

Writing ability is especially important in customer communication. Business proposals, status reports, customer documentation, technical support, or even e-mail replies all depend on clear, written communication.

Alan Cunningham, a manager at Computer Sciences Corp. who is working on a project at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, in Huntsville, Ala., says many failed partnerships between business personnel and their IT counterparts can be directly attributed to lack of communication between the parties.

"Without good communication skills, IT professionals are little good to business people because there is no common platform," Cunningham says. "Just like all IT professionals should have to take some elementary finance and accounting courses to better understand business processes and methods, every IT professional should be able to write cogently and explain technical elements in readable English."

"Knowledge may be power, but communications skills are the primary raw materials of good client relationships," Cunningham adds. Every job description for a new position on his staff includes the following line (which would include other languages if the business were international): "Required: effective organization and mastery of the English language in written and oral forms."

Clear communication can enhance your reputation as an IT professional, says Kevin Jetton, executive vice president of the Association of Information Technology Professionals (AITP) and president of GeniSys Consulting Services, in San Antonio. It is especially important to

communicate in plain English and not technical jargon when you are talking to a non-IT business executive.

"You can have the greatest technical skills in the world, but without solid communication skills, who will know and can understand?" Jetton says.

Even if you have limited customer contact, writing skills are essential. Larry McConnell, deputy registrar for information services at the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles, in Boston, says that unless you can communicate, your career will level off.

Your job efficiency may depend on how well others communicate, as well. Joe Thompson, product support lead at Kesmai, an online games developer in Charlottesville, Va., says his daily work often depends on somebody's writing skills. Whether he's communicating with the test department or with a customer, Thompson sees writing as the key to effective two-way communication.

Even if writing is not your forte, you can improve your skills. Many companies offer onsite writing courses or send their staff to business writing workshops such as those offered by the American Management Association and other training organizations.

Pete McGarahan, executive director of the Help Desk Institute, in San Francisco, says one of the best investments of his career was hiring a trainer to teach business writing for IT professionals.

Check out writing courses at colleges and community education programs, as well.

"College-level courses in English composition and creative writing help broaden skills beyond the technical 'myopia' common to many IT professionals, enabling them to establish rapport and truly communicate with their clients," Cunningham says.

Good writing requires practice. AITP's Jetton suggests becoming involved in community volunteer opportunities or professional societies, where you can work on newsletters or write committee reports.

"Communication skills are an ever-evolving skill set," Jetton says. "You never have enough practice."

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How good writing can help you advance

- Increases customer satisfaction
- Saves time
- Improves communication across the organization
- Enhances your professional image
- Contributes to business success
- Raises your professional status