

Tech Industry Managers:



By Vivek Wadhwa

When I was ready to transition from computer programmer to project manager, my employer, Xerox Corporation, sent me to its huge training center in Leesburg, Virginia. Over two weeks, the people there taught me some of the skills I needed in order to succeed in my new role: managing projects, motivating people, complying with employment regulations, and preparing status reports and presentations. Xerox also encouraged me to complete an MBA, on a part-time basis, at New York University. The company gave me lots of time off and paid for the tuition.

The situation is different today. Tech companies in the Internet era offer their employees some great perks. But do you think that Facebook, Groupon, or Zynga provide their budding professionals with any serious management training? Not at all. Given the way tech companies grow and the HR challenges they face, management training and career development are more important than ever. But few tech companies have the time—they are too busy surviving.

Professors Robert Fulmer and Byron Hanson of Duke University's Corporate Education group researched the management practices of 23 leading high-tech firms. By an overwhelming majority—89 percent—corporate executives believed that leadership development was becoming increasingly important for their companies; 58 percent ranked the training as a high corporate priority. Yet less than one-fourth of the managers interviewed had a clear roadmap for how they could develop themselves, and more than half of them didn't even know who in their organization was responsible for developing leaders. Fulmer and Hanson's conclusion wasn't surprising: many high-tech companies are young, so their systems and procedures for grooming leaders are neither well-developed nor firmly established.

Maybe this is why so many tech companies suffer from morale problems, missed deadlines, customer-support disasters, and high turnover. Maybe this is also one of the reasons why so many tech startups that succeed in selling their vision and raising millions in financing are just flashes in the pan.

One of the interesting findings in Fulmer and Hanson's research was that more than 70 percent of the

tech executives interviewed said that leadership development in technology-driven firms is different from such development in other industries. But the researchers believed, just as I do, that these tech executives were dead wrong. The lessons that leading companies like Procter & Gamble and General Electric have learned about management development and training apply equally, if not more so, to tech companies.

This means that if you're a fresh grad joining a hot new tech startup, you shouldn't expect your managers to train and groom you—nor should you assume that the company will provide you with time off to complete an MBA. You're on your own. If you're working at one of the more established companies, such as IBM or HP—which do have excellent management-development practices—take full advantage of those opportunities. You need to learn all you can.

Many people are born with an innate sense of vision; they readily learn new technologies and master them. Some are very good at communicating and inspiring others. But no one is born with the skills needed to plan projects, adhere to EEOC guidelines, and prepare budgets and manage finances, or to know the intricacies of business and intellectual property law. All of these things must be learned. Some skills can be developed on the job, but that usually happens through trial and error—not the most pleasant or efficient method.

I generally recommend that engineering students who want to become managers and CEOs complete a fifth year of education. One-year-long engineering management programs are available that cover such subjects as marketing, finance, intellectual property, business law, and management—similar to the key courses in an MBA program. These programs also cover tech-oriented subjects like innovation management, operations management, and entrepreneurship. Invest the time in management training. You'll be glad you did. **N**

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