Professional Development for IT Leaders

The aging of the current generation of IT leaders adds urgency to the professional development of future IT leaders from among the next generation

By **Linda A. Cabot**

What exactly *is* professional development? If you "google" the term on the Web, you get definitions such as "the development of skills both tangential and essential to one's current occupation." Digging a little deeper does not yield a common definition, just distinctions among education, training, and credentialing.

Despite the lack of a common or clear definition,[1] never before has professional development seemed so important to those of us who work in IT in higher education as it does today. The "graying" of the profession means that we anticipate large numbers of vacancies to occur in senior IT leadership positions within the next five years. Many of our current staff are not well positioned to fill these roles, however. First, we should ask ourselves why that is the case, and then we must address the issue by providing professional development opportunities to the next generation.

Do we *really* have a problem? I think we do, but my reasoning might differ a little from the usual arguments.

Generational Differences

Although I've been with Georgia Tech in the information technology area for nearly 18 years, my previous life was in career planning and placement. When I take a rare moment to think about the people who entered the job market twenty plus years ago compared to those entering today, I find one significant difference: My fellow Baby Boomers believed the responsibility for deciding what they wanted to be when they grew up was theirs, along with choosing a major and deciding what to do with that major upon graduation. Yes, parents gave advice, but many had not experienced a college education, so the advice often was based on common sense rather than prior experience.

In contrast, the next generation has not had much opportunity to make decisions on their own—parents, teachers, and bosses have guided them by making suggestions, sending them to training, providing opportunities and time to try out new things—almost spoon-feeding them. They are the benefactors of the previous generation's success. When my generation wants to retire or even consider a reduced workweek, we find a gap in the drive, the motivation, the appropriate training of those just behind us. Our protégés in infor-

mation technology have terrific technical skills, but the ability to see the big picture, to appreciate the value of structure, to select from their repertoire of management experiences to make good business decisions—those abilities are frequently missing, and many of us struggle to accommodate or correct this lack in our future leaders.

A *USA Today* article published in 2002 presented another rationale.[2] According to that story, "Generation Xers (born 1960–1980) tend to be skeptical, highly individual workers who value a work/life balance. Most would rather be rewarded with extra time off than to step up the corporate ladder." This attitude contrasts to that of the Baby Boomers, who are highly competitive and willing to sacrifice for success—and who occupy a majority of senior leadership positions right now.

Let me pause to admit that yes, I'm over generalizing, and yes, our field includes many motivated and very smart people. Still, the generational differences exist, and we continue to see more and more leadership development programs designed to address this gap and to help the next generation—and subsequent ones—become better leaders. It is important that those of us who currently sit in leadership positions recognize our responsibility to develop the next group of leaders—and the quicker, the better.

Basic Training

So what approach do we use at Georgia Tech to address the issue of leadership development in IT? In 1998 we surveyed staff to find out if we were meeting their needs with regard to career paths, direction, and opportunities. The results of this and a subsequent survey (in 2001) indicated a lack of knowledge among staff about career development and growth opportunities. The Office of Information Technology (OIT) subsequently worked with the Office of Human Resources (OHR) to define potential career paths in the technology field. With input from the surveys, we created the first phase of a professional development program, targeted to all IT staff, by designing

a Web-based resource that identified career paths using the job titles available in the Georgia university system and specifically at Georgia Tech. We grouped job titles with potential affinities and provided information about job skills that could be leveraged to enter or exit alternative career paths.[3]

The senior IT staff also began to identify skills needed but lacking in our various staff. We observed staff who needed project management skills, budding managers who needed to understand the legal aspects of managing staff, and a general need for a better blend of business and technical skills. Based on the results of this gap analysis, we worked with both the institute and outside trainers to offer training in needed skills to our employees.

The institute had already developed two timely programs, the Supervisory Development Certificate and the Management Development Certificate, that introduced our technical leads and managers to the "soft skills" side of managing.[4] These programs, while not specifically targeted to the IT community, helped fill the gap in how to better manage line staff.

OIT recognized the need to provide basic training in project management for many of our leads and managers in parallel with the soft skills training, so we could use consistent terminology and a structured approach with IT-related projects. Since 2003 we have trained more than 60 staff in basic project management and terminology and put 76 through the various certificate programs.

Building for Succession

While these activities created a base from which to build, we had yet to address the succession planning for senior IT staff beginning to retire. The institute recognized the need to develop the next generation and included the issue in our strategic plan.[5] In 2004 the Office of Organizational Development piloted the first Master Series program, which was created "to identify and develop the leadership skills of selected candidates to build 'bench strength' for senior leaders on the Georgia Tech

campus as well as meet the institute's need to grow, develop, and retain future leaders." The Masters Series program accepts 12 participants for each series. The participants represent a broad range of mid-level managers from the administrative support community as well as information technology. The program is designed to last the academic year (September through June), and the entire group of participants together work on a selected campus-wide project the second half of the program.[6]

At the same time, OIT was designing the OIT Professional Leaders Program.[7] We built upon the positive aspects of the Masters Series program while deciding to focus our program only on information technology in the educational environment. The program covers five major topics: leading change, business acumen in the electronic world, designing and supporting the enterprise architecture, building coalitions and strategic relationships and results-oriented organizations.

The twelve-month program begins with a two-week shadowing assignment in which the participants observe executives in action. This is followed by an extended assignment within OIT, correlating to a predefined project. Two to three days per month are spent on program assignments. Participants also attend conferences to network with peers outside of the Georgia Tech information technology environment and to deliver professional presentations. Each participant has an administrative sponsor who serves as a mentor throughout the program.

The first participant in the professional leaders program was hand-selected. Because we realized each participant will bring a different set of experiences to the table, we knew the IT program would need to be a custom-tailored experience for each individual. By reviewing the participant's resume, interviewing the individual, and holding subsequent discussions among the directors, we identified projects that would fill gaps in the pilot participant's experience. For example, in this initial program a project on Secure Remote Access was identified for the participant. The senior directors

defined, discussed, and supported the project goal. The participant was given the latitude to identify members of the project team as well as a deadline for delivery of concrete recommendations. The recommendations were submitted and are now identified as a suite of immediate initiatives that require specific funding for implementation. The decision to fund will be addressed both in year-end initiatives and prioritized for the FY07 budget cycle.

The projects provided opportunities for the participant to assume a leadership role, address IT issues that would engage cross-functional groups, and offer recommendations and solutions to improve services to the campus. Each project purposefully forced the participant outside of their comfort zone. The participant had to pull together people and resources outside the unit, perform research to address a requirement intelligently and in an informed manner, and submit a specific recommendation or set of recommendations to senior leadership that would include an implementation plan for the recommended service. Thus far, the pilot participant has completed two projects and submitted recommendations for approval.

Obviously, the OIT Professional Leaders Program targets only a small portion of our staff and cannot address the dwindling pipeline for leaders projected in the next five to ten years.[8] The Masters Series also aims to widen the available leadership pool, and OIT is engaged in collaborative partnerships with campus units and OHR to create new career paths that bridge the gap between the traditional IT jobs and skill sets in areas outside of IT.

One such collaboration with the campus library involved designing and implementing the first library commons area, staffed with both library and OIT personnel. When the Library West Commons opened in fall 2003, one outcome was the creation of an Information Associate position and career path. Again, we worked with OHR and the Board of Regents to get approval for this title. In doing so, we identified another potential candidate from among our technology-proficient staff and likewise opened

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the door for less traditional entries into the IT arena.

What Next?

So where do we go from here? The second class of participants was just selected for the Masters Series Program. Based on feedback and results from the initial group, adjustments were made to eliminate less valuable experiences and broaden those seen as more beneficial. Likewise, the OIT pilot will continue into the next calendar year, after which we will reassess and adjust the program. We decided to keep our program small—no more than two participants at one time—given the existing workload and the time it takes to identify projects that address the participants' skill gaps. Because the projects are intended to fill existing gaps, we first must recruit appropriate nominees, then assess existing skills, then identify specific projects that will meet two basic criteria: expose the individual to opportunities that fill the identified gap and meet a real need for service or process improvements on campus.

We intend the OIT program to deliver significant practical experience in a specific field versus the broader exposure offered by the Masters Series. It isn't a requirement that the selected candidates participate in both, but we hope that the exposure the Master Series program provides will create a pool of potential candidates interested in a deeper experience in the IT environment.

Will these programs create a large enough pool of potential leaders to succeed those anxious to explore the next phase of our lives? There is no way to really know yet, but they can't help but strengthen the pipeline. They certainly will help weed out those who think they

have the skills but don't, or those who want to get into management for the wrong reasons. Facing the dot-com bust, the globalization of technology services, and current gas prices—I think there's enough unpleasant reality to entice some of the next generation into the leadership roles of tomorrow. Of course, we Baby Boomers will continue to strive for success—ours and theirs—by creating leadership programs to cultivate the next wave of talent. *e*

Endnotes
1. McCormick Tribune Center, National-Louis University, Spring 2005, <http://cecl.nl.edu> (accessed November 15, 2005).
2. D. Kersten, "Today's Generations Face New Communications Gaps," *USA Today*, November 15, 2002, <http://www.usatoday.com/money/jobcenter/workplace/communication/2002-11-15-communication-gap_x.htm> (accessed November 15, 2005).
3. The OIT Jobs page on the Web includes PD opportunities and information about current jobs and titles: <http://www.oit.gatech.edu/inside_oit/oit_jobs/overview.cfm> (accessed November 2, 2005).
4. For more about the Georgia Tech training programs, see <http://www.orgdev.gatech.edu/training/> (accessed November 2, 2005).
5. Georgia Tech's strategic plan is available on the Web at <http://www.gatech.edu/president/strategic-plan.html> (accessed November 2, 2005).
6. Georgia Tech Masters Series 2005 Program Wrap-Up, Office of Organizational Development, <http://www.mastersseries.gatech.edu/> (accessed November 15, 2005).
7. Information on the Professional Leaders Program is available on the Georgia Tech OIT Employee Resources page, <http://www.oit.gatech.edu/inside_oit/employee_resources> (accessed November 2, 2005).
8. R. N. Katz et al., *Information Technology Leadership in Higher Education: The Condition of the Community* (Boulder, Colo.: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research, Research Study, Vol. 1, 2004), <http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=ERS0401>.

Linda A. Cabot (linda.cabot@oit.gatech.edu) is Director, Information Technology Services, at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta.