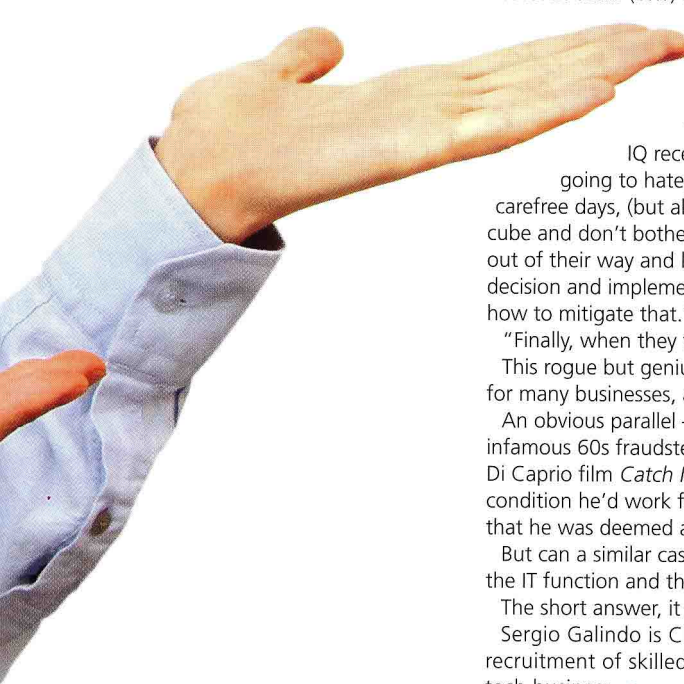


# The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth

**Poor old techies. You've got to feel for them. Unappreciated, under-valued, put upon, nagged at by all and sundry, expected to work miracles (often with the technological equivalent of pink string and sealing wax) – and all for a philistine of a manager who couldn't tell a Romulan from a Klingon. Marvellous.**



**W**orse still, as if all that weren't enough to contend with, technophiles are suddenly under mounting pressure to leave their carefully built comfort zones and learn something called 'soft' and 'people' skills – which according to 'the philistine' are pretty important these days.

Such attributes are indeed increasingly vital, and for well-documented reasons. Recently though, in perhaps something of a backlash, there have been indications in several quarters that the business value of high-level technical skills – and people – is not only holding, but climbing.

In fact a number of commentators have recently noted that one species of techie in particular could be set to conquer the business world. Or at least the IT function. The lesser spotted, scarily talented, often maverick, übergeek.

VP EMEA for password security specialists Passlogix, John Handelaar is one such observer. He comments: "More and more companies are using standard software applications, but innovation is vital to get that competitive edge. Very technical people are required to turn those ideas, be it from within the technical community or business itself, into a reality."

In fact, he says, businesses can't afford not to use such people whether they're mavericks or not. He suggests that they should be given plenty of latitude and encouragement to come up with creative ideas; to be allowed to explore and "do what they like" – albeit it in a controlled environment.

Matt Olney, Research Engineer within security vendor Sourcefire's Vulnerability Research Team (VRT) is another of those that believe that the time of the

maverick supertechie could now be at hand. He even goes as far as to suggest that every IT department should have one "very, very bad person."

"It's hard to overstate the need now for someone who hates rules, restrictions, and limitations", he told

IQ recently. "You need to find someone your HR department is going to hate; someone who reminds you of you in your younger, more carefree days, (but also) someone you trust completely. Then you put them in a cube and don't bother them. Throw them problems, tasks, and direction, but get out of their way and let them do their thing. Let them pick apart every security decision and implementation you have. Ask them how they'd get around it and how to mitigate that."

"Finally, when they tell you something is bad... believe them."

This rogue but genius employee will be an intriguing and familiar conundrum for many businesses, and also a disquieting one.

An obvious parallel – and one pointed out by several commentators – was infamous 60s fraudster, king of social engineering and subject of the Leonardo Di Caprio film *Catch Me If You Can*, Frank Abagnale. Released from jail on the condition he'd work for the FBI (who'd eventually caught him), his skill was such that he was deemed a worthwhile risk.

But can a similar case really be made for placing such a person at the heart of the IT function and therefore the business – and all that might entail?

The short answer, it seems, is yes.

Sergio Galindo is CIO of security vendor GFI and he predicts that the recruitment of skilled mavericks could well become a growing trend in the tech business. ↪

## Tech Pros want to make IT big

Almost half of UK IT professionals, 47%, have high ambitions to become directors or entrepreneurs, according to a recent Microsoft survey. The survey of 200 tech pros, designed to gauge the attitudes of those working in IT in the UK, also found that more than four in five are happy in their jobs – almost double the UK average.

In Q1's quarterly Employee Outlook Survey published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), which covers companies of all sizes in all market sectors, only 42% of respondents said they were satisfied with their job.

Of those working in the in the IT sector, the majority saw it as a long term career choice with more than two thirds predicting that they'd still be in IT in 10 years time.

Asked what excites them most about future industry developments, participants' responses to the Microsoft research ranged from 'the ability to help more people', to 'increasing efficiency in terms of energy and resources', with Virtualisation (32%), Mobile (31%), and Cloud Computing (25%) cited as among the most looked forward to IT projects for 2010.

All are encouraging signs according to Mark Taylor, Director of Developer and Platform Evangelism with Microsoft UK; the findings supporting his belief that the current time is an exciting one to work in the technology sector.

"It is reassuring to see such positivity... Not so long ago there were claims that IT departments would be things of the past (but) the results of our survey show that attitudes in our sector are as upbeat as ever. (It) shows that people working in IT are on the whole extremely positive about their career choice (and) retain huge excitement for technology and the difference it can make."

Tristram Bardrick, Sales Manager at the National Computer Centre concurred, suggesting that the industry as a whole should be committed "to fostering this excitement and positive attitude."

Among the further key themes identified by the study were 'IT saving organisations money' and 'helping to drive the business forward'; with most respondents showing a positive view of their chosen career sector. 63% felt that, through IT, they can help their companies steer through the recession and the vast majority, 81%, believe that technology can change the world for the better.

It wasn't all positive however, with professionals noting among their least favourite aspects of their jobs factors such as Time spent firefighting/troubleshooting (34%) unrealistic user expectations (32%) and "Feeling permanently 'on call'" (24%).

More than half (51%) find their IT jobs more stressful than a year ago while almost as many (46%) saw their job as more challenging and difficult than five years ago.

"In the past, leading security organisations recruited individuals who were behind some of the most notorious malware attacks and fraud cases to help them develop counter-strategies", he comments. "Their argument being that it's better to work with such highly trained and talented individuals than fight them. Their knowledge of the 'dark side' has been instrumental in understanding how 'the bad guys' operate and in taking effective action. And I'd say that a growing number of IT teams will likewise recruit highly skilled 'mavericks' because they provide a unique perspective to security, networking and data protection.

"Talented mavericks often possess skills that are hard to find. They are individuals who think out of the box, who have different perspectives on security and IT, and who can therefore provide IT with development, security, and analysis expertise that often takes years' of experience to build, if ever."

Clive Longbottom, Service Director with tech analyst Quocirca, thinks similarly, noting that there may be little option for companies but to retain the odd rebel as "top-of-the-class skills in any area (sales, marketing, research or IT) are hard to come by, and it is in the best interests of an organisation to ensure that these skills are maintained and retained as far as they possibly can be."

Steve Smith UK MD at Pentura concurs, noting that with high-quality talent in short supply in the IT industry, with their ability think and problem solve in an innovative way, the maverick can be a very valuable asset.

Take hackers, he says, who take great pride in their ability to identify and exploit vulnerabilities. Such desire and skill can be turned to benefit businesses by tapping into their specialist knowledge to enhance security. Indeed these days, rather than looking for the notoriety of simply having cracked a tough system, many hackers are motivated by the objective of sealing the gaps.

Such employees clearly need careful handling however.

Longbottom notes that mavericks tend to be ideas people and so are particularly good at the start of a project as they'll feed in rafts of ideas (though many may be ill thought out), and that they can also make good fire-fighters as they often look at problems from a different viewpoint. They may also have a part to play in certain other circumstances, he says. Where there's a high degree of IT development or cutting edge architectural work going on for example.

But he warns that, in a general IT operations centre for example, such people can be "a pain from the start" – especially without careful management – upsetting their colleagues, who find their withering sarcasm and put downs too much to bear, and being cut out of the team as a result.

"Also, as mavericks are often useless at documenting what they do, (their involvement) often leads to a lot more fire fighting where an ops person has to solve a problem that has been introduced by the maverick without anyone knowing."

Longbottom also warns against "putting anyone in a position where they're made to feel indispensable. Especially mavericks.

But how maverick **is** maverick exactly?

"It's hard to say", says Galindo. "Attitudes vary".

"What you don't want is someone who can't work to specific guidelines, follow the rules. Even if a person is allowed to work under his own steam, they still need to toe the company line. If a 'maverick' is unwilling to adapt or continues in activities that are suspect or borderline legal, then you cannot take the risk."

As such, companies should offer latitude only as far as an individual doesn't compromise their integrity, security and credibility.

Longbottom advocates similar caution.

"In all these areas a person can suddenly become more of a problem than of real value if the maverick side takes over. They tend to get bored easily and will suffer fools badly if they perceive things aren't moving as fast as they think they should be – which is often due to them being completely incapable of seeing that the devil is in the details. They also change their minds a lot – "Hey, virtualisation is great. I think we should do that across the whole of the datacentre", followed two weeks later by "Why the hell are we running IT internally – Cloud is the way forwards. I'm putting everything on Amazon EC2".

Constancy and continuity tend not to be maverick traits.

How to handle such people though? Kid gloves or iron rod?

Galindo believes that while the tech maverick should be treated like any other employee, a deeper understanding of their mindset and attitudes is key to bringing out the best in them.

"Often they are individuals who prefer to work alone on tasks that aren't mundane or repetitive. They need to be nurtured and given direction but without putting them in a stifling environment that isn't conducive to their 'maverick' status. Giving them a controlled and yet free rein in their job is often the best approach, though never at the expense of the company's integrity, security or credibility."

How can their efforts be controlled, steered, and channeled for the benefit of the business? By allowing them to work and flourish, according to Galindo.

"These people need to be nurtured; their skills developed and honed to suit the business's needs. They need to be given room to express themselves and their abilities. With guidelines in place their careers are easier to steer."

When is enough enough though?

"The minute they appear to overstep the line", he says.

"Mavericks will always pose a risk and that's why it is important to establish clear policies and the parameters within which they must operate." ↪

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