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## ICT SKILLS AND TRAINING

IN ASSOCIATION WITH IACT

# BACK TO SCHOOL FOR TECHIES

**As schools and colleges return to the grind of learning, should professionals also be looking at sharpening their skills? And how can they know which ones need to be developed? Jason Walsh investigates**

**N**obody is looking out for you but yourself – harsh words, but true ones.

The speaker would know too. Mary Cleary is deputy chief executive of the **Irish Computer Society** and its subsidiary, the **ICS** Foundation.

Luckily, at this time of year, as with the New Year, a lot of people are assessing where they are in life. Fresh back from holidays, hitting the office can be something of a shock – and a great motivator for seeking to climb the career ladder.

“It’s a very busy time for us,” said Cleary. “Even apart from the school agenda, everyone is thinking about their professional development.”

Doing professional development properly means auditing one’s abilities, and the **Irish Computer Society** is keen to promote a mode of understanding individual competencies that makes choosing which skills to pursue and finesse a much less haphazard process.

“The European E-Competence Framework enables people to give a structure to their career planning. One of the things that people lose track of is a career path, as it’s very common to change,” she said.

IT, in particular, suffers from a

haphazard approach to careers: training opportunities abound, but choosing the right courses and certifications demands attention.

“The idea of developing a career path seems unusual to people, but it [training] is only useful if it leads to a development plan. We’ve developed a CPD platform on our website, and on that people can record their professional development, formal and non-formal.

“People can be assigned points for accredited and unaccredited but validated, training, and build up a picture of their CPD,” she said.

## Qualified minorities

Once a career path has been chosen, IT professionals can seek out the right qualifications that will help them appear head and shoulders above the rest of the pack.

“Industry-recognised certifications are very relevant in the workplace and more so in the IT industry,” said Sally Stone, training specialist at PFH Technology Group.

Graduates, in particular, need to be aware that a university degree, even a first class one, is really only the start of the story.

“University qualifications get people the job and the accredited skills training is what ensures more productive industry-focused employees and progression, and [for individuals] career development and, therefore, better promotion opportunities and wage increases.

“Also accredited skills training ensures you keep abreast of the current technologies and developments in IT which is constantly changing and updating,” she said.

Stone’s colleague, Catherine O’Keeffe, training manager at PFH Technology Group, said that now that the economy is expanding once more, employers are more open to training staff – particularly in light of the Europe-wide IT skills shortage.

“Training ensures a more productive and satisfied workplace. When money is spent on training, it makes for better decision-making in relation to IT systems planning and implementation [and is] therefore more beneficial to the company all round.”

Individuals may need to take the initiative, however, and make the case for training.

“Employees can stress that they





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will be better equipped to implement and manage IT systems if they are formally trained and certified correctly. Again this is for the benefit of the company too. IT systems are the backbone of most companies nowadays therefore need to be managed and used productively by all employees," said O'Keeffe.

Current in-demand areas noted by PFH include the standard certifications for Microsoft, VMware, ITIL, cloud and Cisco – all in steady demand – but the company has also noted a large demand for reporting tools within all applications and technologies for both end users and technical people.

## Staying on top

Shane Broadberry, director of training firm IACT, said that specialist skills learned on formal courses can make the difference when it comes to multiple candidates being evaluated.

"When you walk into an interview armed with the experience



## Martin Delaney the Innovation Value Institute at Maynooth University

and expertise you've learned on an IACT course, it's like wearing a smart suit: it makes a lasting impression and can mean the difference between getting a job and not getting the job, or that pay rise you've been looking for.

"Every hour of training spent with IACT can help enhance a career and lead to promotion – making training no different to investing in a good suit for an interview – [it's] vital for success," he said.

Broadberry also said that individuals need not only to do their jobs

and do them well, but keep on top of trends in business and industry.

"Scanning the technical websites and magazines like *Connected* will give a good idea of the coming trends in technology and where there is a likely demand growing. It's important to read," he said.

"IACT provides a consultancy service where we work with candidates through their areas of experience, interest and expertise and recommend a path of training to reach their goals – over a reasonable timeframe. Everyone in technology needs to be mindful of changes and updates and to try and keep their skills and expertise up to date."

## Institutional cost-benefit

Moving beyond the level of individuals, employers need to consider the level of capability across the board.

Martin Delaney, at the Innovation Value Institute at Maynooth University, says that the link between individual competencies and organisational capability is clear, but also that organisational capability differs greatly from place to place.

"What we've found is we measured capability and maturity in hundreds of organisations across the world, big and small. There is a huge disparity. To be precise, we measure capability on a very simple scale of one to five, with five being best.

## The results?

"We've seen as low as 1.3 and as high as 3.9," he said. "That tells you a lot; that's an enormous gap."

Delaney said that because companies are not yet in the habit of measuring capability across the board, many do invest in training but end up shooting in the dark.

"They need to know what is their starting position: where are they today? An organisation could be very good in application development skills, but bad on project management," he said.

IT is, he said, particularly prone to this, and, as a result, the Innovation Value Institute's research has resulted in the development of competency and capability frameworks that make measurement much easier.

"The IT skills world is a very siloed world. If you're looking at the myriad of training courses, you find them in development, security project management and so on, but the reason we got started, and this was ten years ago now, was to measure the entire profession of information technology.

"Being top at development is great, but it doesn't work in business. Business is business," said Delaney.

"Companies can be brilliant in several silos, but the chain is as weak as its weakest link."

Since developing its frameworks, the Innovation Value Institute has worked with significant employers around the world, including Fortus TCI, which is the primary electricity supplier to the Turks and Caicos, Easyjet, government departments in Ireland, the city of Toronto and Procter and Gamble.

Michael McGrath, professional services manager at Dell, said that a major factor in the need to develop skills is the changing nature of business activities.

"We recently migrated one customer from Lotus Notes to the Microsoft Cloud. In addition to the services we [ourselves] provide in education, there's a great need for people skilled in these new products and technologies.

"Some [businesses and individuals] would have been with the older technology for 20 years," he said.

Dell includes training as part of any major upgrade or migration programme, and this requires a skills audit.

"Before we put forward a solution like that we perform an audit and put together a proposal to deal with the skills gap," he said. "It's positive for a business as it cuts the service calls. It's often overlooked, but the IT team really benefits from that."

Audits can be useful for individuals, too, as they identify skills gaps that many in IT overlook. If you're in the IT space then there are core skills and accreditations, but there are other dimensions," he said.

"Organisations have to change with what's going on in technology: big data, mobile, cloud and so on. This is changing business, so it may not be technical skills that an audit throws up."

The fact that these are so-called 'soft skills' does not mean they are



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less important. In fact, if anything, they are what is needed in a world where coloration and service provision is the new normal.

“These human skills are in demand and some IT [departments and professionals] may overlook that in favour of accredited, hard skills.”



**Sally Stone, training and development specialist, and Catherine O'Keeffe, training manager, PFH Technology Group**



**Michael McGrath, professional services manager at Dell**