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The CRM Talent Shortage: Here, Now

– David Taber, CIO

August 12, 2010

A shortage of CRM talent in the current economy? Who'd a thunk it.

My consultancy works in the micro-economy surrounding Salesforce.com and the third-party products that their customers use. With a customer growth rate of better than 20% and a limit on their professional services headcount, there's increasing demand for external staff and consultants. I don't know if there are similar situations with other CRM and sales/marketing tools, but I suspect so:

- There are a lot of open positions, both temporary and permanent, for system admins, operations types, data analysts, and power users for Salesforce.com.
- There are also significant openings for people who know how to use marketing automation systems (e.g., Eloqua, Marketo, or Vertical Response) in conjunction with web marketing and CRM systems. There is a surprising dearth of real talent available in these areas.
- There are a lot of poseurs out on the market. These are people who claim to have deep experience, but are very quickly stymied by fairly routine technical issues. Quiz your candidates! (Use your best Lie to Me skills to monitor their responses.)
- There are literally thousands (maybe even tens of thousands) of certified admins, consultants, and developers in the Salesforce.com world alone. Certification actually does mean something in the current market, and these folks are in short supply. Certification carries a bit of a premium, but it helps you weed out the poseurs.
- While you must be picky, it's a mistake to scope the job requirements to the point they'll never be satisfied. For example, ask for an admin + developer + business process expert. That isn't one hire, and typically it isn't even one consultant.

The net result of all this is that business value from your CRM system is far from optimal. Marketing campaigns aren't as effective as they should be. Conversion ratios are low. Pipeline closure rates are erratic. Customer support and satisfaction are less than great.

What Should You Be Doing?

Unlike other enterprise applications, the effective use of true CRM systems requires significant domain expertise. Skills that go beyond the technical basics — from phone manner to market segmentation to content generation to survey analysis — are essential to getting the biggest profits from a CRM investment. This makes recruiting harder.

The first step is to recognize that high quality content — from call-center scripts to Web copy to white papers to support FAQs — will be an essential ingredient of CRM success. If you don't have the talent to produce that content internally, do not attempt to mix your CRM/marketing automation/support system job spec (or consulting RFQ) with content generation or community management. These skill sets are almost never found in a single person.

Once you have the "soft side" duties separated from the technical CRM/marketing automation/support job, now it's time to fish for talent. Since there are a lot of poseurs out there, generic job boards are hopeless. There are specific newsgroups, LinkedIn lists, and user groups where you can go fishing for the specific talents you need. But all I've seen this year — at least in the Salesforce communities — is other people scouring the membership. There isn't much talent available, and in some geographies like San Francisco, a half-dozen consultancies are constantly trolling to vacuum up any good people.

At more sophisticated job boards such as eLance and oDesk, you'll find what looks like thousands of providers. As these job boards have screens for certification and testing, you can rapidly filter for your particular criteria. At the end, though, you'll often find the CRM talent has one or more of these characteristics:

- Physically distant.
- Available only intermittently.
- Narrowly skilled (little domain knowledge or business sense).
- Proficient in English, but not with native fluency.

This talent can be effectively harnessed, but requires a very tight task specification and management attention. As long as you expect them to deliver exactly what you ask — and only what you ask for in writing — they are a usable resource.

Most of the time, though, you need people to be on site, able to manage tasks without supervision, and understand something about your business. In other words, a temporary contractor or permanent employee. To find these, generic recruiters may be OK, but typically it's better to find a recruiter specializing in the CRM products you use. The best of these do serious testing and screening of candidates before you see them.

The alternatives to premium recruiters?

- Grow your own talent, investing in a junior technical person to give them CRM and business domain knowledge. This is a great strategy if you have the time and money — but doesn't work if you need mastery in less than 6 months.
- Go fishing inside your competitors. This may be the fastest way to get all the qualities you need. You're trading money for time here.
- Hire talent away from consulting companies. This can be dicey for a lot of reasons, but seldom works out in the long term for real talent. Expect to lose them after a few months.

Have better ideas? Put them in Comments to this article — I may need to use them myself.

David Taber is the author of the new Prentice Hall book, "[Salesforce.com Secrets of Success](#)" and is the CEO of [SalesLogistix](#), a certified Salesforce.com consultancy focused on business process improvement through use of CRM systems. SalesLogistix clients are in North America, Europe, Israel, and India, and David has over 25 years experience in high tech, including 10 years at the VP level or above.

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