HR: what is the impact of digital on future talent needs and hiring?

To what extent is digital changing the type of candidate that organisations are looking for? Has the arrival of this digital technology and multi-channel world changed the underlying characteristics and attributes of a successful modern day hire? Have we reached a sea-change in the type of skills, attitude and outlook that it takes to succeed?

Certainly right now there is a wide-spread view that it is hard to find good "digital" people. In a recent survey by e-Consultancy, 68% of HR professionals said they had difficulty recruiting staff who were sufficiently knowledgeable about digital technology and communications. 73% commented that digital was making a significant impact on preferred candidate profiles and 43% commented on the challenge of keeping up to date with the new digital trends and tools. What's more HR teams are having themselves to become increasingly "digitally savvy". 74% said they had had to become skilled in using online search tools to find out about a candidate's reputation and 46% said they had rejected a candidate based on what they had discovered about a person online with Facebook, YouTube and blogs being cited as key influences.

And it does look as though digital is making a substantial impact in the way companies generally do organise and go to market. A recent study by BCG (Boston Consulting Group) together with Google showed that the "digital economy" is already worth more than 7% of UK GDP at more than £100bn. That makes it larger than the construction, utilities and transportation sectors! And it is fast growing, expected to double over the next 5 years. At that level it will be larger than the UK Financial Services sector. In fact the UK is emerging as a global leader in this area. It has the largest internet sector in terms of absolute billions of GDP and e-commerce spend per household in this country is higher than anywhere else in the world!

Among the many challenges that digital poses is that it is nevertheless relatively new and immature. It only started hitting the headlines not much more than a decade ago when we witnessed the first internet bubble during '98/ '99 and 2000. When that all crashed, many internet businesses were closed and teams disbanded. It took a further 5 years till 2005 for the "Web 2.0" reawakening to occur and for companies to begin to see the power of the Net in terms of customer reach and business development. With that came a surge of interest in starting to ask for candidates who "got digital", who understood at least some of this new world and who could help navigate a way through this digital maze.

The need was especially strong in marketing and technology. The rapid rise of online sales and information provision meant there was an immediate need for tech people who could design, build, optimise and maintain web sites and for marketing people who could use and deploy e-commerce know-how to maximise site traffic and effectively deliver high sales conversion rates. And those needs have not gone away, they have in fact now become far more complex.

"Digital" is a widely used term but it is a catch-all umbrella for a whole range of different skills and requirements. For example within "digital marketing" there are a large number of specialist skills. These include: Search engine marketing, search engine optimisation, affiliate marketing, web analytics, campaign analysis, creative marketing, brand strategy development, customer retention, eCRM, email marketing, and now add on mobile commerce, social media and interactive TV. All these areas are unique and distinctive skill sets. They all require a candidate with specific know-how and skills. But if a business team asks for a "digital marketeer", there is often the assumption that someone with knowledge of the online world can turn their hand to any and all of these very different things. And yet what can make a difference is a candidate who really is for example, steeped and immersed in mobile, who really does have the case studies and the war stories and the lessons learnt so that they know intuitively what will drive successful mobile comms, content and commerce.

The same can be said for the technology area. In a recent survey by IBM of 2000 IT professionals, 91% said that digital technology tools would dominate by 2015 and would form the primary IT delivery model. They mentioned a wide range of skill set requirements from IT visioning and enterprise architecture, through to SOA (service-oriented architecture) and SaaS (software as a service) and Cloud computing. The IT community are also placing a much higher emphasis on Programme Management and delivery recognising that the migration to a new digital technology environment will likely need transformational change across geography and business units and will need expert tech and commercial change and delivery skills. There are also core and specialist skill requirements around IT infrastructure, data centres, data protection and security, MIS (management information services), social networks, mobile, voice recognition, content management, "green IT" and the multitude of different software programming skills from Dot Net to Java to Open Source experience to HTML5 and so on….

It's a challenging environment, it's new and there are no real proven solutions. Businesses are forced to learn and experiment as they go and make a bet, however reasoned, on what are the core skills and needs to help drive the future success and growth of the organisation. And that is often why job specs for "digital" jobs are difficult to write. Unlike for example a search for a new financial controller where there are many years of understanding and experience as to the sort of qualifications and experience required. Digital expertise is harder to define and describe. What are the right qualifications, what sort of university degree is most relevant, how evaluate years of hands-on experience, how valuable is someone who is steeped in IT generally versus a new grad who has grown up using and learning the new digital tools and environment? If there's a need for a marketer then how transferable are for example search engine marketing skills into a more general online marketing remit? If looking for a new architect how familiar and expert do they need to be in cloud computing, if according to IBM, that will be the specific area that will dominate IT development for the rest of this decade?

In summary there are probably 5 key things that can be identified from all the research and experience that distinguish a candidate who is best-suited for the digital world. The focus here is less on the specific skills eg in Search engine marketing specialisation or in SOA, but more around the qualitative attributes that mark out an individual. What is the "right stuff" that HR teams and business owners should be looking for? It's all changing so fast and hard to know what will be required in the business in 12 months time, let alone 3 years out. But can we put together a simple and sustainable check-list of core attributes and characteristics?

The 5 keys are:

1. A restless spirit

2. Comfort and confident with technology (but not necessarily a "techie")

3. Communication and interpersonal skills

4. Self-sufficiency

5. An appreciation that it's a multi-channel world

A restless spirit: this is someone who enjoys and relishes change! It's the individual who is happy that there is no complete job spec, who is comfortable that there is no clearly defined box for the role, it's that person who recognises that we are going through a revolution in communications and in technology and who wants to be part of that, contributing to it, challenging traditions and accepted methodologies and processes, a force for change who is unhappy if things are status quo or if things take too long to happen, an inquisitive mind who wants to know about the latest technologies and tools and is passionate about them.

Comfort and confident with technology: this is a vital prerequisite. They need not necessarily have a deep tech background if they are for example up for a marketing role, but they must have an appreciation of it, a desire to understand it and ability to talk about it. They need to know what is "cloud computing", why it's being so widely discussed and be able to see the potential commercial applications. They need to appreciate that doing something in mobile for example is not just about "creating an app for the iPhone" but that there are scores of other handsets which need to be separately managed and that configuration of the online site may require significant technical resource. They need to be a point of contact that can translate tech advances into commercial feasibility

Communication and Interpersonal skills: a recent survey by the US Center for Public Education highlighted this area as the key requirement. "The 21st Century is bringing a requirement for new skills and tools in the workspace. Strong interpersonal skills for collaboration and communication will be a "must-have" competency. It's the power to interact effectively, to communicate both face-to-face, in large and small meetings, both verbally and with data, to relate well to others and to cooperate with them, to negotiate and manage potential conflicts of priority between departments and to lead through persuasion. In times of change and especially where organisations are having to adopt new technologies and new ways of working, this is going to be a core skill".

Self sufficiency: organisations are already moving toward remote working environments. The concept of everyone travelling to an office to do a day's work and do that every day of the week is a not a 21st century way of working. Unilever for example have adopted a workplace strategy which looks at three categories of employee. They call it "resident, mobile and offsite". Residents are still those who come to work and have their own desk and workspace. That might be eg the office manager, security staff as well as others who prefer that style. The Mobile worker has typically been the salesperson out and about with customers but returning to base and hot-desking there, so having access but no "permanent home". And then the Remote worker, who may never visit the office, may be established at home or be a connected contractor or consultant or supplier who needs and gets access to fellow employees, office news and information, email etc but always from a remote station.

Unilever are also studying how the next 5 years will further change that categorisation. One thing they are certain about: there will still be a need for an office, but there will be a substantial shift from resident to mobile and offsite. This has far-reaching impact on people. Are they the sort that can cope with this change in work pattern? Are they self-sufficient in that they could be set up to eg work from home? Are they reliable in that they may have limited physical contact with colleagues and it will be harder to monitor their performance?

Appreciation it's a multi-channel world: while this has all been about digital, it is just as important for good candidates to appreciate that there is a much that is not digital. 20% of the UK population are not online, e-commerce accounts for some 15% to 20% plus of total retail and while many will research online still the majority will shop and buy in-store. TV advertising still accounts for some 40% of all advertising spend and is still the key way for any organisation wishing to build a mass wide-reaching consumer brand. 26% of consumers have smart phones with Net access but that's still a large majority that do not and most people today will shop and research and interact in a multi-channel and cross platform way. So it's critical that good marketers and technology people do appreciate this, do understand that you can't just "switch off analogue" overnight, that the spread of online and digital technology will still be unfolding for the rest of this decade and that any business solution will need to accommodate customers wherever they are and through whatever channel they choose to interact.

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It's always been a challenge of course to find the best candidates for the organisation. There will always be competition for the very best people and a premium on their time and services. But as we look at the next few years it is clear that digital is placing an added layer of complexity. There are many people who will claim to be "digital experts" and cite years of experience, but the facts are that that whole world has emerged so very recently that there just are not that many experts around. Social Media only really took off in 2009 and Mobile only really got going last year. So claims of years of expertise in those areas need to be carefully examined. Equally there has been talk about SaaS and Cloud but few organisations and people have any genuine and immersed expertise and insight. And this shortage of really experienced talent puts a bigger emphasis on the 5 keys discussed here: to find those individuals with the spirit, the confidence, the interpersonal skills, the self-sufficiency and the strategic multi-channel awareness that they can operate effectively in this digital world and make the outstanding impact that they've been hired for.

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