Are you a team player?

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In my last blog I discussed the need for IT organizations to support both a more agile IT operational model as well as increasingly more nimble business processes. That blog discussed the movement to make network operations (NetOps) more agile by taking a DevOps-like approach to NetOps. This blog will examine some of the ways that supporting an agile IT operational model and nimble business processes are impacting the role of network engineers.

One of the companies that is actively advocating for a new, agile IT operational model is Cisco. Cisco believes that one of the prime drivers of the new IT operational model is the dramatic growth in the number of connected devices that is forcing the infrastructure of most companies to scale to where it is not manageable using the traditional IT operational model. As a result, Cisco believes that IT organizations can no longer build a static infrastructure based on the assumption of predictable growth. Rather, Cisco believes that IT organizations need to build a dynamic infrastructure that is flexible enough to satisfy the users who consume the growing volumes of data.

As the new operational model is adopted, Cisco thinks that network engineers will spend less of their time on device configurations and more of their time driving business and IT innovation. To support the shift in the role that network professionals will play on a going forward basis, Cisco has enhanced the training they offer to address some industry job roles that Cisco believes will continue to evolve. Those roles are:

- Business application engineer
- Network application developer
- Network programmability designer

I talked recently with a network architect for a Fortune 500 company about how the movement to increase IT and business agility is changing the skills needed by network engineers. He said that when he thinks about the skills his organization will need on a going forward basis, he isn't that concerned about their ability to develop the necessary technical skills. His reasoning is that the people they hire generally have made a commitment to work in IT and that they will continue to take whatever training they need to evolve their technical skills. He is concerned, however, about his organization's ability to develop soft skills in general and business skills in particular. He said that his company needs IT professionals who can do things that are very technical and yet be able to explain it to people with a wide range of business interests as well as a variety of technical backgrounds. They also need IT professionals who can build trust and negotiate with other organizations within the company as well as deal with the internal political pressures and the ongoing shifts in direction.

In addition to continuing to expand their knowledge of both business and networking, a recent article[1], GE Capital's CTO Eric Reed explained the need for all IT professionals to expand their area of expertise to become more of an effective team player. According to Reed, "Our experience [GE Capital's] on this journey to date has been that the small, self-directed teams required in a DevOps world require an amalgamation of skills spanning everything from IT security to database design and application architecture, plus everything in between. While each individual on the team has a particular strength (say, application design and coding), each one also needs to have working knowledge in other areas (maybe UX or network design)."

There can be no doubt that network engineers are key to a company being able to implement a more agile IT operational model and more nimble business processes. However, there can also be no doubt that in order to achieve these results, network engineers need to have more of a business focus and to work closely in cross functional teams.

[1] http://www.informationweek.com/strategic-cio/it-strategy/full-stack-engineer-for-devops-fact-or-fiction/d/d-id/1235060