

IT ZONE

By Alexander J. Hanna

Are Bahamian IT Professionals Ready For Prime Time?

I said that I would discuss the above topic in my previous article (Do we need foreign IT professionals in The Bahamas? – Aug 20, 07, The Nassau Guardian). After my last article, I received many emails and had several discussions with readers about foreign IT professionals in the Bahamas. What I found interesting was that even foreigners agreed with the comments made in the article. They too had a problem with second rate professionals whether foreign or Bahamian.

Just after I submitted my last article, I went to pick up an IT related Request for Proposal (RFP) from a government agency that had advertised in the local papers. While waiting for the RFP, I was shocked to see a foreigner requesting the same RFP. Trust me, I knew from the moment I saw him that he was a foreigner. The fact was confirmed when he spoke to me. He had the nerve to ask me if I was also waiting for the RFP. Talk about shock and awe! I was literally speechless and those who know me are aware that I am rarely speechless. After I composed myself, I asked him about the type of IT work he was involved in. He stated that he was here for a short time installing an application for a hotel. Well, you know, in typical Bahamian fashion, I wondered if he had a work permit.

To make a long story short, after reviewing the RFP later that day, I realized that it stated “no award if respondent has any violations or past due debt with the Government of The Bahamas”. What I found strange about the statement was that it was likely to apply only to Bahamian respondents. Yet, this foreigner was being given an opportunity to bid without considering violations or debt in his own country. As I said in my last article, such incidents should not happen. The RFP should have been marked “Bahamian business only need bid”. If the Bahamian business needed assistance, they could partner with a foreign company.

Let me add a line to thank all my readers, especially those who provided me with comments. I hope that you will continue to read these articles and provide your feedback.

Now back to my main subject. Firstly, no one knows everything, even though some people in IT think they do. I think this mistaken perception is probably why I believe that some IT professionals are not ready for prime time.

Like everything else, there are good and bad aspects to IT, and oh, lets not forget the ugly. Many Bahamian IT professional practice here at home while others are foreigners in other countries (pun intended). I am personally familiar with some of these professionals and always find it exciting to hear about the projects they are working on. The projects boost my conviction that Bahamian professionals can hold their own anywhere in the world if the opportunity presents itself.

I find that people confuse amiability of temperament with professional competence. Not me; being nice has nothing to do with your expertise. That said it is ideal if you are both an expert and have a wonderful personality.

I have outlined the ‘good’ aspect of IT, but as we know, the bad and the ugly are so ubiquitous that the good hardly registers on the scale.

Microsoft Shares the Blame

I actually blame Microsoft for some of the problems afflicting IT. You see, with the advent of Microsoft Windows, software became easier to install and use. This meant that any Joe Blow now believed that they could easily install software using a step-by-step guided process. Take the example of Microsoft Windows Server (the top networking software) - countless Joe Blows out there install this software and profess to be network experts. As a matter of fact, I like to state that "my 6 year old daughter can install software". Companies like Microsoft ensure that installation is the easy part. However, after installation, does it function as it is supposed to? What about security? What about users' access? Trust me; the list of vital questions goes on and on.

Microsoft Access is another popular software that caused countless Joe Blows to appear on the IT scene. Access is database software that provides the ability to store, retrieve and edit data records. Using MS Access, it is very easy to setup your own database. However, history and experience has shown that many companies ran into problems with their databases mostly due to Joe Blows who had no real experience working on database solutions. If you need a database design, then get a database expert and not a Joe Blow.

Disgrace & Shame

For a country that claims to be part of the first world, I find it disgraceful and shameful that IT professionals have not organized themselves into a group that facilitates continuing learning and promotion of the sector as a whole. Each professional is doing their own thing without regard for the sector. This really must change if Bahamian professionals are to be taken seriously. We need an association of some sort, user groups, and workshops to gather and share ideas and knowledge with others.

However, I believe that many in the IT profession are afraid of competition. Getting involved in groups/association activities will expose the fact that they are not what they purport to be professionally. However, this insecurity should not act as a deterrent, it's not like you are being asked to share your company secrets.

If you look at places like Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados, they all have mature and thriving IT sectors with many training opportunities, user groups and associations. They are valued by their governments and by companies like Microsoft. Now that's really saying something! Can you imagine a situation in Jamaica or Trinidad where their governments consider foreign companies and not their local IT sector when seeking IT solutions. I don't think so. However, in The Bahamas the situation is very different. Just take a look at some business and government websites and you realize they were not developed locally. My question is why not. Some of these websites have people employed in another country and not The Bahamas.

Hiring Practices

I find that hiring practices need to be reevaluated within some businesses because the problem starts in this area. What is clear to me is that if you have a "C" grade person as your IT head, they will hire "C-" persons and a "B" grade person will hire "B-" persons. Only an "A" class person will think of hiring an "A" class person. If you don't believe me, then check out a situation that you are familiar with. An average person will always be afraid that a person above them (in terms of skills) is going to steal their job. This is why it is imperative that businesses ensure that they have an "A" class IT head.

College of The Bahamas (COB)

I feel that it is necessary to mention COB in this article because learning tends to be centered on colleges and universities. However, I must say as far as IT training goes, COB leaves much



to be desired. Now don't attack me; I know that they are currently working on their university status. I make this point because I want to encourage them not to lose the opportunity to make COB's IT curriculum excellent. COB should become the place for IT research and development and the source of all business recruitment. COB should therefore ensure that they acquire the latest technology and recruit instructors who have real world experience.

Learn Something New

I am often shocked to see how little some IT professionals know about their area of expertise. I wonder why this happens. I think it's because they look at the person next to them and they conclude that they can match that person. When I compare my work with others, I endeavor to work with high standards. However, people fail to recognize genuine high-standards. What some people call high-standards will be labeled sub-standard by others. For example, the other day a buddy of mine bragged about visiting a local restaurant and insisted that he had eaten the best stew fish ever. After I managed to pickup myself off the floor laughing, I simply said that I had lost respect for him because I thought he had higher standards. The issue boils down to a person's concept of high standards. Ultimately, your standards depend on what you have been exposed to. This is why competition and exposure to the best talent are so important while building excellence in IT.

Lastly, IT is constantly changing which implies that IT professionals must continuously learn and seek knowledge to stay on top of their game. Until Next Time (UNT)

Alexander J. Hanna is President of MegaComm Systems which specializes in developing Windows and Internet Solutions. He is considered by many to be the most innovative software solutions developer in the country. Mr. Hanna has developed high-end solutions such as BankBahamasOnline (Internet Banking), ezDirectory, BahamasElections.com, online gaming solutions, and the first ever in The Bahamas text message voting via cellular phone just to name a few. Please send your feedback to itzone@MegaCommSystems.com.