

Looking to attract top tech talent? Then lighten up

It is no secret that South Africa, like many others, is fighting a war for talent. With global competition intensifying, local companies simply cannot afford to lose top talent to their overseas competitors.



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Although many South African companies spend a great deal of effort and resources to attract and retain talented professionals, some sectors are clearly fighting a losing battle. Arguably, IT and technology is among the embattled industries in South Africa, with a dire shortage of skilled IT professionals hindering the growth of a key sector.

Marc Gordon, a developer at local custom software development firm redPanda Software, argues that one of the major stumbling blocks is a stifling corporate culture. Despite the perception that tech firms are fun, vibrant places that allow their staff to play ping-pong in the day, he says that the reality is quite different.

“As a developer, I have been wary of joining a South African corporate because of the traditional management style and the ‘grey’, boring culture that permeates the work environment,” he explains. “In addition to being bogged down by corporate bureaucracy, I have generally found that there is little space to grow and to be challenged by new and diverse projects that can enhance my skills.”

Creative work, creative spaces

According to Gordon, local software development companies tend to be risk averse with regards to the types of projects and campaigns they take on, as well as how they tackle them. In his view, software development is both art and science, and talented developers are fuelled by projects that demand creative approaches and ongoing problem solving.

“Some companies do understand this, and they value that their employees are in fact human beings who require things that may not necessarily fit into the traditional corporate structure,” he adds.

For example, in addition to its casual dress code and on-site bar, redPanda has a ‘creative room’ with musical instruments and drawing/painting materials where employees can go to decompress and take time out. This kind of break is critical, argues Gordon, to effective problem solving and to being both productive and happy throughout the working day.

International exposure

Another major reason why many local IT professionals feel dissatisfied with their lot is because they lack the international experience and diverse projects that many of their U.S. and European counterparts enjoy.

This is one of the major reasons why Gordon snapped up the opportunity presented to him in his current role to undertake a three-month training project at a partner firm in the U.K. The experience was an eye-opener, but not in the way that Gordon had expected.

“As South African software developers, we tend to think that our market is immature, and that we cut corners in the way that we approach our work,” he explains. “Now, after having spent time working in the U.K., I feel that our local developers are on par with their U.K. rivals, and have learned to optimise the way they work out of necessity – and out of a knack for resourcefulness that is quite unique to South Africans.”

Having only recently returned from his training abroad, Gordon is optimistic about the local industry – although he says that companies should undoubtedly be rethinking their management styles in order to both attract and nurture local talent.

“Within reason, companies should definitely be looking into things like flexible and remote working,” he adds. “While it is true that not every Silicon Valley tech incubator embraces flexi-time, the most successful and attractive companies simply recognise that employees are human beings with a unique and individual set of needs and aspirations.”

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