

Transitioning

Technical Experts into

Trusted Advisors

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"This top-notch research demonstrates the value and outlines the processes required to leverage key technical talent by transforming them into your most valuable resource for achieving customer satisfaction and growth. I'd recommend this study to anyone who manages technical talent."

*Dan Wiersma
Senior Vice President,
Sony Service Company
Sony Electronics*



By James A. Alexander, Ed.D.

Executive Summary

Why Is the Transition from Technical Expert to Trusted Advisor Important?

For organizations offering complex services and solutions, no one has more impact on getting and keeping customers than the technical expert.¹ Yet although their specialized knowledge is highly prized, their potential value both to their customers and to their organization is often unrealized. For technical experts to become true trusted advisors they need a shift in mindset, an expansion of role, and advanced knowledge and skills. For the vast majority of technical experts this is a very doable, very rewarding transformation.

Why a Technology Industry Study?

The need for traditional professional services technical experts (e.g., management consultants, lawyers, accountants, investment bankers, etc.) to assume more of a trusted advisor role has been recognized, researched, and written about since the turn of this century.² The value of this transition has been articulated, and the benefits both to clients and to the firms providing the advice have been defined.

“Alexander’s very important study gives services executives the direction they need for managing their talent plus the required information for transitioning old-style technical deployments into high-level, strategic engagements.”

*Edward Marshall
Vice President Sales and Marketing
OpenAir, Inc.*

There are hundreds of thousands of technical experts who also could create more value by assuming more of an advisory role with their customers. Many similarities exist between their roles and that of the traditional professional services providers mentioned above. Yet, there are significant differences as well. For example, some technology technical experts will find themselves in the situation of providing advice to their client’s senior management, but this is not the norm, as most will never visit the corporate suite. The majority of time they will be problem solving or working directly with their client colleagues in implementing technology (their main job responsibility). So compared to traditional professional services consultants, they are, for the most part, working with different people on different issues in different environments. Yet, because of their client exposure and (hopefully) the credibility they have established, they find themselves in a position to influence clients regarding existing and future technology decisions that can have a significant impact on the client’s business. Another important difference is that the majority of technology companies not only offer services, but products and product-services combinations (“solutions,” in the industry vernacular) as well. This adds additional complexity and, hence, makes the role of the technical advisor even more important.

To date there has been no research targeted at this important population. The objective of this study is to build upon the earlier research and thinking developed in traditional professional services combined with past technology services research related to the topic. This foundation research will not only guide future research, but provide both technology professional services providers and their management with some direction as to how to better perform their duties.

Who Will Benefit from this Report?

There is direct application of the contents of this study to anyone interested in generating profitable growth and enhancing customer loyalty through the interactions of their technical experts. Special value will be gained by those in business-to-business settings when selling and delivering complex technology services and solutions.

Top managers in product companies will find value in learning:

- The revenue growth potential and the competitive advantage opportunity that technical experts bring to the business.
- A framework for tapping this potential.
- Mistakes to avoid.

Services leaders in product companies will discover:

- What their peers think about this important topic and their lessons learned through personal experiences.
- Key benchmarks and core and best practices.
- Recommendations that can be applied for immediate performance improvement in helping transition their technical personal into the role of trusted advisor.

Technical experts will learn:

- The importance of expanding their capabilities and assuming a new role.
- The factors most important to their ongoing success.
- Specific recommendations to improve personal performance.

Researchers, academics, practitioners, or anyone tasked with improving the performance of organizations will benefit from having available:

- Foundational benchmarks.
- Core and best practices.
- Guidelines to successfully transition technical experts into trusted advisors.

The Study Builds Upon Past Technology Professional Services Research

The author has conducted and published four prior studies in the technology services industry. The insights gained from these works, combined with the author's years of consulting to this industry and a review of the traditional professional services work on this topic, sets the stage for establishing findings and recommendations relevant to the providers of technology services and their management.

Major Findings

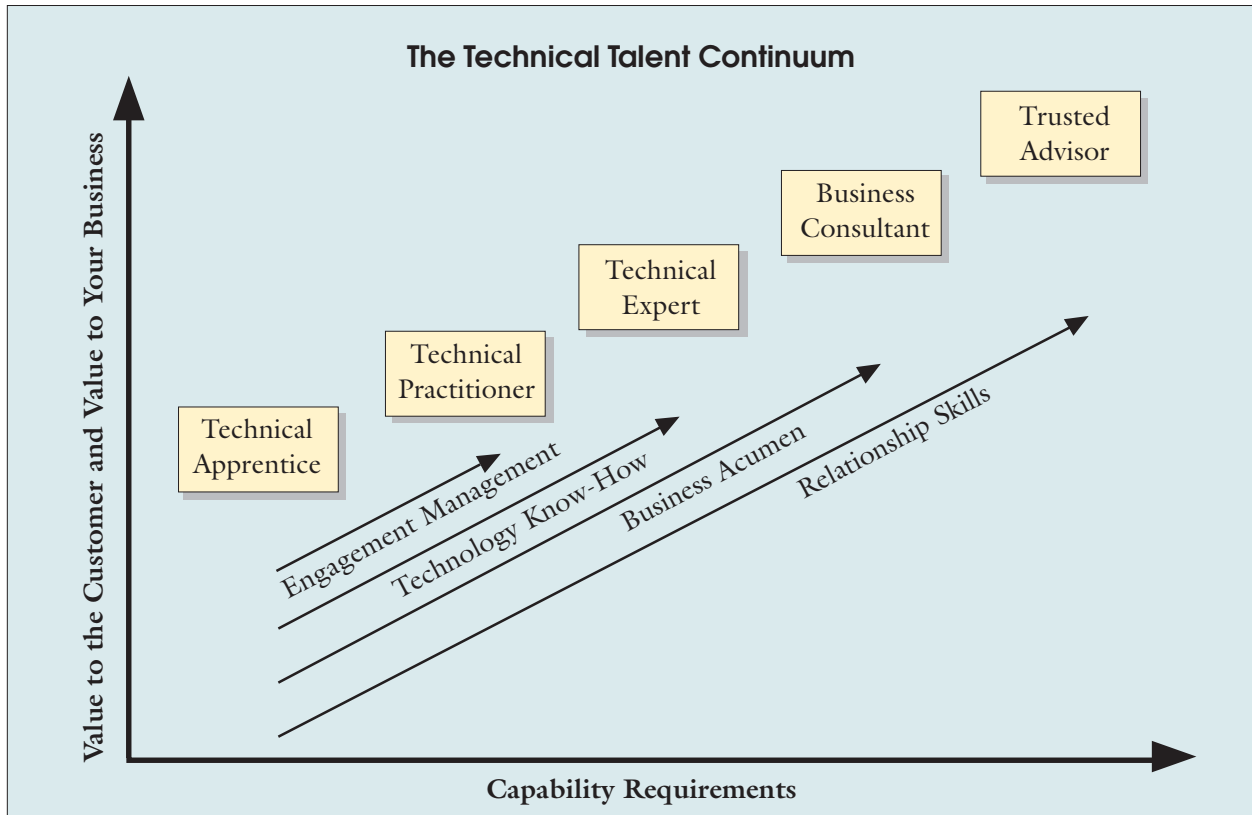
- The benefits of increasing the number of trusted advisors among the pool of technical experts are huge.
- Increasing the knowledge and skill levels of technical experts is a top management talent issue.
- Surprisingly, finding and retaining top talent was *not* an issue with the services leaders in this study.
- Managers of technical experts have much greater expectations of them from just two years ago.
- The majority of technology services organizations expect their technical experts to aggressively help sell services and solutions.
- The most important differences between the trusted advisor behaviors of top technical experts and the behaviors of average performers are “great communication skills” followed by “seizing the initiative.”
- Some services executives have a concern about the ability of their technical experts to maintain client credibility while shouldering business development responsibilities.
- Most of the key dimensions of becoming a trusted advisor are learnable.

“As with Alexander’s past studies, I have found this report very solid and full of very relevant data that is helping me drive both change and improvement. This is one great piece of groundbreaking research!”

*James Cowie
Chief Services Officer
BlueFreeway*

Recommendations

1. **Accept reality.** The trusted advisor role is not for everyone, so adjust expectations based upon the capacity and the desire of your technical people.
2. **Let your stars shine.** Learn what your top performers do that the rest of your people don't do, and let this become your benchmark for your technical organization.
3. **Position the potential.** Determine where all your technical people are on the Technical Talent Continuum (discussed in Chapter 6), and develop individual actions plans to increase their value.



4. **Before you giveth, taketh away.** Before asking for more outputs, eliminate or lessen expectations in other areas—this is good business.
5. **Focus on the few.** Train your technical experts on the key knowledge, skills, and mindset gaps uncovered in the assessment.
6. **Lead, don't lag.** Change your performance management system (especially your metrics) to encourage the desired new behaviors and results.
7. **Recruit talent capable of becoming trusted advisors.**
To further help get the people you need, incent everyone in your organization for recruiting talent—this is a best practice.³
8. **Develop top talent.** When senior management has responsibility for nurturing your top performers, performance improves.
9. **Retain top talent.** Make retention of top talent an organizational priority, first by tracking the loyalty of your stars (another best practice), and then by having a formal retention plan in place.⁴

"The 10 recommendations provided by Jim are viable, highly useful, and offer strategic guidance to any professional leader desiring to move his or her team from the singular technical perspective to the trusted advisor role."

Wayne Halverson
Director, Global Strategic Services
MRO Software

10. **Walk the line.** Concern was voiced in the study that focusing on trusted advisor status by over-emphasizing business development could, potentially, pose a real risk—proceed with caution.

References

1. Schwarz, Julie and Adnelly Reyes. September 13, 2005. *How customers choose solutions*. On-Line Briefing. ITSMA.
2. Two popular books on this topic, which I strongly recommend, are *The Trusted Advisor*, by David H. Maister, Charles H. Green, and Robert Galford, published by Free Press (New York, 2000) and *Clients for Life*, by Jagdish Sheth and Andrew Sobel, published by Simon and Schuster (New York, 2000).
3. Alexander, James A. 2004. *The state of professional services II: An industry comes of age*. Alexander Consulting/AFSM International.
4. *ibid.*

“Considering today’s customer-competitive environment, I could not think of any reason that a services executive would not want to incorporate the findings of this report into their go-forward strategies. Long-term customer relationships are based on trust and will continue to be the stepping stone for all successful service companies.”

George J. Harris
President and CEO
GA Services LLC

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About the Author

James A. Alexander, Ed.D., is the founder of Alexander Consulting, a management consultancy that helps product companies create and implement professional services strategies. He researches, publishes, trains, and speaks on the critical issues services leaders face. Jim has authored or co-authored over 80 articles, three white papers, five research reports, and two books and has taught at universities in the U.S., Europe, and Mexico. Jim was selected as the services pundit for IBM Global Services 2003 Headlights Program. Furthermore, he served as the U.S. Department of Commerce’s e-business subject-matter expert for its Inter-American E-Business Fellowship Program. Finally, Jim is a trusted advisor and executive coach to many senior executives of leading services organizations, helping them navigate the journey from business-as-usual to business-as-exceptional. He may be contacted at 239-283-7400 or alex@alexanderstrategists.com.



About Alexander Consulting

Alexander Consulting helps product companies create and implement professional services strategies. Services include research, consulting, training, and speaking on the critical issues of the services industry. Areas of strength include market research, strategy formulation, marketing direction, sales effectiveness, and talent productivity. For more information, e-mail info@alexanderstrategists.com or visit www.alexanderstrategists.com.



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Are you leaving money on the table?

Are you maximizing the trust and credibility of your technical talent?

Would you like to drive new business and increase customer loyalty?

No one has more impact on getting and keeping customers than the technical expert. Yet, although their specialized knowledge is highly prized, their potential value both to their customers and to their organizations is often unrealized.

This study reveals the critical knowledge, skills, methods, and tools required to effectively engage and sustain a trusted advisor relationship with all your clients. The results are more value to the customer and more value to your organization.



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