

Shared skills make hiring easy

With the GFC behind us, it's once again hard to find and retain IT staff, especially so in the wage-constrained public sector. *Simon Sharwood* discovers one agency that's found a way to find and retain talent, with the help of the private sector and a twist on graduate recruitment

Shared services is taking off around Australia. Queensland's CorpTech is admired for its work providing whole-of-government information systems. Centrelink recently announced its intention to acquire a massive storage system and sell that capacity as a shared services and/or government cloud provider. Victoria's CenITex has commenced its mission to provide centralised ICT support to the State's government departments and agencies.

But CenITex doesn't have all of the State's IT work to itself. The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) also provides shared services to five other agencies. And the service it provides is proving very successful.

"We run human resources, payroll and finance for five agencies," explains Guy Nicholson, DPI's General Manager for Shared Business Systems. While the Department's brief is to excel with these tasks, clients (Nicholson likes this term

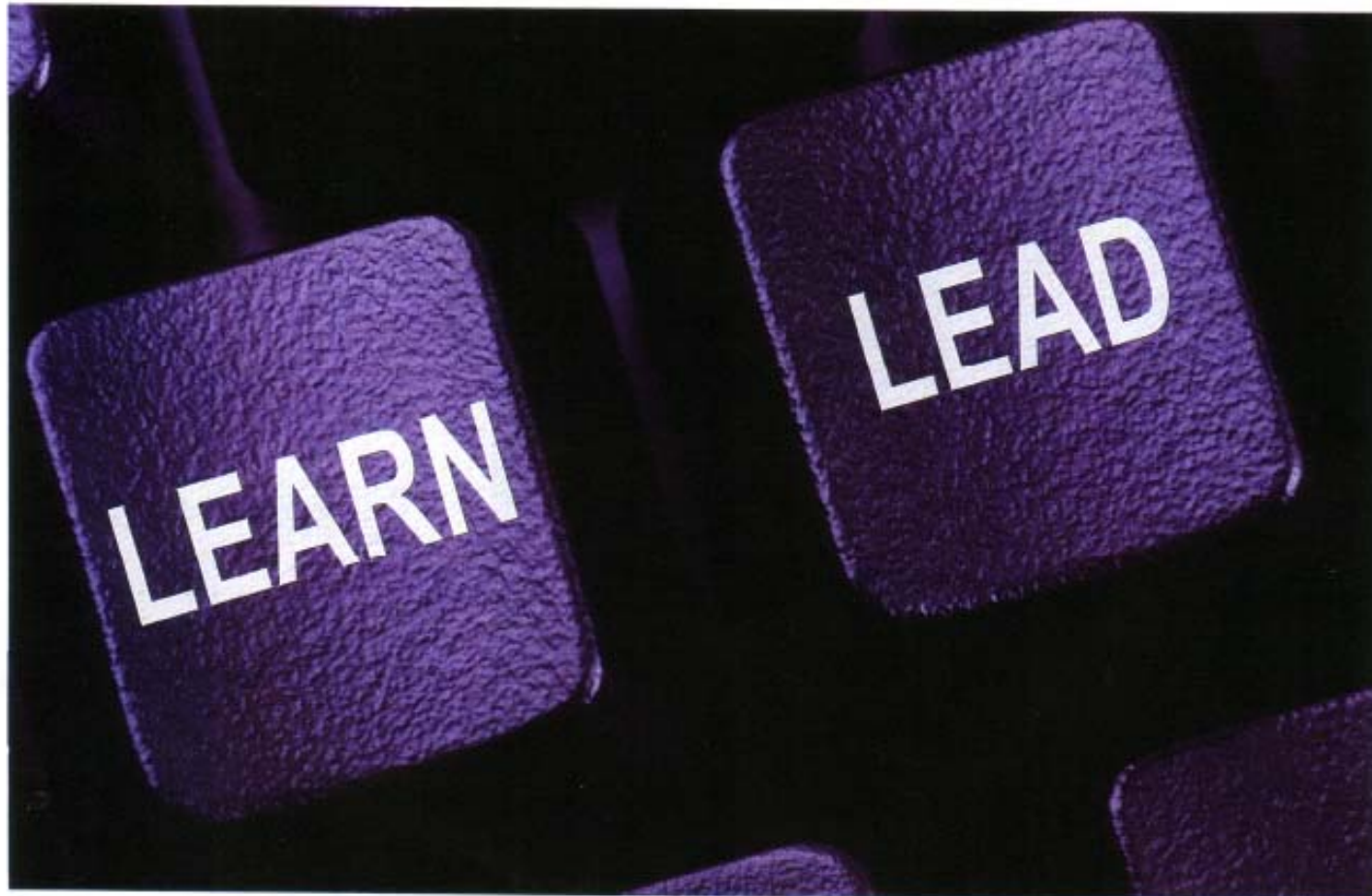
for the agencies to which he supplies services, and calls users "customers") are asking it to go beyond its initial brief.

"It is a maturity thing," he says. "Some of the other shared services practitioners I have spoken to say they get the same: as people get familiar they want more."

Nicholson takes this as a sign of success. "We like to talk about partnership models, and to be thought of as part of the business shows shared services is working," he says.

Like any IT operation, the DPI cannot deliver those expanded services without also expanding its workforce, and Nicholson says meeting demand means that finding the right people "is becoming more and more important to us."

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One obvious source of talent is graduate recruitment, but that tactic is not one that Nicholson felt would yield the right staff to meet DPI's needs for staff skilled in business applications. Graduates, after all, often possess excellent technical skills, but have seldom acquired the experience and the skills to wield such software effectively. Recruiting experienced staff is also tricky, Nicholson says, as "we have to compete with the rest of the workforce, and we cannot [compete effectively] on salary."

Recruitment partnership

Nicholson's next step was an engagement with Corporate Information Systems (CIS), a managed contract labour provider.

"CIS had started to run its graduate program, so we took someone in and ran them through our support desk and then onto the main team. They came in with some technology know-how and we have had two years to work with him and [develop a skill-set] more tailored to our needs."

Nicholson says he chose this path because "we don't have that relationship with the universities. We would have to go through a standard process of recruiting," and with salary and other issues, it would have been harder to find talent.

The nature of the CIS' offering also made sense to the Department, because CIS is initially responsible for the workers, and Nicholson believes the company therefore "has a vested interest in doing more screening of résumés than we would." Hiring staff in this way is also flexible – Nicholson can make an offer or the engagement with CIS means graduates can continue to work for the firm – while graduates arrive with the expectation they'll be assigned to a certain area. "When I compare it to other graduate programs, you get real continuity instead of an expectation of rotation."

"Try before you buy is quite appealing," too.

That's not to say that the DPI is using this recruitment tactic as a way to focus young careers. Nicholson says he has half a dozen staff that have become part of a 'positive attrition' plan that has seen them move from the support desk to other roles in the department.

"Graduates are mentored by CIS – they get good stuff there – and we mentor them with a senior technical manager. After two years as a graduate, we offer them a role.

"If we get someone in at Grade Three we can nurse them to Grade Six," he says.

"My ability to retain people is limited: experienced people come in at Grade Five or Six. This lets us bring in graduates and they get really good experience."

Hiring experienced contractors remains an option for the DPI, and Nicholson is happy to do so to help out on projects. Overall, however, he feels that going after graduates in this way is better than competing with private-sector employers for talent, although the jury is out – to some extent – on the issue of experiences versus enthusiasm.

"We do ask ourselves if it is better to have someone with 20 years' experience, or a graduate who is a sponge for knowledge," he says. "Kids coming out of school have the skills, and we need to teach them the business rules rather than the technology. That has real benefits as well; they do not start here with preconceived ideas." ❁

Employment market hots up

Employers are finding it harder to recruit the talent they need, according to three recent pieces of research.

Recruitment firm Hudson's most recent Employment Expectations survey found that employers' hiring intentions rose for a sixth consecutive quarter, leading Martin Retschko, the firm's National Practice Director, to state "This is one of the strongest levels of confidence across all industries nationally. Organisations across a wide range of sectors are currently making significant investments in technology [and] ... a number of major financial services providers have embarked on ambitious transformation programs; the mining and resources sector has invested heavily in new technologies to support expansion; and the utilities sector has invested in the delivery of new energy saving technologies and services."

"This is flowing through to the labour market and a shortage of skilled candidates is reappearing, with architects, business analysts and project managers in high demand."

The Clarius Index, a study of employment trends across the

economy, says that "Both demand and supply for Computing Professionals has softened in the September quarter, with supply falling further than demand."

"The supply of workers fell 7,200 to 198,900 workers, while demand fell 5,200 to 201,600 workers. This resulted in a shortage of approximately 2,800 Computing Professionals."

"The nature of the IT sector is that it is rapidly evolving, due to new advancements in technology," the report adds. "This means that demand for skilled workers is likely to remain strong."

A third source indicating troubled times is KPMG's 2010 Skilled Migration Survey, which indicates (perhaps ominously) that "Most indicators suggest the re-emergence of serious skills shortages in Australia," and adds that shortages are likely to be most pronounced in the "professional, technical and trades categories."

Skilled migration levels, the Survey adds, are currently too low, and nearly half of respondents reported some level of skills shortage impacting their organisation.