

Interpersonal skills put focus on a 'we' not 'me' attitude

ADVICE | Job seekers are advised to think of themselves as part of a successful team

BY BRIAN MORTON
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If you're in the process of searching out your dream job, think 'we,' not 'me.'

That's the word from an executive in the human resources field who maintains that interpersonal skills, or "soft skills," are more important than ever in securing that cherished job — or retaining that cherished employee.

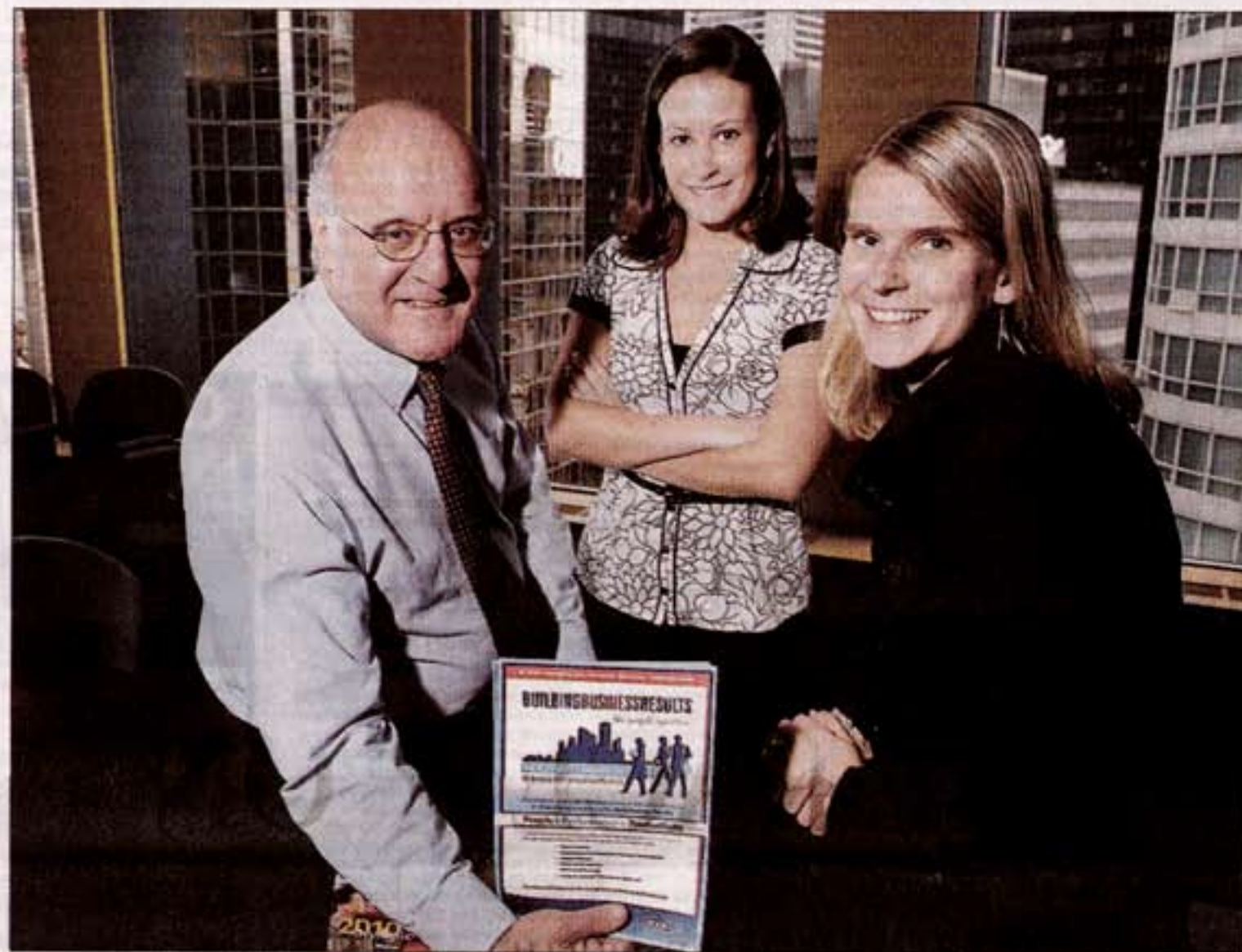
"In these days of Blackberrys and voicemail, [it has] created interpersonal communication voids," said Simon Evans, CEO of Vancouver-based B.C. Human Resources Management Association, a non-profit organization with 3,500 members and 2,700 affiliates.

"The downside is a lack of one-on-one verbal communication that helps create a better team spirit. Everybody's pretty good technically, but on the other side there has been a tendency about 'me.' But teams aren't about 'me' — they're about 'us,' about problem solving together, diplomacy."

Evans said that technical skills are very important, but that when he looks for someone, attitude is critical. "If they're positive, they have a good attitude of working with people. You look for people who work cooperatively, but that doesn't mean a 'yes' man or 'yes' person."

"It means being able to acknowledge that there might be a different opinion and that you can constructively discuss that with your peer [worker] or manager."

Traits that Evans looks for include "politeness, a readiness



Simon Evans (left) with Trina Wright, (centre) and Kara Douglas in the human resources management association's downtown office.

to engage in the conversation, the thank yous, tact, honesty, integrity and caring about their fellow employees."

Evans said that B.C.'s strong economy puts many employees in a position in which they can "pick and choose" jobs.

Because of that, companies are trying to become "preferred

employers" that emphasize team spirit and interpersonal relationships. "Retention is important. If they [employees] are not engaged, they drift. It's not just about the bottom line."

Evans's comments follow the release of a survey this month suggesting that technical skills are overrated and that it's not

what you know or who you know — it's how well you play with others.

Sixty-seven per cent of human resource managers polled by OfficeTeam, HR.com and the International Association of Administrative Professionals [IAAP] said they would hire an applicant with strong soft skills

whose technical abilities were lacking; only nine per cent would hire someone who had strong technical expertise but weak interpersonal skills.

According to the survey, which polled 300 administrative professionals and 400 HR managers,

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the overwhelming majority [93 per cent] of respondents felt technical skills are easier to teach than soft skills. The survey was released to coincide with last week's Administrative Professionals Week.

Valued soft skills, followed by the percentage of managers who rated them as most in demand, were:

- Organizational skills, 87 per cent.
- Verbal communication, 81 per cent.
- Teamwork and collaboration, 78 per cent.
- Problem solving, 60 per cent.
- Tact and diplomacy, 59 per cent.
- Business writing, 48 per cent.
- Analytical skills, 45 per cent.

Lisa Fried, division director for OfficeTeam in Surrey, said in an interview that the survey is relevant for B.C. because of the province's strong economy.

"Certainly in B.C., the administrative sector continues to grow and grow. Their roles are changing and it's becoming more important for administrators to take on more responsibilities. The economy is very strong. All these companies have administrative professionals."

Fried said technical skills are "cut and dry," but that interpersonal skills are more "situational and complex."

"Soft skills are non-technical. You need to be able to read people and understand where they're coming from in order to respond effectively."

Sandra P. Chandler, international president for IAAP, said in a statement that the survey results indicate an increasingly complex administrative world. "Today's professionals often negotiate with vendors, plan meetings and special events, create presentations, and interview and supervise other employees. While office technology skills are very important, excellent interpersonal abilities are invaluable and usually difficult to teach."

Chandler also said that now is a good time to help staff grow professionally. "Our research shows that administrative professionals appreciate more meaningful and long-lasting recognition. To help support staff enhance their effectiveness, managers should provide them with the opportunity to attend professional conferences or take relevant courses."

Meanwhile, Evans believes many companies are seeing the light. "There's a wind of change as we move back to some of the soft skills."

OfficeTeam is a staffing service specializing in the temporary placement of administrative and office support professionals, with 300 locations worldwide.

IAAP is an association for administrative support staff, while HR.com is a social network and online community of HR executives.

bmorton@png.comwest.com