

ERP Careers

"I have a strong financial management background and am familiar with computers but I have no direct experience with any of the ERP packages."

"I have over 20 years of manufacturing experience. I have good team management and leadership skills. I have worked for a few months in SAP implementation on the functional side. The only problem is that I do not have any configuration experience. SAP consultants did that part. Can I get a position as SAP consultant? Do I have to acquire any other skills or attend any training?"

"I have a Masters in Industrial Engineering and have worked in as an Industrial Engineer for a large steel manufacturer. I have good functional experience but none on ERP. Where can I get training in ERP?"

"I have an MBA in Finance and four years business experience. I'd like to get into ERP. Which package should I go for—SAP, Baan, Oracle, Sage or QAD? Is ERP still a good career choice?"

"I am an engineering graduate with no experience. I have heard lots of good things about ERP. How do I get experience?"

These are a few examples of the kind of questions that are being asked by professionals who want to make a career switch to ERP. The hype and the mystical aura that surrounds it and the articles and news items in the media have made ERP the latest buzzword and hundreds of professionals want to join the ERP bandwagon. Clearly, ERP is a hotter-than-hot field right now. But what is not clear is how to get close enough to bask in the reflected ERP glow. In this section we will look at various ways to get into ERP, make a career and become successful.

SKILL INVENTORY

A good place to start is by critically and realistically assessing your skill set. As you can gather from the questions asked, people hope to get into ERP from all kinds of angles. Your particular approach depends on the kinds of skills and experience you bring to the table. The fresh college graduate with a B.Tech. in Computer Science will market him/ herself quite differently from an IT professional with two or three years of hands-on technical experience. Similarly, a financial manager with a 15-20 year business and consulting career reflects an entirely different scenario and would approach getting into ERP accordingly.

The point to bear in mind is that unlike other traditional IS/ IT projects, ERP is a corporate-wide, mission-critical implementation driven by business goals. As such the successful ERP implementation draws from both sides of the functional/technical divide. Look at your skills holistically—get a sense of the 'big picture'. Once you have established the flow of your career path, you can effectively capitalize on your experience and skills, and find the right niche in the vast ERP market.

One word of caution; if your skill set is not suitable for an ERP career, then do not try to make it suitable using the 'brutal force' method. Because, even though ERP is a booming area now, any

sensible person will know that it not going to remain like that forever. The ERP package you select may merge or be absorbed by another company. So do not jettison all that hard-earned knowledge and experience. Be selective in your choice of package: choose one that fits well with your core of skills, experience and education. That way you will be better prepared to navigate the ebbs and flows of the ERP job market.

TRY WITH YOUR CURRENT EMPLOYER

Once you have taken stock of your skill inventory and assessed carefully your skill set, experience and career goals, you will be in a position to decide whether you want to enter the ERP market or not. Remember, sticking with your area of expertise and building on it gives coherence and depth to your resume.

The best way to minimize the risk of unemployment is to seek opportunities within your current company (i.e., if you are employed and your company is implementing or has implemented a package). Many companies are in the process of, or are about to start an ERP implementation. Your first task therefore, is to find out as much as you can about your company's ERP plans. That way you will see if and how, you can be included and the best ways to capitalize on your existing skills. Most companies have some sort of methodology for implementation, which outlines the form the changeover will take. Your chances of getting hands-on implementation experience probably depend on the kind of plan your company intends to follow.

If the methodology is a BPR (business process reengineering), top to bottom, change management process as often favored by the Big 6 consulting firms, external consultants will usually dominate. This fact effectively lessens your chances of getting the hands-on experience you need, particularly in the most attractive areas on the functional side such as configuration. Most likely you will encounter the BPR approach if you work for a large company. Mid-range to smaller companies may well take the technical approach to implementation, using ERP more as a specific implementation to complement an existing company vision. The technical approach has less dependency on external management consultants.

The point to keep in mind is that you will have to do some scouting around and find out as much as you can. Which consulting firm is involved? What is the make-up of the implementation team? Knowing the likely number of consultants and the project areas they will be working on, and so on lets you see where your skills can best be applied. If you haven't already done so, this may also be a good time to do some background research on the company.

All companies select an in-house team to work together with the external consultants. If you are not selected at this time, do not give up. Having done some background research, you are in an informed position to approach your manager and try to negotiate a place on the team. It can't be overstated here, that you need to appear interested both in the project and the company. You should express a keen interest in the overall goals of the ERP implementation and emphasize the ways in which your skills, technical experience and knowledge of the company will add value to their investment in your ERP training. Many companies are reluctant to spend time and money in ERP training so you need to convince them of your high-level of commitment. De-emphasize/ downplay your burning desire to get a foot in the ERP door; focus instead on the skills you bring to the project. In doing so you will be marketing yourself effectively, connecting the dots of your skills and solid background with the company, your education and interests in order to create the big picture of your suitability as a team member.

Always bear in mind that ERP is a business driven implementation. Therefore, those of you with a technical background (a programmer, for example) should emphasize those aspects of your experience that involve teamwork, co-operation and communication. If you do get an opportunity to take part in an implementation, try to dovetail it into your existing skill set. The company may not be implementing the package that you want. You might be interested in SAP R/3, whereas the company is implementing Baan. So what do you do? What you should do depends on how badly you want to get into ERP. If you really want to get in, take the opportunity for hands-on experience wherever you find it, as long as it is with one of the ERP industry leaders such as SAP, Baan, Oracle, PeopleSoft or JD Edwards. Once you have gained a reasonable amount of experience, you can always cross over into your preferred ERP package. If you do hit the jackpot and your present company agrees to train you and give you hands-on experience, maybe even in the fabled configuration process, thank God and go for it. Although in the long run you need to manage your career and aim for continuity in your area of expertise, in the short run you need to get a foot in the door. So stay focused, be flexible. Once you are in, you can maneuver into a place that better fits your skills.

But you might not be able to get into the ERP team even with all this research and hard work. What to do then? There are no two ways about it; hands-on experience is the key to becoming marketable. But, if you cannot get onto an implementation directly, your company may be willing to let you attend ERP training courses. Once again, the key is to negotiate yourself into a place, leveraging your good reputation and excellent skills.

Since you have studied your company's plans for ERP implementation and made your case for getting involved, you should have a pretty good idea where you stand with them and their level of support for your career. If you decide that your plans to develop an ERP career are unattainable in your present company, you may need to look outside your company.

MAKE YOUR OWN "STRATEGIC ENTRY PLAN"

We have so far examined various strategies for entering the ERP market either from within your existing company, or as a consultant. "Exhausting the internal possibilities" is how we describe these "first step" techniques for getting the kind of hands-on ERP implementation you are looking for. In the next few sections, we will consider strategies that you might employ or have to employ if you are just not having any success getting into ERP from within your existing company. We will call this the "strategic entry plan"—to encourage you to research the ERP market with a well thought out career strategy in place. First we will look at some of the issues facing those of you on the technical side of ERP. Keep in mind, whether you end up with a consulting firm, with an end-user, or even as a contractor, the key is to gain ERP implementation experience. It is always important to do this research while you are still with your current employer.

In other words, once you have worked out a viable exit plan, the temptation may well be to head out in the direction of the current month's hottest area. Not so fast. In the long run it makes more sense to go over your work experience and skills set, and draw up a plan that ties your existing strengths and skills into your career goals. That way you will lend a credibility and continuity to your resume that works in your favor, rather than giving the impression of someone who is only interested in the money. As we have discussed before in this section, employers may be reluctant to train someone in ERP implementation who looks likely to jump ship as soon as possible. They want to see some evidence of interest and commitment to the company itself, some way in which you can add value to them.

In looking over your skills and goals, it may help to define what it is you want to do. You might say something like: "I want hands-on implementation experience, with a market-leading ERP package, Baan, PeopleSoft, Oracle, SAP or JD Edwards." With that focus, you can look at the wide range of possibilities within each of the two distinct implementation areas—technical and functional. Generally speaking, you will fall into one or the other. If you are a programmer and/or have a technical IS background you will fit into the technical side; if you are an accountant or have any similar business/ manufacturing background you will be in the functional group. You need to decide which aspect of the ERP market best suits your skills and experience. Some of you are probably thinking, "I am a programmer and am ready for a change, and I have heard there is more money to be made in the functional side, so does what you are saying mean I'm stuck on the technical side?" Well, not stuck exactly—it is possible to make the transition from technical to functional (or the other way) but make sure you are willing to make a long-term career switch. Real career changes should be permanent. Even if you do decide to switch you may have to stay in technical (or functional) for a while in order to get into ERP.

But what about the money issue? Is it true that there is more to be made on the functional side of the divide? Probably, functional skills rely heavily on communication and specific industry experience. These skills are not as important in the technical area (though given the business-driven nature of ERP they cannot be completely overlooked). It is true that those in the technical area can be cross-trained more easily—programmers are expected to learn new languages as a matter of course. All is not gloom however, because that same flexibility leads to an easier entry into the implementation cycle. Unlike those in the functional area, who ideally should have full life cycle experience and absolutely must have configuration experience, those on the technical side can enter into any point of the implementation cycle since many of the implementation phases are ongoing. This truth applies even to batch data conversion, which comes early in the implementation cycle but may come up several more times if the plan is to go-live by location.

Another advantage to those entering ERP in the technical side centers on the choice of packages. While those on the functional side may have to settle for a particular package depending on their industry background or find themselves in a package that does not play to their strengths, the same does not apply to those on the technical side. All ERP implementations need programmers to install packages and upgrades (coding work in the major packages is pretty much on a level playing field). Usually the proprietary tools are a step above the code the program is written in, but strong technical skills carry the day. You may like the look of a certain package, but if you are on the technical side the specific package you work with really does not matter as long as it is one of the top ERP players. As a programmer what you do want to be clear about is where your skills fit into one of the four major implementation areas on the technical side. These are:

- **Batch data conversion**—This is the most mundane level and typically consists of a one-time transfer of data from a legacy environment or from mainframe to client/ server.
- **Interfacing**—This is the more advanced level. There is ongoing need for programs to interface with one another. Often companies retain specific types of programs (either off-the-shelf or hand built) despite implementing ERP. Typically, these holdover programs do not share the same standards as the ERP software and therefore the need for interfacing to establish compatibility throughout the company's "homemade suite" of applications.
- **Customization of software**—This is the most exciting and creative programming field i.e. actually customizing the proprietary software. Although the ERP package manufacturers frown on the practice companies frequently find they must customize the ERP source code to

ensure competitive practices in their industry. (This practice means that proprietary upgrades must also be customized.)

- **Application development**—This too is a very creative field, working with all kinds of third-party, bolt-on products, as well as directly with ERP package companies. These bolt-on companies can be very exciting but potentially risky environments (vulnerable to buy outs, mergers, etc.), but application development is a definite option for programmers trying to get into ERP.

Before we wrap up this discussion of fitting in on the technical side of ERP, we will take look at the systems administrator/ DBA side of the story. Those of you in those areas may be wondering how you fit into the picture. Typically, ERP technical work has two distinct areas: programming and systems administration/ DBA. In SAP for example, the system admin/ DBA niche is highly evolved. It is officially called BASIS and constitutes a hiring market unto itself. In other ERP markets the systems admin/ DBA role is less clearly defined in terms of the hiring market and so those in the systems admin/ DBA field should either look hard at SAP or consider branching out into some programming work in another ERP package. For technical work in the other leading packages, you may need both programming and systems administration skills—although you may well be able to enter into ERP on either side by focusing on your strengths.

If you are a systems administrator with hopes of entering the ERP market, the trick is to spot the way to get in. If for example you are an Oracle DBA, focus on managing the ERP project databases. Play up the relationship between the installation of the software and the integration of the platforms. In the SAP Basis area, responsibilities include installing software, upgrading new releases, working with data bases, insuring compatibility between multiple locations and platforms (e.g. UNIX, NT), security and authorization, performance tuning and lastly, back up and recovery. While the other ERP programs do not have the same specialty as SAP Basis, there may be similar overlaps between programming and systems administration. Look at your technical experience and see where it fits. Be resourceful. You may find a way into ERP off the beaten path.

Perhaps the best advice one can give you is to follow the heart and go for the challenge and do not assume that you have to abandon technical work in order to succeed in ERP. In doing so you will enhance your skills while enjoying the process. If you get into one of the main ERP packages in an area compatible with your skills and training, you will soon end up where you want to be.

So far we have talked about the ways in which those of you on the technical side might approach entry into the ERP market. Now we will look at some of the issues facing those of you on the functional side. It is generally true that the most sought-after candidates are those who have full life cycle implementation experience. But how do you get this experience and what is it anyway? Although it may be described differently by different people, in the end the life cycle boils down to: package evaluation, project design and gap analysis, configuration, testing, go-live and end-user training.

It is generally accepted that the big five—Baan, PeopleSoft, SAP, Oracle and JD Edwards—are stronger in certain areas than in others and each one is madly trying to add functionality in areas where they have been lacking. For example, PeopleSoft is strong in HR and less so in manufacturing; Baan on the other hand, is historically stronger in manufacturing than in financial. Likewise, some packages are perceived as having an easier implementation cycle or having better graphical user interfaces. While these general perceptions may have some truth to them, the fact is that the ERP packages are being constantly updated and revised. So, the best way to decide on which package is for you is to check the trade articles and reviews and see where each package is adding functionality. All

the packages are trying to get involved in supply chain and new vertical markets. So, even if the package is not traditionally strong in your area, you should not rule it out. However, we encourage you to keep in mind that one of the major distinctions between the technical and functional areas is that the package you choose to be involved in on the functional side really does make a difference. So, be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each package vis-a-vis your own particular expertise when deciding which package to go for. Usually, the package whose components are most closely tied to what you do will be where you can make the best contribution.

Although the technical and functional sides are split into two pretty distinct areas for the purpose of this section, the reality is that people on the functional side do need some technical know-how. Specifically, they need configuration skills. All ERP implementations involve both technical and functional configuration: they are the common denominator running through all the ERP packages. On the technical side, this may involve configuring the database system into ERP specifications or configuring SAP to run on 20 servers. On the functional side, configuration is much more business process oriented. In virtually all cases, whenever you see the word 'configuration' on a job posting it refers to this functional work. Those on the functional team responsible for configuration have to understand what it is the company does and how the business runs in order to map these functions into the ERP package. Once the business processes have been assessed, the ERP package is configured to reflect the individual company's business needs.

Configuring a company's system reveals not only the strengths of a company's business process but also—and perhaps more importantly—its weaknesses. It is vital to the health of the company and to the success of the ERP implementation that those configuring the system are able to explain what will not fit into the package and where the gaps in functionality occur. Some companies may have an overnight defective parts system that cannot be configured into the system for example, or some other kind of shipping process that will not conform to the package. The company obviously needs to know which processes have to change in the process of implementation. Finding out what will work and what won't entail knowledge of the business process itself, and an ability to work with people throughout the company. As a rule, in most large implementations the functional configurations are split between the different areas within the company, so some will attend to HR, some will be involved in financials and so forth.

Given this obvious need for business knowledge in the configuration process, one of the most frequently asked questions is, "how come someone who graduated from college two years ago, with no business experience, gets hired by a Big6 consulting company and now has configuration certification while I have 15 years plant maintenance and can't get my foot in the ERP door?" Part of the reason for this is the high cost of implementation. Companies are trying to cut the significant cost of ERP implementation any way they can. One strategy is to have the consulting firm handle the configuration component of the implementation. Training is expensive and companies are all too aware that retaining highly skilled functional people with ERP implementation experience is by no means a sure thing, especially those with full life cycle plus implementation experience. They may train some of their own people but companies and consulting firms both need consultants with proven ERP implementation skills. Yes, your industry skills honed over 10–15 years do matter but to get your foot in the door you need the ERP project experience and, in particular, the configuration skills. At the same time, ERP vendors are constantly striving to lower configuration costs. Strategies currently being pursued include automation and pre-configuration. Baan for instance, has developed Orgware, an automated configuration tool while SAP is working on pre-configured industry-specific templates, which can be tweaked for each individual company—ASAP.

The current ERP industry push towards developing the mid-range market in turn creates an added incentive to reduce costs, encouraging the sought-after mid-range companies to feel they can afford to implement a top-of-the-line ERP package. By creating a custom pre-configured ERP module for a particular industry—say a shoe software-manufacturing prototype created for a shoe manufacturer—the need for hands-on custom configuration is reduced, thereby keeping the cost ratio down. The hope is that a kind of question and answer format can be used to find out the kinds of business process information hitherto addressed through the hands-on configuration process. In theory, these pre-configured tools should save time and money, but every business is unique and at least some configuration is unique to each project.

Where does this leave you in your search for full cycle implementation experience, including the all-important configuration experience? You will still need configuration experience, but in the context of broader ERP experience! As configuration becomes more fully automated those skills will lose some of their market demand and while configuration skills will always be necessary, the innovations in automated pre-configurations tools will inevitably lessen the demand for 'pure' configuration skills. So, if you only have configuration skills you will not fit in at any place. You only have 'soft' technical skills and no real-life cycle implementation skills either. But if you have experience implementing—say, PeopleSoft—and you understand configuration, and on top of that you have gone through a full life cycle implementation, then configuration experience becomes the icing on the cake.

As you move into the ERP field it is important to know what experience will be most marketable in the long run and not simply chase what is trendy right now. As you look for your place in the functional side of ERP, get those configuration skills by all means, but make sure you are also building up your full life cycle skills for the broader career path they provide.

As we have seen, in terms of getting into the ERP market, understanding the implementation cycle is paramount to those of you in the functional side. And at the risk of boring you out of your minds, we will repeat once again the central mantra of ERP implementations—all the packages are business driven in that they are trying to provide integrated functionality across all the departmental areas of the company (HR, manufacturing, finance). Consequently, it makes sense to think of your career plan in a similarly integrated way and choose the ERP package that most closely mirrors your skills and experience. All of the leading packages are known to have their strengths and weaknesses—and although you should not dismiss a particular package just because it is not as strong in your area, you should pay some attention to the package's pros and cons when making your choice. Being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the major packages allows you to figure out which package's functional strengths shows your skills and experience in the most favorable light.

But having the skills and experience is not enough in today's highly competitive market. It seems quite obvious—OK, ERP is business driven, I know the business, and so what is the problem? But you cannot expect to land a job in the ERP market on business savvy alone. In fact, your experience by itself may not be enough to get you past the first cut in the job search. Today's employers are not necessarily all that interested in your employment history in and of itself. In today's technology driven market the perception is that skills have a very short shelf life and for the most part are not transferable. The college graduate may not have the business skills but does have up-to-the-minute technology skills and therefore seems a safer bet. Part of the problem is that the high cost of ERP implementations have made employers adopt a hired-gun mentality but a deeper, more far reaching reason is the change in the nature of the employee/ employer relationship. Employers for the most

part are no longer interested in viewing employees as long-term investments who will mature into valued stock, but see them rather as short-term turnarounds.

The net result of this emphasis on quick return is the well documented difficulty employers have in retaining highly skilled professionals and the concomitant growth of free agents. So where does this leave you as a highly skilled, experienced professional hoping to get into the ERP market? Back to the need for strategic career planning to get around this seeming Catch-22 situation—you need the ERP implementation skills to get into the field, but can't get the skills unless you are already there.

It is pretty well taken for granted that anyone hoping to get into the ERP field has to have some technical skills. For the maximum marketability, configuration experience should be gained within the context of full life cycle implementation experience. That is when your business experience really counts, when it accompanies up-to-date, hands-on implementation experience. In fact, given the push toward automation and pre-configuration tools—although there is always going to be a need for some configuration skills—one of the most vulnerable positions to be in the ERP market might be as a young configuration consultant with no significant industry experience. But if you can obtain ERP experience across the full implementation cycle—including configuration experience—you have diversified your skills and broadened your experience in ways that will stand you in good stead over the long haul.

But as always there is a catch—if your company is implementing ERP and you are on the implementation team that is not in itself a guarantee that you will get configuration experience. Often the consulting firm will do the bulk of the configuration phase of the implementation and when they leave the project, most of the configuration skills go with them. If that happens and you get frozen out of the configuration phase, you might find yourself unable to capitalize on your implementation experience. Certainly, you will find it difficult to contract without that all-important configuration experience. Should you find yourself in this position, try to get on with one of the consulting companies in the hope that they will train you in configuration. Generally speaking, the big consulting companies are involved in the larger implementations, which in turn provide opportunities for junior configuration positions on the implementation teams.

We have talked a lot about the full life cycle implementation without describing it. However, broadly speaking, we can talk about the following aspects:

- **Package evaluation**—Not everyone considers this part of the implementation *per se*, and some companies rely on consultants when choosing a package, but sometimes you may be involved as part of the implementation team. Say for example you are pulled out of accounting or sales and distribution to be part of the implementation team, you may be consulted on the pros and cons of different packages and how they compare to your company's functional practices in your area. Certainly, the more familiarity you have with the packages and the more you understand how ERP works, the more you can add value to this phase.
- **Project planning phase**—This is the design component, which outlines the scope of the project. It is closely connected to the gap analysis phase.
- **Gap Analysis**—This is the phase arguably most crucial to the success of the ERP implementation and while only a few contractors specialize in it, most of the best consultants have been through it. Put very simply, this is the process through which companies create a complete model of where they are now and where they want to be headed. The trick is to design a model, which both anticipates and covers any functional gaps. It has been estimated that even the best ERP package custom tailored to a company's needs, meets only 80% to the company's functional requirements.

- **Configuration**—This is the main functional area of the implementation and the one phase of the implementation cycle you can truly specialize in on a contract basis. There is a bit of mystique around the configuration process and for good reason: the Holy Grail of ERP implementation is synchronizing existing company practices with the ERP package. In order to do so, business processes have to be understood and mapped in such a way that the arrived-at solutions match up with the overall goals of the company. But, companies can't just shut down their operations while the mapping processes take place. Hence, the prototype i.e. a simulation of the actual business processes the company will use when it goes live. The prototype allows for thorough testing of the "to be" model in a controlled environment. As the ERP consultants configure and test the prototype they attempt to solve any logistical problems inherent in the BPR before the actual go-live implementation. . In terms of your career planning, try to get onto the configuration/ prototype aspect of the implementation cycle but do not forget that as lucrative and valuable as this may be, these skills are even more valuable within the context of full life cycle implementation experience.
- **Team training**—Around the same time that the configuration is taking place, the implementation team is being trained, not so much on how to use the system but on how to implement it. You can specialize in this area—there is a bit of a cottage industry of people who do this implementation team training—however, you need hard-core implementation experience. It is a fairly lucrative seam in the ERP market but it is hard to break into. You must have actual, hands-on implementation experience as a consultant to do it. Be warned that the assignments are short-term and there is a high burnout rate. For the most part, consulting firms take care of the implementation team training themselves.
- **Testing**—Basically this is where you try to break the system. You have reached a point where you are testing real case scenarios. The system is configured and now you must come up with extreme-case scenarios—system overloads, multiple users logging on at the same time with the same query—designed specifically to find the weak link in the chain and fix it before the go live.
- **Go-live**—This is it. Lights on, switches thrown, gloves off. On the technical side the work is almost complete—data conversion is done, databases are up and running; and on the functional side, the prototype is fully configured and tested and ready to go operational. Post go-live functional configuration folks are, for the most part, ready to move on to another project and many people consider this the end of the functional cycle, but especially if this is your first implementation, it is a good idea to stick around for the inevitable debugging stage—another nice touch to a well rounded set of ERP implementation skills.
- **End-user training**—The most well rounded professionals have some end-user training experience (and ideally, some implementation team training, too). It shows a real ability to relay knowledge and information, and people skills too; since most end-users are not thrilled at having to change. But end-user training is a field unto itself—much bigger than implementation team training. Companies are beginning to take it seriously now that figures show that most implementations fail because of a lack of end-user training. Given that you do not have to have implementation experience, salaries are not as attractive in end-user training and I would not recommend it as a career move for those of you with implementation experience. It does afford a way into the ERP field however, for those of you looking for a roundabout way to get in. If you are interested in this as a possible entry point, try to get on with a consulting firm that does the full range of ERP implementations and see if you can eventually transfer from end-user training to the implementation side.

- **Post-implementation**—The maintenance mode is the final stage of implementation and not the ideal area to get into. Certainly, there are both technical and functional areas requiring package maintenance—upgrades for example. However, this area is the least marketable—you may want to do it for a while, but eventually you need to move on to other more challenging and marketable assignments to keep your career on track.

Although these phases may seem very linear and distinct from each other as outlined above, keep in mind that throughout an actual implementation, the phases are in fact quite fluid. In many cases, companies go through six or seven implementations—in different business units, different modules or manufacturing locations. So at any given time, more than one of the phases may be operational. Some companies opt for the one and only big bang, while other companies favor sequential rollouts—each company has different needs. The main thing you have to do is understand the cycle. Then you have the best chance of drawing on your industry experience and finding a way into your dream job as an ERP professional.

TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

We have looked at some of the strategies you might use to enter the ERP field—assessing your core skills; playing up your track record; seeking out creative ways to enter the field on the functional or technical side of the implementation cycle. We have called this process "exhausting your internal possibilities" and some of you might respond by saying, "that is all very well and good, but I don't think I have any internal possibilities. What now? Should I go for one of the training courses I see on the Web. Should I quit my job to train? Are the courses worth my time and money?" Good questions and serious concerns. So, in this section we will discuss the pros and cons of training and certification. We'll start with some short working definitions, which we will elaborate on throughout this section:

Certification usually comes after completion of a set of training courses, authorized by the software vendor and is contingent upon passing an exam. Training usually involves formal courses, either identical to those authorized by the software vendor, or similar in format and content but does not have to be sanctioned by an exam.

As a general rule, only consulting firms that are partners with the ERP vendor have access to these programs and exams for example, some consulting firms insist that all their consultants be certified. In some cases, the certification ratifies existing skills and experience and the consultant does not need any formal training but simply takes the exam. However if training is required, the consulting firm usually has access to the standardized training courses, which are designed specifically to cover the material required for certification. There is no question that certification has market clout, in that it carries more weight than training without certification, but it doesn't guarantee you an entry into ERP. The reality is that those of you who have access to certification probably have your foot in the door anyway. Most of the people who contact us with questions about the need or advantages of training/ certification are not consultants but end-users who, typically do not have the option of certification and are trying to get some kind of ERP training.

SHOULD I QUIT MY JOB?

You may be faced with some pretty hard decisions when it comes to training. It is often asked if it is worth quitting your job to take training courses and usually the answer we give is, no. Certainly, take time off if you can arrange it or use your vacation time if you are in a permanent position. I have

heard of contractors who fit training in between assignments. But, if you do have the opportunity to train, should you take it? Well the answer is a qualified yes. First of all, you should be aware that there is a hierarchy of training options. At the top of the ladder are the ones that give you access to the same training courses that accompany the certification program. You may have access to this type of training if you are working on an end-user implementation site or if your company is implementing an ERP package.

One rung down the ladder are the local proprietary software training centers, which offer all sorts of generic software training courses which mimic the vendor-authorized standard courses. The best of these training centers will guarantee you some kind of hands-on project experience at the end of the course. These can be a pretty good deal, even though you may have to make some kind of commitment to stay with the company offering you the hands-on experience for a certain amount of time, (and be forewarned, you are probably not going to get the going ERP rate). Keep the big picture in mind though; you are getting the training and the necessary hands-on project experience. One caveat, make sure there is an "escape clause" before you sign-on with a training company. You should not have to pay the full cost if they cannot find you hands-on project experience. Find a company with a good outplacement track record. Before you cough up your hard-earned dollars, do some market research to minimize the risks.

IS TRAINING MONEY WELL SPENT?

Here I feel confident in saying yes but.... Any investment you make in your career is definitely worth the money. As you well know, the technical field is constantly changing and in fact, I highly recommend that you put money aside for training and skills updates. Most employers are impressed by a candidate who has a track record of investing in his /her skills. It is definitely a no-loss situation to be proactive in updating your skill set. But, in and of itself, training does not guarantee you a job. And so I will not encourage you to take a loan to float the training—it is not worth financial hardship.

In fact, the most effective use of your time and money is that spent on the unglamorous and painstaking business of researching the ERP market, writing an excellent strategic resume and cover letter and approaching companies one by one. If you have the time and resources to train and self-market, then the training may give you an edge, but you have got to at least land a phone interview before your training course know-how will really help you. That is why the time you spend marketing yourself effectively is so crucial and why it is not really an either or situation.

Let us take a close look at how and at what point, your training course might impact your ERP job search: A PeopleSoft manager is hiring a Web developer with electronic commerce experience for a PeopleSoft/ Internet commerce project.

1. First Stage: Proven Internet commerce/ Java project experience. If you have PeopleSoft training but no Internet commerce you are screened out at this point.
2. Second Stage: All the Java/ Internet commerce applicants are phone screened. At this stage of the interview process the fact that you have PeopleSoft training will have a negligible effect. Probably 90% of those without training will also be phone screened.
3. Third stage: During the phone call, if (and only if) the manager likes your Java/ Internet experience, your PeopleSoft training becomes a plus. You might then get a first interview or even an offer.

It is in this kind of situation that the training courses are the icing on the cake. Remember that it is not the ERP training that gets you the interview; it is the relevant industry experience. Companies

have a short-term mentality and will be most attracted to an applicant with the kind of project experience they can use tomorrow. Additional training courses are a plus but they will not get you the interview.

One question that is very frequently asked is whether recruiters can help once you have had some training. The answer is no. Companies are disinclined to pay recruiters fees when they also have to absorb the costs of bringing an inexperienced ERP person up to speed. Of course, there are rare exceptions to this rule—if you have other relevant skills that are in high demand, a company may justify the recruiting fee. But generally, companies will pull someone from in-house who has a proven track record rather than pay for an unknown quantity. And it is this fact that explains why companies will not hire an outside applicant with just the training. After all, any company that is implementing ERP has access to these training courses for their current employees. Of course, they will prefer to train one of their own hard-working internal people rather than hire an outside applicant with no hands-on experience. That is why, to get in the door you must be able to fill a technical niche they cannot fill from the inside.

So if you do go ahead and get training in order to get into ERP, keep in mind that it is definitely worth the time and money and effort in the context of the other strategies we have talked so far. The biggest benefit to training may be the networking opportunities it can afford. The ERP market is still strong and when you think about it, if you embark on training now, you are not really going to be "market ready" for another year. In the meantime, those already in the field are increasing in marketability. Look carefully at all of the ways you can increase your options for strategic entry: training is just one of the ways in which you can get into this exciting field. Being creative and willing to take some risks may be the best advice I can give you.

SELF-MARKETING (AND THE TRANSFERABILITY OF ERP SKILLS BETWEEN PACKAGES)

We have covered a lot of ground in this section, suggesting various strategies for getting into ERP from different angles. Underscoring these strategies is the need for self-marketing. We all know that this is the least attractive and most painstaking option to many of you seeking a career in ERP. But as we have mentioned earlier, entry-level positions are very rare to come by; companies for the most part will train existing employees. Part of the problem stems from the high-level of unrealistic expectations about the current ERP market—there is still a perception out there that the ERP streets are paved with gold just for the taking. While that may have been true a few years ago, the reality now is that the ERP market is maturing and you cannot just walk in with little or no experience or look at it as a get-rich-quick scheme. But do not despair: ERP still affords a great career, combining technical and business skills like no other, with attractive salaries and interesting, innovative opportunities. With some planning and get-go, you will find a way to get hands-on experience.

The key is to exploit your existing skills and experience and get into an ERP package that is a good fit with your core skills. Some of you already working in an ERP environment may decide after careful consideration, that the best strategic career move involves switching packages: from one of the top packages to another, or from a small, relatively unknown ERP package to one of a market leader. Let us look at a few different situations and end with some advice on self-marketing for those of you with no ERP experience.

SWITCHING BETWEEN THE MAJOR ERP PACKAGES

As things stand right now, there is not a lot of opportunity to transfer between ERP packages, even among the top ERP packages. Companies tend not to be impressed with the idea that you know say, SAP and Oracle. As a matter of fact that may put them off—they may well be suspicious of the quality of your hands-on implementation experience, doubting that you have had the time to focus in-depth on more than one package. Employers want people who add value today, not some time in the future and tend not to consider experience in one ERP package transferable to another. Generally speaking, it is not until you get to the level of Practice Manager (or some comparable position that assumes a detailed knowledge of the overall ERP market, rather than specific knowledge of one particular area within the package) that ERP skills are regarded as transferable.

In the best of all possible worlds, you will end up in one of the top five ERP packages and live happily ever after. But what if you end up in one of the top ERP packages and decide it is really not for you? It is not easy to transfer. It can be done but, if you are motivated purely by the lure of money, think twice. As I have already pointed out there is not a whole lot of respect for the concept of multi-package consulting as of now, and the era of employers throwing gold coin at the mere mention of ERP experience is definitely over.

Really, you should only consider switching between the top packages if you truly believe your skills would be better put to use in another package. For example, if your background was in HR payroll and you wound up in Baan and you felt you could offer more working with PeopleSoft HR. That might work but do not have any illusions about the market—it is pretty unforgiving and it is not going to wait until you re-tool. And if you do decide to make a switch from one of the top package to another your best luck might be to get on board a consulting firm with an ERP practice in more than one area.

This not to say that at some point in the future the ERP market may not develop into multi-package implementations, taking the strongest applications from within two or more packages. There are definitely trends away from the homogenous one-size-fits-all implementations towards a more heterogeneous environment, especially now that increasingly standard interfaces between applications are reducing the need for costly custom interface work. But even with these developments, the best career strategies are still those that focus on deepening your field of expertise.

If you feel that you must get more than one ERP package under your belt, aim for broad-based, multi-package experience in one specific application area—in ERP financial applications, say SAP FI and Oracle Financials—for example, rather than trying to be an "expert" in SAP FI/ PeopleSoft HR/ Oracle Manufacturing. If you think about it, it makes more sense to develop depth and continuity in your skills set, rather than chasing after whatever happens to be hot at any given moment. Even if you decide to chase the hottest area of the market—right now Internet commerce, or the supply chain areas are really hot—you are still going to need core skills; they will give you the foundation you need to stay marketable in the long run.

SWITCHING FROM A SMALL PACKAGE TO THE BUG LEAGUE

The same transferability issues between top ERP packages discussed above also apply between small packages and the top ERP package. It is not that it is impossible to transfer; it just takes a bit of work on your part. In these circumstances, the risk of getting stuck in a fringe package is great enough to justify your efforts to move into the Top 5. If you do decide that you want to transfer from a smaller

package into one of the Top 5, consulting firms is probably the way to go. Try to get on with a consulting firm that is involved with the package you are involved with and one of the top ERP packages. Ask around, use your industry contacts, find out who is implementing the major packages and try to get on board.

There are some small, industry-specific packages, which have captured particular industries. If your expertise is in that particular industry, you might find that you are in a very advantageous position to capitalize on your strengths and create a rewarding niche for yourself. In those circumstances, what does it matter what the top ERP packages are up to? If your package has a lock on your industry and a viable future in it and your rates are good, staying put would not be a bad idea. But if you are considering a small package that does not have a strong industry niche and that is trailing the top ERP package, without much chance of capturing a slice of the market, then you should think twice about signing on.

SELF-MARKETING FOR THOSE WITH LITTLE OR NO ERP EXPERIENCE

First of all, it is best to target one of the top ERP packages. One cannot be really sure about who is the top ERP package with the amount of mergers and acquisitions that is happening. The only two companies one can be sure will be in the top 5 are SAP and Oracle. PeopleSoft and JD Edwards who were in the top 5 a few years ago have now been acquired by Oracle. Currently, the top 5 ERP vendors (as of December 2006) are SAP, Oracle, Sage, Microsoft Dynamics and SSA Global. But SSA Global has already been taken over by Infor Global Solutions. So, from here onwards we will avoid the term 'Top 5' or 'Big 5' and use the top ERP packages or top ERP vendors.

The same rationale applies here as it does in the discussion of switching from a small package to one of the top ERP packages. You do not want to get stuck in a small, lesser-known packages that will ultimately limit your flexibility and ability to make attractive career moves. Unless of course, it is a small package that has captured the industry in which you have an interest and suitable skills and experience. Then you might fill a niche and have a flourishing career outside of the top ERP packages. It does happen. Whatever you decide in the way of package though, first of all, make a mental checklist of the strategies we have outlined throughout the series:

- Exhaust your internal possibilities
- Evaluate your skills and experience
- Understand the kinds of skills an ERP implementation entails
- Understand the difference between the technical and functional areas of ERP

Although you can try to get into the one which seems the best fit with your skill set, it does not really matter which one you enter, as long as it is one of the major packages (with the exceptions as described above). If you have little or no ERP experience, think of creative ways to leverage your existing skills. Are you multi-lingual? Think international ERP applications; Internet development experience? Think ERP Web development; EDI? ERP-EDI work. In other words, make the most of your specific expertise and use it to your advantage by targeting a niche that needs to be filled. For example, I have heard of a doctor with less than eight months ERP implementation experience who got on with a pharmaceutical company which was in the process of implementing ERP. His medical background tied in with the pharmaceutical company's mission and allowed him to come on board up and running.

By emphasizing your current skills and how they will be of use to the company overall from day one rather than your desire to get into ERP, you are more likely to create an opening for yourself.

Companies are just not all that interested in bringing people in from the outside and training them because it is too expensive and time-consuming—they already have employees who can be trained. That is why, although training can be an advantage later on in the interview process it is not such a plus as an entry ploy. You have to focus on creating an opportunity for yourself by offering the company something they need but don't have.

So where does this leave you? Your best bet is probably to approach a consulting firm. Research the consulting firms that specialize in your area of expertise. Some consulting companies have strange bedfellows—maybe they will consult in J.D. Edwards and SAP because they have a lot of AS/400 clients and JD Edwards is the big in AS/400; in the meantime, they have launched a SAP initiative. Ask around, use your professional contacts, check-out the local newspapers, trade magazines, the Web—catch the industry buzz.

The information is out there—but generally, you are going to have to search for it: there is no single point where you will get all the information. Approach the market based on your strengths, not your burning desire to get into ERP and make money. Even if you don't get onto the ERP project right away the trick is to get a toehold; once you are on you can figure out the next move. Do not worry too much about the actual position you land. Make the most of any opportunity that comes your way, the best is yet to come.