Podcast: SAP Soft Skills - Myth Versus Reality - with Guy Couillard of OTA

"On the customer perspective on SAP business process expert skills, Guy's take on soft skills in an SAP context, and the SAP consultant as midwife"

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How is the SAP consultant skill set changing? Do companies really want "SAP Business Process Expert" skills or is it a top-down invention? And why are "soft skills" becoming more important to SAP professionals? And what does "soft skills" mean anyway? To get to the bottom of these topics, Jon talks with Guy Couillard, President of OTA. Jon was introduced to Guy by Andy Klee of ERPtips, and ever since that introduction was made, Jon was seriously impressed by OTA's role in the SAP soft skills and change management education space.

During this 40 minute podcast, learn why Jon thinks OTA is one of the best kept secrets in the SAP consulting space. Hear Jon and Guy talk about what customers are looking for from SAP consultants, how they fall short, and find out what to do about it.

Podcast Highlights

1:02 Guy's industry background and what draws him to the "thankless task" of retraining today's SAP consultants. Guy's firm goes back in 1995 in the SAP space, and his background is heavy on the change management side. OTA has developed the curriculum over the last 15 years to address the skills shifts in SAP - training 1,500 consultants within SAP alone.

2:35 OTA is one of the best kept secrets in the SAP marketplace, with extensive courses for all kind of SAP consultant training, much of it filling gaps in SAP soft skills and change management. Guy provides the background on OTA and its unique relationship to SAP. OTA presents executive governance workshops as well, which helps to give them a broader customer perspective on how SAP consultants perform.

On SAP's request, OTA has developed a number of soft skills related programs - both for entry level and experienced consultants. As consultants advance into team lead roles, there is a need for additional skills in that area to help the consultant with these bigger management challenges. OTA integrates this training into SAP's own methodology. OTA's offering is specific to what takes place on an SAP project; it's not a generic soft skills approach.

6:05 Based on OTA's research and your talks with clients, what are the key skills that today's SAP consultants, even those who may be more senior in experience, lack? OTA has done formal surveys along these lines - their workshops always begin by asking about the common mistakes consultants make. The response is consistent: you have to know

how to manage client expectations. Another is the ability to articulate value in business terms. You can talk about config and features, but this is SAP centric, To really have an impact, you have to talk about value, and by definition, value is in the eye of the beholder. You have to be able to translate SAP skills into business value. This involves the ability to listen and the expertise to elicit customer needs.

If you say to a customer, "we're here to implement best practices," what does that imply about their existing practice? There can be an arrogance that permeates the SAP consulting vocabulary. To realize customer value, you need a broad coalition in an organization. Whether you're an APO or SAP HCM consultant, for your ideas to take hold, they have to be embraced not just by one contact person but by a broader coalition. This points to the importance of leadership skills. These are the sought after SAP skills. Over the years, Guy has seen an evolution of what customers are looking for in consultants. It started with SAP product knowledge, but more and more, they are asking for consultants who can lead their people.

10:02 One of Jon's points of contention is that as companies have gotten more sophisticated at globally sourcing skills, this raises the bar on what SAP customers are looking for in on-site consultants. Has Guy observed this same trend in the field? In a word, yes! Guy: "We keep thinking of offshoring as offshoring development work based on outside specifications, but I'm observing teams of consultants who are working offshore doing virtual requirements gathering, with or without video, and doing it really well. So what is left for on site? This is a major trend."

11:50 Jon puts Guy on the spot: OTA's curriculum places a great deal of emphasis on "soft skills." Soft skills still aren't taken seriously, or they are simplified as "good communication skills." Why do soft skills matter in an SAP consulting context? What impact can they have on the success and failure of an implementation?

Guy: I have found consultants rarely get pulled off projects because of their lack of product knowledge. They are usually pulled because of their inability to interact in a productive matter. Building trust may be the most important thing. OTA has specific training to prepare consultants for engagement interviews, since more and more, companies want to screen these consultants before they come on board. Again and again, there was a phenomenon of the great looking resume who fell down in the interview - either they weren't assertive enough, or weren't able elicit good information from the customer. The ability to rapidly introduce yourself and ask meaningful questions is critically important.

Of course, soft skills go beyond asking the right questions. It also moves into requirements gathering, but even this phrase is limited because often customers don't know exactly what they want. Guy explains why "requirements elicitation" is so critically important.

16:10 One of the most important JonERP topics around SAP skills improvement is "business process expert skills". We still don't see "business process expert" on a lot of SAP job orders, but Jon still believes it is coming. Guy has a different take on the skills gaps that are most urgently needed in this area, which pertain to a different approach to requirements gathering.

Guy: Historically, we talked about SAP consultants in terms of siloed skills, such as MM or FI. Even though SAP was pitching an integrated solutions, the skills areas were siloed. There are still a lot of people who talk FI, SD, MM, or PP, but the way SAP has rewritten its applications is about processes like order to cash and hire to retire. If you look at Solution Manager, where a lot of scoping can be done, it's about business process scenarios. This is the first evolution step for the product consultant to move to a business process orientation. A lot of people are struggling with this first step.

In parallel, the Business Process Expert has risen up from an Enterprise Architecture perspective, with a heavy emphasis on modeling. Guy's approach: first become familiar with SAP's own process-driven approach. Solution Composer is a little known tool - you can download this after registering for free on SAP.com, and you can download the Solution Composer app, which provides a comprehensive view of all the solutions SAP offers from a business process oriented standpoint. A consultant can use this stool to start to education themselves on what SAP does from a process perspective. Another critical piece is that Solution Composer includes all the industry solutions - a critically important part of the know-how that SAP consultants need to pick up on.

20:10 Certification is part of this mix as well, and it's a big issue in the SAP community. Jon's had conversations with SAP as part of the "certification five, " a group of SAP Mentors that's been trying to push the envelope in this area, or perhaps advance the conversation and help make certification more high impact and more relevant to hiring managers. Does Guy see these emerging skills as playing a bigger role in certifications going forward? How could these "softer" skills be evaluated and quantified?

Guy: This is an important issue: a self-assessment may not work. Within an organization, a 360 feedback exercise can work. The one way you can see soft skills coming into play is through a reputation-based system, an eBay type rating or a LinkedIn type of recommendation or endorsement scenario. If you take a PMI certification, it does address soft skills but it does tend to be very basic. This is one area that the voice of the customer will speak loudest. Guy is hearing it more and more frequently from customers - they want consultants who not only know their stuff but can also lead. So how can you measure leadership? These are not easy skills to quantify, but we can start with "requirements elicitation" - the best practices in this area are known. In a narrowly-defined area like this, certification could be feasible.

23:55 We've talked about this mostly from a functional angle, but many of JonERP's listeners are either developers or Basis/systems admin types. What do they have to gain from this soft skills/process expert discussion?

Guy: The boundary between the technical and functional SAP world is getting increasingly blurry. Basis folks also need to be able to engage their counterparts in questions of business value. The ability to work with subject matter experts can make you a more well rounded individual. This is just as applicable to technical consultants than functional ones, and can even be a greater differentiator on the technical side.

26:15 The million dollar question: when are we going to see some of these newfangled SAP soft skills on job orders? Or will it mostly be added to existing roles? How can SAP professionals work towards these skills?

Guy: I have clients right now in the public sector who are looking for process-oriented SAP professionals and functional consultants to hit value targets. The Service Marketplace provides a new version of the ASAP methodology, ASAP 7.0, there are new value targets and value identification and tracking. Business monitoring is all about KPIs. So this is another key resource for those who have access to it. Many companies have moved beyond legacy SAP environments and the low hanging fruit of basic integration.

As they upgrade, they understand the value of process optimization, and they need SAP consultants who can take them

to the next level. This is about visibility, measurement, helping to graphically visualize KPI tracking. Not to mention the holy grail of all enterprise vendors is automated configuration. So if your core competency is configuration, and there's large amounts of R and D devoted to taking it away, it's time to think about what's next before you become a commodity. One thing that you can't automate yet is the ability to elicit requirements and engage the customer. It's like being a midwife, you have to be hands-on. It can be painful and messy, but it's part of the job.

29:55 Guy: So we might not see "SAP Requirements Elicitor" on business cards anytime soon, but companies are definitely insisting on this as part of the skills they are requiring for hires. OTA is piloting a class with the Canadian government in June on requirements gathering in the context of SAP. Some of these folks have functional configuration experience, but they don't have enough people who can go engage with various departments and have meaningful discussions that can elicit business requirements. There is a much stronger emphasis on business case documents, high level requirements elicitation, and how do you test requirements before you actually answer them. These are well recognized business analysis skills, but not often recognized in an SAP context. An SAP consultant could do a lot worse than bone up on their business analyst skills.

32:05 Jon has never heard an SAP consultant compared to a midwife before but the analogy does make some sense, in terms of the SAP consultant of the future and the need to be able to roll up sleeves and get into the messy process of identifying true customer needs. Many of the skills of yesterday are commodities today - so consultant are looking for higher ground, and that is where SAP customers are heading as well, looking to get the most out of their transactional systems. As SAP evolves, there's going to be more and more of a request for generalist type skills again - that have a broader technical and functional integration toolkit - which will be a change from the era of: "I'm an FI consultant." The time for reinvention is here.

Guy asks Jon for his take - yes, there is still a core of HR, FI, CRM, etc - but it is increasingly wrapped in a soft skills layer, and then there is this techno-functional convergence. To maintain relevance, you have to move to the center a bit. The tools are out there to education yourself, the time to do it is now.

Guy also talks about the team lead skills transition, and how your industry reputation becomes part of how you build up to a team lead role. It's not always an easy transition. A team lead is NOT a project manager. The team lead role is not yet a commodity - it's a combination of excellent hands-on skills and the leadership skills we've been talking about.

Give us your feedback on this podcast and I'll have Guy back in the future to respond.