Podcast: Breaking into SAP - Live Q and A with Michael Management Students

"A live Q and A with Jon Reed and Tom Michael fielding questions on breaking into SAP with two Michael Management SAP training course students"

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Breaking into SAP is no easy project - especially in today's economy. To get a better handle on the issues with breaking into SAP in today's market, I had the chance to tape a unique podcast with Tom Michael of Michael Management. The podcast includes two "students" from Michael Management's Pay it Forward SAP Training Program (PDF), which sponsored SAP training for five job seekers to help them move into SAP during a challenging SAP job market. We begin the podcast with Tom posing some questions to me about breaking into SAP in today's market. Then we enter into a free flowing discussion, with Tom and I taking any and all questions from the two aspiring SAP professionals who joined us on the call and shared their stories with us.

This podcast has been added to the JonERP iTunes podcast feed. If you're looking for more information on breaking into SAP and succeeding as an SAP consultant, check out Jon's YouTube series on breaking into SAP and his series on SAP consulting excellence.

Additional podcast links: SAP Community Network, help.sap.com. We did not touch on SAP certification in this podcast, get my take on SAP certification and its relevance to aspiring SAP professionals here.

Podcast Highlight

1:10 What inspired the "Pay It Forward" SAP training program? Tom: In times of recession, it's hard to get the right SAP skill set together. We wanted to give something back, so we launched this program to help make quality SAP training available to individuals. We had six hundred applications for this program since we began in December. We selected the winners in January 2011, and Sandy and Tammy (who joined us on the call today) are two of the finalists.

3:25 Sandy's story: Based in NY/NJ. "I thought I was in a dream - I won!" I originally heard about the contest from a friend, wrote the essay and waited. When I got the email that I was accepted, I called everybody I knew.

4:40 Tammy: I've been a functional person on the procurement side, and I'm looking into opportunities to become an SAP trainer.

5:30 Tom to Jon: What's the appropriate way to break into SAP? Jon: It's not as easy to break into SAP via the large consultancies anymore. SAP customers are looking for more senior consultants these days - 5/10/15 year consultants. The avenues we still see are: getting hired by a company already running on SAP. Another option that can be overlooked: there are a vast collection of smaller SAP services and solution firms that can be in growth mode and open to hiring people. So then the questions comes down to how you get a hearing from those companies. Tom: recommend three avenues: consultant, end user, or project manager - all three have different skill sets, so it's important to select the appropriate path for your overall business skills. Matching your background into SAP is the right approach. You have to have realistic expectations.

8:45 Jon: You hit on a very important point. It's much more effective to approach companies by emphasizing your existing strengths that are relevant to SAP, rather than highlighting your lack of experience in SAP. Understanding how your skills fit into the picture and mapping those strengths into SAP is crucial. You're trying to avoid the dreaded tag of the "newbie."

10:15 Tom to Jon: So once you have the desire to break into SAP, where do you get your skills? Jon: The easy part is getting your first education: structured training, books, a ton of web sites including the SAP Community Network, trial downloads - the self-education part is better than it ever was before. Education isn't always enough to land that first SAP job role, so that can be tricky. Tom: The initial exposure to SAP you can get via low cost books that are out there, and there's a bunch of free information such as help.sap.com. But eventually you'll need to look at more formal training and instruction.

12:55 Other tips: Look at strengths such as the regions where SAP is hottest, the industries where projects are active and where you have experience. Sometimes multi-lingual capabilities can have an impact. Tom to Jon: Is it realistic to consult without travelling? Jon: Sometimes you can pull it off with a regional consulting firm, but typically being a full time consultant means travelling. Sometimes if you move into independent consulting you can call your own shots on travel.

16:55 Jon: one of the biggest mistakes I see: focusing too much on getting an SAP job role, rather than getting a job inside a company running SAP. Once you are hired, there is a natural progression that occurs over time, from SAP user, to super-user, to hardcore business analyst, to implementation team member. From there, you're hopefully getting that full life cycle experience, including all-important configuraiton experience. Tom: That's the natural progression once you get your foot into the door. But how do you get employment when you're up against folks with 5 or 10 years of SAP experience? My answer to that: play up your strengths in your existing background. Jon: true, in some cases you have no show based on the competition. But other jobs might list SAP as a nice to have but it's not required for the position. In that case, you may have relevant experience, such as procurement, and you also have the training as well, and now you look like a promising applicant. Tom: we see that every day - if you have deep relevant experience in financials, for example, and need some SAP training as a "nice to have" - we see those kinds of positions every week.

21:10 Tammy: With functional experience in MM over a number of years, how would I get into configuration? I do notice many of the jobs I apply for require 5 to 10 years of MM configuration experience. How do you get into that side? Tom: You start on more of an end-user role, and the more familiar you are with the business, you start making that transition into configuration. Jon: You may need to avoid applying for jobs where you are competing with senior SAP talent. But you may be well cut out for a super-user role based on your background. Keep in mind that some companies do outsource some or all of their configuration work, so you have to do your homework on who does the configuration on the project. You want to find situations where some of the configuration work is being done in house. You're looking for companies that have an internal center of excellence focus. Those are the kinds of companies you want to get hired for.

24:40 Sandy: It's that first opportunity - how do you get it? Tom: The key is to be realistic about what you're good at and what your expertise is and pick the correct path. If you know you don't have config experience, don't apply for that job. If you don't have the consulting background, don't apply for that role. But if you have project management expertise, pursue that. And once you're inside, make sure you progress. Jon: I do hear from folks who say they will discount their rates to get their career going, but that tactic doesn't really work in the SAP field. I'd start making my own research hitlist and start to understand what those companies within your commuting range are doing, what versions of SAP they are running on. Start applying to the companies that are most relevant to your background, to jobs that list SAP as a "nice to have," because that's where your training becomes a difference maker.

28:15 LinkedIn - can you use it to connect to potential employers? Jon: Yes, especially if you have contacts from previous jobs at those companies. You're looking for folks who know those companies and can give you insight. There is some social networking aspect that can get interesting. Tom to Jon: we know about the big job boards. Are those web sites sufficient or would you go on a corporate web site? Jon: every company is different in their approach. It's good to track companies on their own job boards. I was always very influenced when the job seeker had done some homework with that company, and it's that kind of diligence can help you in the applications process. Taking your time to personalize your approach can really pay off, as opposed to firing off hundreds of resumes.

30:10 Tom to Jon: How do you best work with recruiters? Jon: recruiters tend to work with a handful of companies, so that means you may need to work with a variety of recruiters. Finding recruiters who respect your existing skill set (such as project management) is valuable. Help recruiters to know what it takes to close the deal. That builds trust. Limit their scope, help them target the right role. Sandy: I think networking is the best way to go - I found some important contacts on LinkedIn. If I can network myself into a position through that person, that pays off.

35:55 Jon's closing comments: There was a time when it felt like a get rich quick scheme in SAP. But this was in 1995, it's a whole differnet world now. The folks succeeding in SAP these days are passionate about what they do that plays into their expertise. As you move into a level of expertise, what would that look like? And are there things you can do now? Can you start staking out your expertise, sharing white papers, defining in public what you're good at and what you're passionate about. That's the kind of person that rises to that level of career stability that we're all looking for. Tom: consulting as a business is a craft, there is much to learn about that craft beyond SAP. Make sure the consulting craft matters as well. If you're good at that, you'll bubble up to the top of the list. Jon: true. The best SAP consultants are not just tools masters but "trusted advisors."

38:50 Tom: Thanks Jon - We've had so much response for this, we'll do another Pay it Forward program in the summer. For more info: MichaelManagement.com.