

Podcast: Live SAP Tech Skills Chat from Las Vegas

"An informal talk about the future of SAP tech skills in the era of outsourcing"

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Since Dennis Howlett and I have posted all 21 of our JD-OD SAP TechEd Vegas videos, I can play catch up and post a few other TechEd highlights. One was this annual tradition: my SAP TechEd skills chat, taped live from the Expert Lounge. Although there was some crowd noise, this recording came out pretty well and captured a range of views during a short 17 minute recording time. Since a major theme of the future of SAP technical skills is the convergence of functional and technical skills, I was fortunate to have SAP Business Process expert Jim Link amongst the participants in the taped discussion. Jim had some great comments about the evolution of the SAP skill set and what he looks for in the solution architects that he collaborates with. The recording begins and ends a little abruptly due to a couple of minor issues, but the meat of the recording is intact for your listening pleasure.

We had a wide range of views during our discussion, but there was common interest in the pros and cons of outsourcing and the implications of managing global SAP projects. A major focal point of the discussion is how SAP technical professionals can remain on the "indispensable" side of the spectrum as opposed to dispensable and easily outsourced. I'm pleased to mention that for the first time ever, I'll be presenting my annual SAP TechEd skills chat in SAP TechEd Madrid. I hope to see and meet plenty of colleagues there and I'll do my best to tape the session also.

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Podcast Highlights

0:00 What folks want to talk about: working with global teams. The majority of development work is done overseas: how to keep my skills up as much as the outsourced people. The first thing to go is training, how do I keep up with those who do the hiring also?

2:23 Jon: many SAP skills can be outsourced globally, a lot of companies can take advantage of that for obvious reasons. We want to be considered more on the indispensable side of the equation than the dispensable side, so what does the indispensable skill set look like? Yes, you need exposure to the latest releases of SAP and emerging technologies, but it's important to understand where IT shops are headed. Usually IT shops are moving on one of two directions, or both: cost center containment on the one hand, and being an invaluable business driver or enabler on the other. Now you don't always have the luxury of choosing the focus of your particular IT shop, but your agenda should be: how can I be a part of business growth and not just applying patches and fixes and batch conversations. Are they handing me reporting specs or am I invaluable to the planning that business users get involved with.

Tech people need to become advisors - you need to be able to advise business users, hang out with "suits" if necessary. Here's why: The business users can write up process models, but if they don't know how that process flow fits into SAP, that process model is irrelevant. Often this role is called the SAP Solution Architect, though there are some variations in this role and what it means. The bottom line is that we're talking about the convergence of technical and functional. A lot of companies don't have that BPX type role yet, where you sit down with users and coax those requirements out of them and make ERP live up to its potential, but that's where this is headed. Companies want to move beyond ERP as a transactional system, they want to approach ERP from a BI perspective or a HANA perspective or a socialized perspective, increased visibility across the supply chain and fostering a collaborative environment with customers and partners as well outside company walls.

6:28 Jon: personal brand is becoming important, SCN participation might not get you a raise, but visibility in your industry increases your overall job security. It's the whole concept of building trust networks, and thinking about: how do I differentiate - a trust network is a big part of that. Some companies don't like that kind of community involvement, so that's something to consider. But generally, your career options increase when you go on that journey towards sharing your expertise with a network. Not all of us are speakers, but all of us can do something to further that cause, whether it's volunteer with like minded people or help put on an Inside Track event and so on. The one caveat? You would have to have a passion for what you are dedicating yourself to, so make sure about the passion that leads to focus and mastery.

8:15 Question for Jon: What kinds of SAP roles do you see in the next five years? Jon: it's not just technical skills you want but advisory skills. Solution Architects bring that combination of understanding the landscape/architecture and the hands-on expertise. Eventually we may well see an "SAP process architect" as well. Looking ahead, you need to understand end-to-end processes that extend beyond company walls, and where SAP solutions fit into that picture. That means mobility, BI, more functional BI roles as well. Jim Link: I look for SAP tech folks who can provide value to the business folks. You need to understand the business process and understand what the company is strategically trying to do, that helps you deliver value from a tech perspective, and understand ahead of the curve the next products coming out. For example, my work is in planning and consolidation - how can I bring that back to my company and say we should be using BPC in such a manner to run planning and consolidation better and lower costs and operate more efficiently, and if I can get out in front, I can provide more value.

11:15 Jim: What I'm looking for in a technical SAP person is someone who knows the product inside and out. I'm going to come to you with some high level specifications, I need you to know the solution inside and out. I may have seen this technology at TechEd or ASUG, and I want to know from you if other companies are doing similar things and how do we make that happen? Participant: I've spent 10-15 years in SAP. I have a clear understanding of the business process, purchasing, procure to pay and everything, but how do we have good oversight of the product and solution? If you go in as a solution architect, what are the technical solutions for difference challenges? I need to be aware of all the products and how do you stay on top of everything. Every product has pros and cons and I have seen more demand for that kind of advisory role. But how do you stay on top of all the information?

13:12 Jon responds: there's good news and bad news. Bad news - structured training to stay on top of your SAP skills is becoming a problem. It's hard to get the funding and you can't take two weeks off from your work anyhow. The good news is that it's easier than ever before to get access to relevant information online. The better SAP professionals are the networked ones, whether it's volunteer groups and influence councils, blogs or even twitter. You need to have a network of people and information in the areas you specialize in, and that might include bloggers and analysts that look at the whole space, they have a broader view than you in terms of competing solutions to SAP and what they might have to offer your employer/client. Most SAP shops are heterogeneous, and you may need to be solution agnostic, and be able to tell your company not only about the SAP way to do this but other approaches. For example to be able to explain the pros and cons of SAP Solution Manager, but also the other alternatives.

15:33 Participant comment on rightshoring, global teams, near shore...I've heard the term blended rate a lot, and then

there's round the clock support no matter wherever SAP resources are located...participant: I don't have much experience with it, but I'm hearing a lot.

- podcast recording ends (rather abruptly :)