

A portrait of Jaroslav Cerny, a man with short, dark hair, wearing a dark brown pinstriped suit jacket, a white shirt, and a red tie with a geometric pattern. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a solid, vibrant orange color. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**TOP OF THE POPS** Jaroslav Cerny, RDB Consulting, and his partners do everything possible to keep their top staff happy.

**S**outh Africa needs to up its game. Traditionally a user not manufacturer of IT, South Africa has developed a solid services base in the last few years. But it has always battled a skills shortage.

Today, the country is struggling to stand on its own in a global economy in the midst of a recession. It's finding it difficult to meet its own skills needs, and is also spreading itself out across Africa as local companies stake their claim. And while some believe that the global recession is driving skills home as the green grass dries up and turns yellow, South Africa is still competing against everyone else, not just hard-hit markets like those in the US and UK.



# IF WE DON'T, we're...

THE SKILLS ISSUE IS BECOMING CRITICAL. AS IT HAS BEEN FOR AT LEAST A DECADE NOW. TIME TO GET INNOVATIVE.

words SAMANTHA PERRY photo SUZANNE GELL

It boils down to one, simple thing. We've tried any number of interventions that haven't worked. Anyone remember the Skills Development Act?

Government's efforts haven't worked. Private sector efforts haven't worked. Partnerships between the two haven't worked. We need to try something different. Something innovative. Like treating skills as people and not resources, perhaps?

Says RDB Consulting head Jaroslav Cerny: "We think we've come up with a solution. It doesn't work for everybody, but it works for most people. Internally, we broke down employees into three categories: those who deliver and really add value, the middle tier with a question mark over their heads, and the dead wood. The dead wood we tried to get rid of, and the middle tier we tried to make into top-tier employees. The top tier we do everything in our power to keep happy."

And when Cerny says he tries to make them happy, he means it. Consultants are allocated jobs on the basis of where they live, so a Johannesburg-based staffer won't be appointed to a Centurion client. He makes interest-free loans available to the youngsters (the bulk of his staff) who need to rent flats or buy couches. If they deliver above and beyond expectation they get awarded R2 500 Stutta-

fords vouchers. And a compliment to one staffer is passed on to all of them.

"We do that because when we were technical resources, no one ever said thanks," he states. And it's a good point. How often do you thank your techies? These would be the same techies that sit at the office at 03h00 on a Sunday morning trying to make something critical work while you're snoring in bed, or still out partying. And the industry wonders why it loses its youngsters? They come in, get worked to death for a few years, get understandably fed up and go farm cattle outside Bloemfontein.

"It's the little gestures that show you are thinking of your staff as human beings that count," says Cerny, whose company has a pool car available for anyone to use if they need to, like the admin lady did the other day when her car broke down. "She was thrilled," he says. Who wouldn't be?

## Look around

Other, more typical options need to be explored too. Says Emile Bosman, HR Consulting head, Softline VIP: "On a practical level, make sure you get the right person for the job. Match competencies. It's not just about skills and knowledge. You need to focus on personality and look at whether they will fit in with the

terms of the job you expect them to do.

"The bigger dimension is that employees work in an environment that is part of the larger culture of an organisation," he adds. "We've found where we match skills, knowledge, competency and culture fit, they stay. And what's really interesting is that a consultant, with an average lifespan of two years maximum, here has a lifespan of five years or more."

And then there's the salary issue, which is what usually drives the job-hopping roundabout. "Organisations need to look for opportunities to optimise while at the same time keep scarce resources," says Matthew Blewett, group executive: Revitalisation Programme at BCX. "Optimisation of IT labour cost can be driven by restructuring how the labour is organised to ensure more efficient output given an existing cost base, reviewing remunera-

tion methods – looking for methods that have a more direct relationship between remuneration and output (risk models will become popular again) – and looking for IT skills globally. The services trade is already a huge industry and the recession will accelerate this, especially in South Africa. This is called global sourcing and India is one possible source."

In English? Make maximum use of your skills, pay them directly and well for work done, via incentives, or bonuses or whatever, and keep an eye on the global skills pool and dip into it when you need to.

The skills shortage won't go away overnight, and companies will need to be increasingly innovative when it comes to skills retention. Money isn't all that counts, as Cerny demonstrates, and many large organisations are still guilty of treating their people as employee numbers. A little change could go a long way. **B**

