The Need for Technology Talent

**An Interview with Jim Nanton,
Corporate Learning Officer, Knowledge Crossing, UST Global**

EDITORS' NOTE *Jim Nanton brings more than 30 years of global information technology (IT) leadership experience to his role at Knowledge Crossing. Previously, he was Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer of Hanesbrands. Prior to this, he was CIO of Sara Lee Branded Apparel and, earlier, a senior IT executive at Citigroup for a decade. Nanton has taught IT courses as an adjunct professor at Winston-Salem State University. He has also served on university trustee and foundation boards, as well as on various technology advisory boards, including those that shape IT curricula for future generations. He holds a Master of Science degree in Management of Technology from the Polytechnic Institute of NYU.*

Jim Nanton

You've had a long career in the global information technology area. What is it about the industry that has kept your interest?

IT is one of those few corporate functions that is intimately and critically involved in virtually every aspect of business.

As an IT leader, you become deeply familiar with and knowledgeable about virtually every other business function. In some cases, those in IT, because of its engagement in enabling business capabilities and strategies, can sometimes become more knowledgeable about parts of the business than those actually working in them.

IT gives one an appreciation of the breadth, scope, and depth of a company and its capabilities, aspirations, and goals that you would not get in most other career choices in the private sector.

What brought you to your role with Knowledge Crossing?

I started at Knowledge Crossing and have now transitioned fully to the UST side. As a CIO and customer, I knew Sajan (Pillai, CEO), and had visited various UST offices in India. Sajan was aware of my involvement in various types of programs involving outreach to college students and young people.

When he heard of my retirement from Hanesbrands, he invited me to join Knowledge Crossing, whose goal is to deliver technology education at scale on a global basis. Subsequently, the Knowledge Crossing management team became focused on a partnership with UST involving a technology start-up in New York. The educational mission and component shifted over to supporting Sajan's vision of developing this initiative in the

U.S., which became Step IT Up America – a program aimed at training and hiring 1,000 young minority women in major cities this year.

This became a natural extension of his national technology training mission and that, in turn, was inspired by Sajan's leadership role in the STEM Educational Excellence movement. It's widely known that there is a huge effort to address the acute underrepresentation of women and minorities in STEM disciplines and one area where this is most evident happens to be the information technology field.

Why hasn't there been more progress and a focus on STEM?

One driving factor is the speed of technology change and the increased importance of STEM disciplines in driving economic competitiveness, productivity, growth, and innovation.

These problems have come to the forefront. The demand being produced by the rapid adoption and increased importance of information technology to every type of institution is not being met by American education. We have fewer graduates in these essential fields, which has led to the necessity to import talent from other countries like India.

So correcting this problem has become much more critical in recent years.

How are academic institutions going to revise their curriculum to address the problem?

There is a concerted effort taking place today. The challenges and issues are now fairly well understood, as is the importance of resolving these issues.

There is a collaborative effort among government officials, educators, and the private sector. Leadership in all three sectors are combining forces to articulate the problems and potential solutions, and then executing various approaches to solving the problem.

What makes Step IT Up America so effective?

What differentiates it is a great thing that originates from UST and Sajan's passion for transforming lives, which is a very sincere and deeply embedded ethos in the company. Another differentiator is that UST pays the young women while they're being trained and guarantees a job.

Also, the process of conducting this accelerated technology training is a proven and well-developed capability that UST developed over many years as a part of its core business model

of transforming young Indian engineering graduates into world-class software developers in a very short time frame.

Over the years, we have developed a proprietary curriculum with structural methods and instructional techniques that have been and continue to be very effective. Now we're trying to adapt and apply these techniques, with initial success, to the demographic of undervalued and underutilized human capital in cities.

How large can this program get?

Our guiding principle is that IQ is equally distributed in the population but opportunity isn't. There is a huge need for talent, especially technology talent, because of the demand and the opportunities. There is an entire segment of the population that is overlooked so, if we can identify individuals with the right attitude, aptitude, and passion to be successful and provide the opportunity, they seize it eagerly.

This is the concept, but the actuality and practices are being borne out as we go from city to city. We have already launched the program in Atlanta, Philadelphia, Detroit, L.A., and recently in Chicago. Our goal is 1,000 graduates in a year and 5,000 over the next three years. In every instance, the corporate community, civic leaders, and elected officials in government have all embraced it. It is intuitively obvious how important on many different levels this program is – not just because it provides employment but also because the nature and quality of that employment results in well-paying jobs, especially relative to the target population's current situation. It also addresses and satisfies an urgent need to increase the diversity of the talent pool and make that talent available to work in this arena.

Will the U.S. remain a leader in technology if the right emphasis is placed on training?

Absolutely. We have always been the leader. We run the risk of having that leadership eclipsed. I've seen this before in my career when U.S. technological or innovative leadership has been written off or prematurely declared dead or dying. We have the resilience, the diversity of population, and the systems of capital formation to retain leadership. Back that up with personal drive and the incentives that our system of capitalism and other structures permit, and we will prevail. That is not to say that other countries are standing still. But in our American culture and lifestyle, there is a sense of individual drive, initiative, innovation, and resilience that will allow us to continue to exert leadership in the technology arena. ●