Why Big IT Is a Different Place to Work

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Working at a large IT shop is a completely different experience than working at smaller counterparts, finds a new report from Forrester.

From the size of systems to the depth of resources, working at a big IT shop bears little resemblance to smaller counterparts, finds new analysis from Forrester Research.

Defined in the Forrester report as organizations with more than 20,000 people, big IT shops share many structural similarities with small ones, yet significant differences were found in funding, outsourcing, perceptions of IT, improvement plans and the way all of these factors relate to the workplace environment.The most evident difference between big and small IT shops is that which defines them: their size, and therefore, their visibility.

"Usually, if you have large organizations, you have them in multiple countries. It's relatively rare to find a large IT organization in just one country," Marc Cecere, Forrester vice president, told eWEEK.

"They also have large-scale systems and when they make changes to them, it gets a lot of press," added Cecere.

It's not just the size that differs in these IT shops, but the type of managers they tend to hire.

"They generally have more experienced management. The person who runs the infrastructure group generally has more experience and more

knowledge than someone running a shop of 50 or so people," Cecere said.

Bigger IT shops have more discretionary resources at their disposal, which allows the IT department to have more time to develop resources and plan for the future.

"Small shops don't have a lot of slack. Everyone is so busy fire-fighting, nobody can take a look at what might happen a couple years down the road. They're too busy patching," Cecere said.

Large-scale IT enterprises are a favorite of vendors, namely because with a single sale, they can have a huge impact.

"Vendors love them. Vendors love whale meat, so outsourcing vendors initially targeted large companies. It was practical on their part," Cecere said.

"One sales cycle could take care of all of their numbers; big IT shops were likely to renew a lot more with the same vendor, and the companies tend to be more sophisticated when dealing with vendors. While this makes them tougher negotiators, there's less thrashing around once they know what they like."

HR structure changes by company size

Yet, the differences between working at a large versus small IT shop are likely to be most noticed as they relate to human resources.

"In smaller shops, the CIO and his or her direct reports can keep pretty good track over everything because there's not as much distance between the CIO and the front-line peoples. Big organizations tend to be run by structures and practices and small ones by the people," said Cecere.

Career tracks have a tendency to be more structured in larger shops, and roles more clearly defined. In smaller shops, most IT professionals are in some ways everymen.

"Big shops tend to better help people understand what their job prospects are in the organization. They have a significantly greater investment in leadership training. They have rotating schemes," Cecere said.

In big IT shops, HR is far more likely to be invested in on-the-job training and leadership curriculums. In their research, Forrester found that large IT was more likely to participate in job fairs (61 versus 36 percent), donate technology to universities (20 versus 9 percent) and sponsor scholarships for students in IT-related majors (23 versus 13 percent) than their smaller-shop counterparts. Large shops were also more likely to be able to hire students right out of college.

"Big IT hires more entry-level people because they have these mechanisms for training in place. They tend to put people in more specialized roles. In a 50 person shop, you're probably going to be more of a generalist," Cecere said.

Big shops outsource more

Big shops haven't always just been the target of outsourcing vendors, they've used them a lot more than their smaller counterparts. The primary reason is that as the financial benefits are scaled up, they are much harder to ignore.

In Forrester's research, big IT shops were found to be more likely to outsource (45 percent versus 17 percent), consolidate applications (31 percent versus 25 percent) and empower a center of excellence (48 percent versus 28 percent) in the next 18 to 24 months to increase

efficiency than their small IT shop counterparts.

On the flip side, smaller shops were much more likely to hire more staff to address the same problems, cited by 35 percent versus 18 percent of big IT.

"Big IT tends to have people with the organizations that have been with outsourcers before, or have been through two or three cycles of outsourcing," Cecere said.

"This is considered a big determinant of a successful outsourcing relationship, having been through the learning curves of the first two cycles."

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