

New Skills Required for CFOs

by James Peter Rubin in Los Angeles - January 8, 2008

If you have designs on a chief financial officer's office in California or other points west, you'd be wise to strengthen your communication and other "softer" skills. The region's employers are more likely to hire executives who know how to present information clearly and work well with others. In other words, financial skills aren't enough any more.

These are among the main conclusions drawn from a national study of 1,400 CFOs conducted by Robert Half Management Resources, a division of the Menlo Park, Calif., staffing firm that places senior-level accounting and finance professionals for interim and project work.

When asked if they'd hire someone with fewer technical skills but stronger soft skills, 53 percent of the CFOs said yes while 39 percent said no - strong evidence of the importance put on soft skills for financial executives.

Yet soft skills appear even more important in the west. Of 219 survey respondents from the Pacific region - which includes California - more than 60 percent said they would hire someone with fewer technical skills while just 32 percent said they would not. "The numbers don't lie," says Randall Micek, division director for Robert Half Management Resources.

Micek, who's been recruiting financial professionals for more than a decade in San Francisco and Silicon Valley, says companies are "more aware of the value of strong soft skills" and "CFOs (and their organizations) are acknowledging that they are inclined to hire someone with these skills." For example, on a recent recruiting assignment Micek spent much of a client meeting discussing the importance of people skills for a high-level position.

Don't Slip on Technical Skills

Of course, the survey doesn't suggest that technical skills are less important than before. Joe Pelayo, a San Francisco recruiter of CFOs and other financial executives, says that with companies still under close watch from regulatory agencies, his clients are looking first and foremost for exceptional "technical skills."

Once background players focused on providing financial data, in recent years, CFOs and other financial executives have assumed more active, public roles in their organizations. In large companies they're often the point person for in-depth presentations to analysts, boards and employees. They also manage sizeable staffs and are more involved in business strategy. That's put the onus on communication skills.

Scott Simmons, a recruiter for Crist Associates says that firms that once focused on accounting and other technical expertise now want candidates who are as comfortable explaining financial information to laymen as they are generating material for a highly technical audience. (The Chicago-based company specializes in CFO searches throughout the U.S.) Among other things, Simmons says his clients are increasingly scrutinizing speaking and listening skills during interviews. They want people who can inspire confidence in subordinates as well as higher-ups.

If you aren't sure about soft skills, consider these tips from recruiters:

- Look at yourself honestly. How do people react to you? Do you struggle to be understood? Moreover, do you struggle to understand others? Listening skills are often underrated but crucial for building solid working relationships. "If you're not listening well, you're not a good part of the conversation," says Simmons. "When they consider communication skills, people think about a good presenter rather than the flip side, which is being a good listener."
- Seek input outside formal evaluations: Co-workers can often provide invaluable tips about communication skills. Sit down with them informally and ask for an honest assessment of your communication and listening skills.
- Consider working with an executive coach or another advisor: Good executive coaches can help shore up weaknesses and be sounding boards about communication-related issues on the job. Recruiters can also help.