Higher education must meet business demands

Today’s rapidly changing work environment requires speed, focus and the ability to adapt swiftly to the needs of the market. This skill set is particularly essential in the technology industry, in which pioneering products and services are developed seemingly daily, and new security threats can spring up overnight. For this reason, IT professionals — and the skills they bring to increase cybersecurity safeguards or build networking systems from the ground up — are highly sought after by all types of organizations from government to health care and beyond. The Bureau of Labor Statistics expects overall computer IT occupations to grow by 22 percent from 2010-2020. To keep a competitive edge in this environment (indeed, in all environments), everyone must adapt.

Employers must hire a work force that is poised to keep pace with digital trends. Workers and job-seekers must adopt an attitude of “lifelong learning” and seek out new skills and competencies to keep themselves sharp and critical to employers. And higher education institutions must build relevant academic programs that address industry demands as well as student interests.

Strayer University recently completed a major redesign of the academic programs within our School of Information Systems and Technology, recognizing the changing demands of employers and workers.

We added specialized concentrations such as digital forensics technology, as well as a management skills curriculum that prepares graduates for technology-focused leadership roles.

By approaching education as an ongoing process, universities deliver on our responsibility to prepare graduates for the realities of today’s working world while empowering them to create their own change as leaders of tomorrow. The steps we took, outlined below, are simplified but provide helpful insights for institutions or businesses undertaking innovation programs of their own.

1. **Listen, really listen.**

   More than ever, today’s technology professionals are sought after not only for their technical prowess but for their understanding of how to use technology strategically to solve practical business problems.

   A review of CIOs describing their ideal job candidates shows that they are hiring for communication, leadership and project management skills as much as the ability to work with algorithms, routers and security software, according to Computerworld magazine. Students and employers, too, emphasized the importance of developing a work force with sophisticated, hands-on experience, as well as the critical thinking skills to manage a technology-driven environment. We also kept a watchful eye on the industry and trends in hot fields such as cybersecurity, database management, networking and internetworking technologies, among others.

   Coupled with the results from an end-to-end assessment of our 100 technology courses, in-depth student and faculty feedback, instructional materials, and various expert advisory committees, we resolved to refresh our academic programs accordingly and further set up our students for success. Institutions and individuals should make a commitment to similarly take stock of what they bring to the market or to the table, listen intently to feedback, and take a hard look at any adjustments that need to be made.

2. **Know that change is A-OK.**

   Change is never easy, but in many cases it can lead to tremendous results. As a result of our yearlong review, Strayer University’s School of Information Systems and Technology now offers five revised or new programs in Georgia, including a customized Bachelor of Science in Information Technology (BSIT) degree.

   The new programs give students the ability to choose a more technical path, a managerial path or a blend of both. Some of the 21 concentrations that can be selected include cybersecurity technology, homeland security management, software engineering management and IT project management.

   Gone by the wayside is the one-size-fits-all approach to IT education — a fundamental change that will net positive outcomes for students and employers. The National Security Agency (NSA) Committee on National Security Systems recently certified Strayer University’s security curriculum as meeting national training standards for information systems security professionals and system administrators.

3. **Repeat as needed.**

   We are pleased with the innovations within our School of Information Systems and Technology, and we are confident that graduates will benefit greatly from the tailored, hands-on curricula. Equally important, graduates’ employers can rest assured that these IT professionals have the knowledge, skills and agility to manage a technology-driven environment and support strategic business goals.

   But we also hope that these graduates will become true “lifelong learners” and continue seeking ways to improve themselves and sharpen their skills. They can be assured that we will do the same.

**Hawkins** is the dean of Strayer University’s Douglasville campus.