

# Internet companies need better skills

Dan Norris-Jones explains why many firms need help to build good internet systems

*IT Week:* As co-founder of consultancy firm Priocept, you help clients manage and build internet-based products and services. Can you explain how this works?

**Dan Norris-Jones:** While working for my last company I noticed a gap between the web agencies, who have relationships with the marketing director down, and the traditional IT consulting firms, whose clients tend to be IT directors. Those IT directors didn't want to work with creative web agencies because 99 percent of those agencies are light-weights when it comes to technology and don't understand IT processes, so [there was] an opportunity for our company to take a traditional IT approach to internet technology in depth that many firms don't do that well.

**What are the major challenges when designing internet-based systems for business clients?**

If you are building an internal IT system it's easy to work out the requirements and what it needs to do – you ask the end-users then write up a specification and build it. But when the end-users are more detached [as our clients' customers are], this becomes difficult and you have to imagine what it is they want. This is why our clients like working with us – because traditional IT companies can't build it until they know [all the details], but we'll take a broad product vision and turn it into a product.

**Have you seen any evidence of a skills shortage in your sector?**

Yes, though internet technologies are relatively mature, we still see a lot of clients working with suppliers who don't have a great depth of expertise. The industry is quite mature but the level of expertise isn't – some suppliers

don't understand various technologies or how to run projects.

**Is this difficulty simply a result of inadequate training?**

Skills shortages are always more of an issue in any emerging technology, because it has been around for less time and so fewer people have developed the appropriate skills. But I don't think the IT industry is good enough in training, mentoring and developing skills.

**So, how does Priocept address the problem of skills?**

When you leave university with an engineering or computer sciences degree you are virtually thrown in at the deep end, so as a result we hire fairly junior-level people and then train them up. It's a long-term programme for developing in-house talent and it's the only way of developing a team – the Chelsea FC model [of buying in experienced] staff just drives up salaries and contract rates.

## About Dan Norris-Jones

- Dan Norris-Jones is a founder of Priocept, which helps firms build internet-based systems.
- Previously he was a founder of the AKQA web agency and global interactive marketing firm.
- Norris-Jones has a degree in mechanical engineering.

**Having worked with internet technologies for many years, what are your major concerns?**

Security is an ongoing issue but it's probably more of a concern to business people than IT staff. The IT industry is not good at informing firms how they should manage security risks – some small problems are blown out of proportion and then serious ones are overlooked. There is also a lot of software running web sites that is poorly architected. It's a legacy of the dot-com bubble when there was a shortage of resources and time-to-market was the most important thing, therefore a lot of solutions came out with a questionable level of quality. Many clients still have systems that are impossible to maintain and run and are very inflexible.

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**Norris-Jones: Lots of suppliers lack depth of expertise**