SFIA

THE NUMBERS HAVE IT

WITH THE LAUNCH OF SFIA V5, WE TAKE A LOOK AT HOW THE SKILLS FRAMEWORK AFFECTS YOU.

Jim Owens

Since the beginning of time on digital watches (1972), we have witnessed venerable analogue technologies crumble and fall before a relentless tide of superior digital successors. The sublime transformations wrought by these coups thereafter delivered considerable benefits to all.

From the music CD replacing the gramophone record around 40 years ago (yes 40!), then data CDs, digital phones and TVs to the DVD usurping the video tape in 1996, the benefits just keep adding up. And while some audiophiles still argue that analogue records are better than digital CDs, other experts still argue that the world is flat, or doesn't actually exist.

The jury is in; the numbers have it. And the verdict is... "Digital is better".

Then just four years after the emergence of the DVD, another "digital" replacement technology began to emerge from the UK, in the form of SFIA (pronounced "Sophia"), the Skills Framework for the Information Age. SFIA is now internationally recognised as the premier skills framework and key workforce alignment tool, which today is actively used by ICT professionals and organisations in over 100 countries.

SFIA was produced by the ICT industry, for the ICT industry, but although initially developed with significant input from several organisations, the SFIA Framework is now independently owned and managed by the not-for-profit SFIA Foundation.

And now with SFIA, your résumé, how you plan your career development, how you select your ICT training and certification, and how employers carry out workforce planning, alignment and recruitment can all be "digital" too.

Extensively, Significantly and Comprehensively Meaningless!

Here is a small excerpt from an actual job advertisement from a large organisation (bolding mine and a few words removed):

● **Significant experience** in eBusiness functional and technical development.
● **Extensive experience** in eProcurement/B2B integration solutions.
● **Experienced** in Business Analysis and system set-up.
● **Comprehensive experience** of project management.

Is "significant" greater than "extensive" or "comprehensive"? Immediately there is a disconnect because the organisation and the ICT professionals have no common language. Clearly there is no objective way for this organisation to filter, evaluate or compare the applications it receives, nor for the ICT professionals to be sure that they meet the criteria.

When shopping, can you imagine the confusion if the price tags simply said, "$Significant", "$Low", "$Affordable"? Yet the job ad above is no better.

Now what if a job ad included something like:

● Solution Architecture (Level 4) [description of duties]
● Network Support (Level 4) [description of duties]
● Testing (Level 3) [description of duties]

And where each skill and level is clearly defined within the SFIA Framework. How easy is that? There are times when using numbers just makes sense.

Number five is alive

Well, it will be by the time you read this. At the time of writing, SFIA v5 is due for release on 1 December, 2011 and so its actual structure and

MAIN CHANGES IN SFIA 5

STOP PRESS

8 New Skills

ADEV Animation development	DATM Data management
DOMA IT estate management	ITCM Contract management
LEDA Learning & development assessment	SEAC Service acceptance
STMG Storage management	TEAC Teaching & subject formation

2 Deleted Skills

DPRO Information policy formation	Absorbed into GOVN and IRMG
NTOP Network control and operation	Merged with ITOP and ITMG

1 Deleted Subcategory- Resource management

PROF moved to Business change/Business change implementation
ASMG moved to Service management/Service transition
CSMG moved to Client interface/Client support
PDSV and RESC moved to Business change/Skills management.

19 Substantial Wording Changes

GOVN	IRMG	POMG	PGMG	TEST	UNAN	CPMG
ITOP	PROC	ACMG	CNSL	STPL	ETMG	ETDL
HCEV	USEV	PBMG	USUP	SURE		

15 had Levels Added [TECH had all levels reduced by 1]

INAN 3, 7	ICPM 1	ONOV 5	BURM 4, 7	EMRG 4
RLMT 4, 7	ETMG 3, 4, 7	PDSV 4	INCA 1	TEST 1
CHMG 2	PBMG 3	PROC 4, 7	SURE 2	CSMG 3, 4

9 Moved Skills

PROF	REQM	ETMG	TMCR	ETDL	RESC	PDSV	ASMG	CSMG

SFIA: WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

SFIA provides so many benefits to all ICT stakeholders; here are just a few.

For organisations employing ICT professionals:

- Reduces risk by enabling ICT professionals' skills and levels to be matched against project and operational requirements, ensuring best matching, and the identification of skill gaps or level gaps, which can be filled by training, recruiting, outsourcing or procuring
- Ensures value for money
- Helps you keep and motivate your key staff, by facilitating the creation of transparent and achievable career paths
- Assists you in recruiting the right people, because now you can both speak the same language
- Increases the effectiveness of the ICT function, because now management can see the overall picture of the ICT skills landscape

For ICT professionals:

- Facilitates job searching by having objective, like-for-like matching with your résumé
- Helps with your career planning, promotion and personal motivation, because you

know where you are going
- Assists with professional development, by identifying skill gaps and appropriate training

For ICT professional associations:

- A benefit for members
- Assists with members' skills and level identification and assessment
- Helps in creating targeted training and professional development, aligned with industry demand
- Helps in selecting industry-aligned presentations

For ICT recruiters:

- Simplifies matching between supply and demand

For ICT training organisations:

- Helps design professional development courses aligned with the needs of industry

For universities and high schools:

- Enables course planning and alignment with industry requirements, and mapping the courses to SFIA, ensuring students emerge with employable skills
- Enables practical dialogue with the ICT industry in a common language, instead of academic course details and theory.

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content are still a closely guarded secret. However, I would be very surprised to see major changes, and any changes that are made will help clarify skills already defined within v4g.

Unlike hardware and software version increments, which introduce myriad new features – most documented, some not (or vice versa) – and sweeping changes, don't expect to see similar revolutions with successive releases of the SFIA framework. Software and hardware releases are driven by fierce competition within a limited market, and so the developers are constantly under pressure to design and deliver more new, must have, differentiating features, to win your sales dollar.

In contrast, SFIA is a reflection of the ICT industry, a reflection which is continually becoming more refined and sharply focused, through open consultation with ICT professionals, academics and others around the world.

"Simply put, SFIA v5 will be a confirmation that SFIA has become the common language of IT," Ron McLaren, COO of SFIA Foundation, says. "The ethos of SFIA is evolution, not revolution. People

don't want to see major change every three years."

Which means of course that your investment in the application of SFIA will be preserved (the SFIA Framework itself is free to use).

SFIA v4g identified 86 skills. The likelihood of genuinely new skills emerging is small, but the recent public consultation uncovered a few skills previously overlooked. ICT is a dynamic industry, and the name of a skill or its description, along with its related responsibilities or levels, may be changed slightly to more accurately reflect the current state of affairs within the industry. Likewise, if one area of the industry emphasises "attribute A" of a skill, while another area emphasises "attribute B", then in a future release of SFIA, that skill may be split into two. So in v5 we could see as many as eight to 10 skills added.

Conversely, if two skills lose their differentiation, then they may well be merged. "The policy of the SFIA Foundation is that SFIA should record industry best practice, not attempt to lead it," McLaren says.

When I asked him about the take-up of SFIA, he said, "The rate of applications for accreditation

and the rate of general queries make it clear that SFIA is growing vigorously, and the level of interest in Australia is particularly noticeable."

SFIA received a significant boost in Australia when it was adopted by the federal government and was strongly endorsed in the whole-of-government ICT Strategic Workforce Plan 2010-2013. "The labour market for ICT workers is dynamic, which makes assessing imbalances in the supply and demand for these skilled professionals problematic," the plan states. "There is going to be increasing pressure to find suitably qualified ICT staff to effectively deliver the government's priorities ... The whole-of-government Strategic ICT Workforce Plan is underpinned by an ICT Capability Framework, which is built upon an internationally recognised ICT capability model – the Skills Framework for the Information Age (SFIA)."

Employers have a measure of success

In previous times of financial crisis, management often discarded ICT staff like ballast from a falling hot-air balloon, viewing ICT as merely a cost centre. That proved as myopic as farmers eating next year's seed.

Nowadays, ICT staff are beginning to be viewed as strategic assets, and consequently there is an increasing emphasis on managing existing ICT staff in the most effective and efficient manner. But as Tom DeMarco once said, "You can't manage what you can't measure".

This was one of the main reasons SFIA was created. It enables organisations to identify and measure the skills of their entire ICT workforce objectively and logically, revealing a hidden asset register full of revenue-generating employees.

SFIA is concerned primarily with skills, because thinking in terms of "roles" or "jobs" is subjective, inefficient and often misleading. For example, it is not a DBA or a Web developer that delivers benefit to your organisation; rather, it is the output of the application of the individual skills that they possess.

Employ the right skills

When a particular set of skills is required to fulfil an organisational need, instead of rushing out and hiring highly paid contractors, now management can see with relative ease if the organisation already has these skills in-house, or would have with a little training, and thus the organisation can become (dare I say it) more agile and flexible.

But if you do need to hire contractors or outsource production, SFIA enables you to objectively define the skills and levels of skills that they must provide, which forms the basis of a realistic and manageable Service Level Agreement.

And in the event that you do have to lose a few staff, SFIA can help you identify your true key staff, so you don't inadvertently jettison those with crucial skills. Conversely, if you need to employ staff, you can ensure you specify the skills that your organisation really needs.

And all this adds up to reduced risk.

A word of caution
Effective ICT skills registers can only be built by people who really understand the skills and understand SFIA, which is why the SFIA Foundation recommends this exercise be performed with the help of a SFIA accredited consultant.

ICT professionals, develop your own snapshot
Another key reason for SFIA's creation was to enable ICT professionals to identify and measure their own ICT skills, and manage their professional development.

A SFIA skill-set is not a complete snapshot of an ICT professional's abilities, however. For the whole picture (a professional profile) they need to consider their SFIA skills, both generic (behavioural) and professional (specialist), as well as the professional's ICT knowledge (proficiencies in specific hardware, software products and methodologies), plus their experience and qualifications. All of this needs to be provided in context.

Likewise a job description cannot be fully defined by a set of SFIA skills, so the organisation must define required or desirable knowledge, experience, qualifications and context too.

In terms of professional development, it is vital to note that it is not your employer's primary focus or responsibility to develop your career – it is yours. Your employer's primary focus is on deriving benefit for the organisation from the appropriate application of your skills, and an element of training may occur to facilitate that.

So that means in order to get the professional development courses that you want, you may have to pay for them yourself, unless you can demonstrate an ensuing benefit for the organisation.

Make sure, however, that your professional development courses are aligned with SFIA and supporting your appropriate level.

Universities
Universities are experiencing big reductions in student numbers and so need to become more flexible and competitive. SFIA can assist here by helping them design courses that are aligned with actual ICT industry requirements and described in industry language, instead of academic course details and theoretical concepts. And then the increased likelihood of finding graduate jobs means an increased likelihood of attracting students to train for them.

According to outgoing ACS president, Anthony Wong, "The availability of new models like the SFIA ... means that ICT workers who begin at the vocational level have a clear roadmap to continue developing their skills and enhancing their professional knowledge and status." ∎

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