

Executive profile

Wanted: Engineering execs to play key product role

By Jennifer LeClaire

Most new products fail. While many of those failures could be blamed on poor marketing or just off-target ideas, even the greatest invention and most brilliant marketing won't save a poorly engineered product.

That's why the chief engineering executive, or CEE as he or she is plotted on the organizational chart, is so vital – and so difficult to find. Searches for specialized engineering executives in Boston are ongoing and vigorous, but recruiters say they're having a hard time finding qualified candidates.

"There's a shortage of engineering executives with desirable skill sets in Boston," says Dave Parker, principal of D.P. Parker & Associates, an executive search firm in Wellesley. "Beyond technical abilities, engineering executives need leadership skills, project management skills and specialized knowledge of particular fields."

On a broad scale, the CEE, often known as a vice president of engineering, establishes the overall objectives and initiatives of an engineering department. More specifically, this technical professional develops ideas for new products, or product enhancements, and oversees the creation and improvement of products, and shepherds them through commercialization.

Engineering executives need experience with specific product types and technologies. A wireless telecom equipment provider wants an engineering executive who is familiar with the technology. So does a biotech company and a software company. What's more, companies are looking for engineering execs with a track record of success in commercializing technology.

"Engineering executives are critical because customers buy into road maps more than they buy into certain products," says Peter Dube, a director with executive search firm Christian & Timbers in Boston. "Companies need to deliver on the changing demands of customers. The engineering executive is the voice in the company that articulates the market needs and how they will change over time."

"The chief engineering executive needs to be able to communicate with the rest of the management team, in business terms, what they are delivering from a marketing perspective, not just a technical perspective," says **Dora Vell, CEO at Vell Executive Search** in Boston, MA.

On the other side of the table, engineering executives need to be able to communicate with the research and development department and the production department. The CEE then acts as the bridge connecting R&D, manufacturing and marketing, Parker said.

This executive also acts as a face to the public, representing the company at conferences and talking to key and prospective customers who want to know: "Can you really tailor this product to meet our needs?"

"It's expensive and rare to find someone who is a visionary, an ambassador and has the ability to deliver the product," Vell said. Perhaps that is why the CEEs in Boston typically bring home about \$184,894 per year, according to a salary survey by Salary.com.

As it is with other technology-orientated jobs, the demand for CEEs is cyclical. In fact, **Vell** said one litmus test for the optimism of area companies is the job growth in engineering and marketing positions. Her experience has taught her that when companies are hiring engineering executives, they are bullish about new products coming down the pike.

"What sets successful engineering executives apart is strong and project management skills – being able to juggle several projects at once," Parker said. "The best engineering executives create timelines, help shorten the cycle from conception to commercialization and increase the so-called hit rate – the percentage of projects that succeed."

It's not enough to be enamored of technology, Dube said. Companies are looking for engineering executives with revenue generation in mind.

"Many startups never go anywhere because they don't get the product to market," Dube said. "The ability to prioritize product features and capabilities that will sell the product is what companies are looking for in an engineering executive."



Dora Vell is the CEO of Vell Executive Search, a premier retained technology executive search firm in Boston. Ms. Vell is an internationally recognized expert in recruiting technology executives including: CEOs, COOs, CTOs, CMOs, CROs, board members and others. She works with VC-backed, PE-backed private companies and public companies. She can be reached at dora@vell.com.