Short and Long-term Strategies for Bridging the Mainframe Skills Gap

It's not all doom and gloom

As the mainframe celebrates its 60th birthday, we're celebrating the fact that the pool of talent available to manage it is growing.

Encouragingly, The 2024 Global Mainframe Skills Report found that 65% of university leaders surveyed said there's more skilled mainframe talent available today than there was five years ago. And there's been a bit of an uptick in the popularity of COBOL over the last few years too.

The mainframe community's work to develop these skills in younger generations is clearly starting to pay off.

Yet the challenge remains

However, the report also found that the demand for mainframe talent continues to grow. 91% of employer respondents said they plan to hire talent for new mainframe positions in the next 1-2 years.

So, for now at least, the mainframe skills gap remains a challenge for many enterprises. In this short guide we share five things your business should be doing to build a short- and long-term supply of mainframe talent.
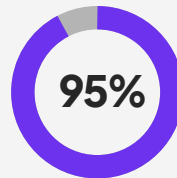
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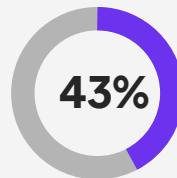
43%
of banking systems are built on COBOL
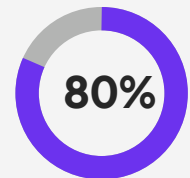
80%
of in-person transactions use COBOL

95%
of ATM swipes rely on COBOL

220 Billion
lines of COBOL are in use today

1   Show that your organization values the mainframe

Recruiting for a role that many consider to be a dying art is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there's a limited talent pool and little interest from young developers. But on the other, many mainframe professionals are feeling underappreciated in their current roles and would be attracted to an organization that truly values the mainframe and has plans to modernize and grow it.

A solid mainframe strategy is proving to be a very effective recruitment tool, with mainframe employers who invest in the platform having less trouble finding skills. In fact, 71% of companies who invest at least $10 million in their mainframe environment said they sufficiently or fully met their hiring goals for mainframe in 2023.

2   Widen your search parameters

When resources are scarce, it's helpful to expand your recruitment strategy. Here are five candidate groups to consider as you work to meet your organization's short- and long-term mainframe staffing requirements. Each group requires its own recruitment and training strategy.

Graduates will require training and mentorship in the short term, but will add great long-term value – if you can hang on to them! To attract graduates, you need to sell them on the value of a mainframe and show them that your business is the best place to kickstart their careers. Do this by developing and showcasing a vibrant mainframe developer culture with plenty of learning and growth opportunities.

Older career switchers will require technical training but often bring valuable life, career, and leadership experience to the table. These candidates are usually highly motivated and looking for job stability in a role they have worked hard to transition into.

Experienced mainframe professionals who are currently employed by your peers and competitors. To attract them, ensure you have a strong mainframe proposition, a clear career path, and an attractive compensation package.

Retired mainframe professionals might be looking to supplement their income by dipping their toes back into the water. You can attract them by offering them part-time, fully-remote and flexible roles that don't put too much of a burden on them.

Your existing team of cloud professionals who, with the right encouragement, could be persuaded to develop their mainframe skills in order to broaden their experience and enhance their value.

3   Remove the siloes with Integrated DevOps for the Mainframe

Imagine if your mainframe and cloud developers could speak the same language and share a common toolset. Everyone would enjoy a modern development experience, and cloud developers would be able to code on the mainframe. This would greatly reduce your reliance on specialist mainframe skills.

Well, a strategic partnership between IBM and Microsoft makes all this possible. Integrated DevOps for the Mainframe enables you to apply DevOps tooling, practices, and culture to mainframe app development.

4   Invest in training

It's great that universities are enhancing their mainframe offerings, but non-traditional learning platforms and programs—including bootcamps and apprenticeship programs— remain valuable. You could work with vendors, a third-party learning platform, or create your own internship program to develop future mainframe talent.

The IBM Z Mainframe Skills Depot has a lot to offer and allows candidates to learn at their own pace. Ensono's Mainframe Academy is an early career development program that sets graduates up for success in their first mainframe roles.

5   Reduce the mainframe burden on your team

If you need to focus your team and recruitment efforts on higher value tasks and require a safe pair of hands to tend to your mainframe, then you may want to consider Mainframe-as-a-Service. This monthly subscription model eliminates the mainframe burden on your team while giving you access to the very best mainframe talent in the market.

Closing thoughts

One thing's certain, the mainframe is here to stay. In fact, as organizations begin to unlock its data for cloud and AI-powered growth, it's poised to become a competitive differentiator. But only for those organizations who have a clear mainframe modernization strategy and the talent to deliver it.

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