Why is a booming, nearly recession-proof industry having such a tough time attracting and keeping people? As Tim Kridel found, the reasons are as myriad as the potential solutions.

Talent spotting

For AV integrators, it's the best of times and the worst of times. The industry survived – and in many markets, thrived – the worst global economy in 70 years. But when it comes to finding and keeping enough talented, skilled staff, many integrators say they're struggling.

One indication is InfoComm's 2012 'AV Market Definition and Strategy Study' which found "a major shortage of expertise and experience" in regions such as Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. "Pro-AV vendors in these regions indicated this is a significant problem that is an obstacle to growth in these pro-AV markets," the report says.

Why? There's no single reason, which means there's also no silver bullet. For example, AV weathered the recession so well partly because it spans so many verticals, a strength that also sometimes is a weakness.

"For us, finding specialists is the challenge because today the industry covers a wide spectrum of specialties: corporate, theaters, sports, museums," says Ibrahim Saad, manager of the AV department at Techno Q, a Qatar-based integrator. "Finding the proper experts that can fit in every one of these is pretty difficult nowadays."

The scarcity of specialists creates another problem:

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poaching, and not just between AV integrators. As IT companies muscle into pro AV, they're fishing in the same small pool of talent.

Although it's instinct to focus on fending off poachers, that's also short-sighted if it means missing the big picture, which includes apprenticeships for newcomers and ample certification opportunities for veterans.

The IT Factor

"We've become a very poaching-oriented industry," says Doug Carnel, AVI-SPL executive vice president of operations. "If all we're doing is taking engineers and technicians from each other, or

the IT field is taking them from us, we're not really growing. We're just making it harder for employees to be successful."

The convergence of AV and IT has made IT skills increasingly in demand among integrators. That's exacerbating the staffing challenge in multiple ways.

For example, some integrators spend the money to get their staff certifications such as Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) and Microsoft Certified Solutions Expert (MCSE) because those help build credibility in the eyes of clients' IT departments. Those certifications also help integrators compete against IT firms for video conferencing, unified communications and other IT-centric projects.

But those certifications also make those employees >

< attractive to IT firms, especially those that believe having people with extensive AV experience is key to being competitive in the AV market. That competition can drive up the cost of talent, which affects integrators' overhead costs and profitability.

The amount of poaching by IT firms – and vice-versa – varies by job title.

"If I'm recruiting toward the middle of the ladder, more and more we're looking at those people who have some IT background," says Colin Etchells, integrated systems product manager at Saville, which has three engineers focused on Cisco and Microsoft. "We haven't lost those to the IT industry. Maybe that's because they've come up through the company."

Other integrators say AV vendor certifications are a bigger factor than IT certifications when it comes to encouraging defections.

Outside expertise

"It doesn't seem to happen much with people who have those [IT] qualifications," says Jared Lancaster, AVM Impact CTO. "It happens more in the engineers and project engineers, where people get a few supplier courses under their belt and start to look elsewhere because the other AV companies don't seem to realise

how important things like CCNA are."

For AV integrators, IT firms can be a way to add staff with that expertise instead of sending existing employees out for that training. But one challenge with that strategy is getting on the radar of IT workers, especially those who don't know enough about the AV industry to consider it on their own.

"For project management, we often get people from IT," Lancaster says. "But for other aspects, not normally. It's hard to find people directly from the IT companies because they're not people we have direct contact with."

Another factor is that the value of IT expertise varies by job title.

"The project manager skills should be quite transferrable," Lancaster says. "But for presales technical or sales engineers, their skills aren't transferrable.

You're going to have to teach them AV or IT. It's quite hard to find the right people for things like presales because the amount of products they need to know is absolutely huge."

Techno Q's Saad has a similar take: "The IT requirements would be at a higher level when it comes to programming or support than in presales or sales."

As tablets and smartphones become increasingly common in pro AV, some integrators are hiring people with app development and other programming skills. Others are staffing up with graphic designers and other creative people to provide content-creation services for their digital signage clients. Still others are looking for expertise in health care and building management as they target those applications.

"Some of our best project managers come from the construction industry: somebody who understands >

< how to deal with multiple trades at once," says AVI-SPL's Carnel.

The trick is to know when a potential hire from another industry has enough skills to begin contributing immediately to the bottom line. Those outsiders often have salary expectations that don't acknowledge how much the integrator still has to spend on training in the nuances of AV.

When advertising for an installer, "we get a lot of people who come from cable and satellite installation," says Saville's Etchells. "They've got an idea, but it's not really what we want. In some cases, you've got to pay over the odds for somebody with very little experience relevant to what you're doing."

Retention/promotion

Some integrators say employees tend to stick around when they know a company has ample opportunities to climb the latter or branch into new areas.

"The main thing is that you've got to make sure they feel important and part of the team," Lancaster says.

Many AV integrators are small, owner-run companies. That combination of size and hands-on owner involvement can make it easier to avoid the problem of employees feeling as if they're just another cog in the wheel. But at the same time, other employees will perceive a small company as having limited room for advancement. So for both job interviews and exit interviews, it's a good idea to ask people whether company size is a factor in their decision.

"Often we get people from small companies because there's nowhere for them to go," says Lancaster, whose company is the UK's largest AV firm. "We get people leaving here because they feel the company is too big for them, and they don't know everybody's names and they want to be part of a smaller thing."

AVI-SPL's Carnel agrees but goes a step further, arguing that talented people often want to be able to climb a ladder not just within a company, but also a profession.

"Yes, there's CTS, CTS-D and CTS-I. But once you're a CTS-D, what determines whether you've been doing design and applications for years versus someone who's just stated and taken the right test?

"Our industry was born out of very similar roots to that of the IT industry. Yet the IT industry quickly became a much more professionally oriented, career-path-oriented profession. We've failed to create the professionalism structure that would allow a person to want to be that."

Where's the initiative?

Opportunities – both at a company and in the industry – also vary by how much effort people are willing to put into their career. Some integrators say this is a key difference between AV and IT.

"We tell people that there's a lot of advancement, but it's hard to find the right people that want to," says Lancaster, who started out as an installer. "A lot of the time in this industry, people want to be hand held through the process.

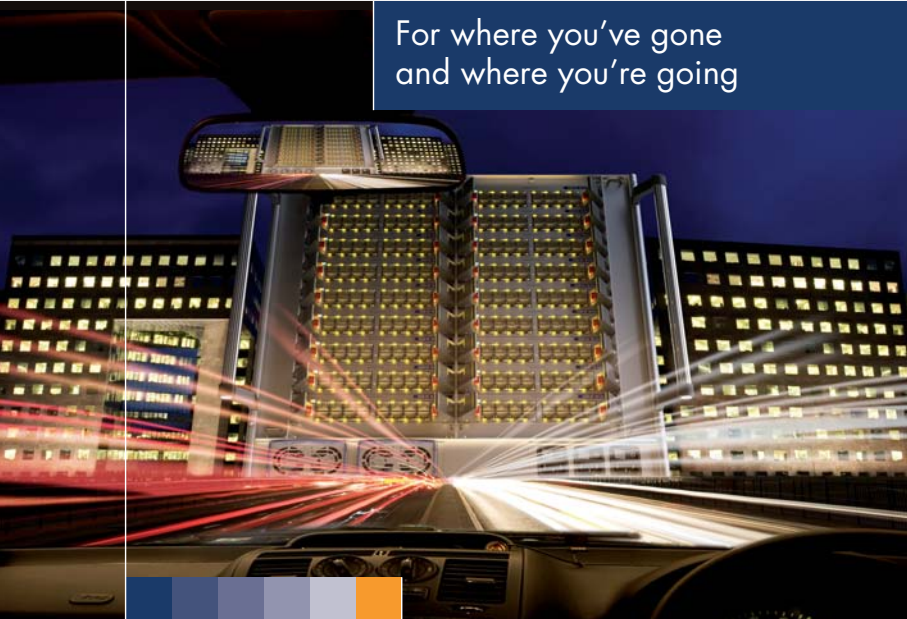< "In IT, if you decided that tomorrow, you want to be an expert in Microsoft Exchange, you'd take courses, become an MSCE and do your MSCP and Exchange certification. Then you'd go, 'Now I'm Microsoft certified, and I can work on Exchange.' If you work in the AV industry, you'd go: 'I'm an installer, and that's it. A company can put me on some courses.'

"That's the problem. A lot of people advance themselves once they're in the job. In IT, people are always doing that: always studying and doing the next qualification. But in AV, people aren't. They don't think it's something they should have to do."

InfoComm's survey highlights the gap between skills and needs, with some of the blame going to integrators rather than employees: "There is some concern that

both CTS and Network + certifications.

InfoComm also is working to foster apprenticeships, including by working with the UK's

National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) to create a framework for AV. Some integrators, such as AVI-SPL, already have their own internship programs, but they could be more effective if governments made changes to reflect AV's unique needs.

"In the UK, AV isn't classified as its own industry and therefore its own apprenticeship," says Saville's Etchells. "There are financial incentives from the government and educational bodies to take a school leaver on and put them through a formal two- or three-year apprenticeship."

But there's no module that covers the skills that AV engineers need.

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pro-AV vendors are reluctant to invest in training and the education of their staff. AV firms are looking for people that already have formal training, but there is little training available outside of InfoComm. In all regions of the world, AV firms would like to see some form of education or certifications established at higher education institutions."

InfoComm is working to provide AV pros with more guidance and training opportunities.

"We now recommend future-focused professionals to develop both a CTS-level understanding of networking technologies and design principles, as well as a CompTIA Network + level understanding of networking technologies and design principles," says David Labuskes, InfoComm International executive director and CEO. "In fact, InfoComm instructors now hold

"So you have to cobble together modules – and it depends on the educational establishment whether they'll let you do that – which encompasses some of the electrical modules," Etchells says. "There's no one set of modules that really suits the AV industry."

Etchells was on the InfoComm roundtable, where he discussed the situation with a government official.

"Between us, we reckoned that with the health and safety modules that most of our engineers have to do, plus modules that already exist in mechanical and electrical engineering apprenticeships, plus the InfoComm AV-specific modules, all of the information is there," Etchells says. "It's just a case of pulling it together into a recognized apprenticeship for AV technicians." ∿