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March 17, 2002

JOB MARKET

The Long, Humbling Quest for a Job in Technology

By SUSAN STELLIN

Three years ago, anyone with a computer science degree and a pulse could practically name his price in the job market as companies scrambled to dodge doomsday Y2K possibilities.

That atmosphere was later buoyed by demand from Internet companies, which offered not just high salaries but also stock options, beer bashes on Friday afternoons and a weekly massage.

By now, the end of that era has become an almost forgotten cliché. But what might surprise some people is the bleakness of the job outlook for a sector once thought impervious to the downturn: software programmers, with experience in code names like SQL, Unix, Java and C++.

Despite recent predictions of a nationwide shortage of computer programmers, those who follow the

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industry say there are lots of qualified information technology workers in New York and the rest of the country who cannot find employment. Although their long-term prospects remain bright, those looking for work right now — and the recruiters whose livelihood depends on finding them jobs — say the market is the worst they have seen, though it is showing signs of picking up.

Eva Marie Plaza, a database and Web developer who lives in Manhattan, has been looking since she was laid off from TheGlobe.com last April. She said she mostly looks at job postings on employment Web sites like Monster.com, HotJobs.com ([news/quote](#)) and JobCircle.com, sending out 25 to 35 responses to classified ads each week.

That effort has generated about five responses a month, resulting in an average of one interview a month and still no offers. Even when recruiters call her about an opening, she said: "What I'm finding is a lot of times, they'll tell me, 'Oh, I have this great job. I'll send your résumé.' And then I never hear from them again."

That is a big contrast to the aggressive tactics recruiters used a couple of years ago to lure technology workers from their employers, in some cases obtaining copies of company phone lists to give prized tech workers the hard sell. All along a line of cubicles, Ms. Plaza said, "You'd hear people say, 'No, thanks, not interested.' And then the next phone in the next cubicle would ring."

Recruiters are not relishing the fact that the tables have turned. After all, their own commissions are on the line.

"I hope and I believe it's at its final stages right now," said Paul Krug, a recruiter with Today's Technology Inc. in New York, referring to the job bust. Like most of his colleagues, Mr. Krug attributed the dearth of technology jobs to the implosion of the Internet industry and subsequent belt-tightening at companies that overspent in the late 1990's to keep up with the dot-coms.

But he also echoed a general consensus that the market is starting to turn around, with a slight increase in job postings and new hires over the past couple of months.

Scot Melland, chief executive of Dice Inc. ([news/quote](#)), an online

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recruiting service for technology professionals, said that at the end of February, the site had about 4,600 job openings listed for the New York metro area. Although that is a significant decrease from the 10,000 positions listed a year ago, it is still a 15 percent increase from the end of December.

"We see things stabilizing," Mr. Melland said. "And the further we get into 2002, we'll see more demand." Companies are looking for more traditional "back office, big- systems types of skill sets," he said, like database administrators, applications programmers, project managers and business analysts. "Those are the people who take business requirements and translate them into technical requirements," he said. "Usually that indicates further hiring."

Employers are also looking for technology workers who have multiple skills, recruiters said: Java programmers who also know C++, or project managers who have development experience as well. And companies that are hiring these days tend to be looking for specific experience, immediately weeding out candidates who do not meet all the criteria.

"If they have an opening in the equities area, they're going to be looking for someone with programming experience in the equities division," Mr. Krug said.

But with so many candidates chasing so few jobs, Mr. Krug said, you have to be almost perfect if you hope to take advantage of the uptick. For example, if an open position lists 15 requirements, hiring managers expect candidates to have 14, if not 15, of those skills, he said.

Some job hunters think such rigidity is short-sighted. "I've been told that the only thing I don't have on a list of requirements is a simple backup program," said Jessica Blank, a systems administrator from Parsippany, N.J. Even though that program might take just an hour to learn, she said, "They'll say, 'I'm sorry, you're not qualified.'"

Another irritating aspect of the job search, she said, is hiring managers' and recruiters' tendency to prefer résumés that have what she called computer industry buzzwords. "If you have 65 buzzwords, it's better than someone who has 45 buzzwords," she said.

Ms. Blank recently landed a job at a culinary Web company in Manhattan, a huge relief even though it pays half what she used to earn.

Another frustration for job seekers is encountering dead ends in the hiring process. "A lot of the jobs on the Net are posted, and then when you track it down you find out the budget has been re-evaluated

or the company is hiring internally," said Lawrence Saltzman, an out-of-work Manhattan programmer.

Of course, not all in the information-technology sector is doom and gloom. Rob Francis, a network design consultant who lives in Brooklyn, said he has held onto his consulting clients for the last two years despite the downturn. He attributes his relative longevity to having skills that are still in demand, and being at a more senior level. In his view, mid-level employees are bearing the brunt of the budget cuts.

But even for them, the long-term prognosis is upbeat. According to data released in December by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, 8 of the 10 fastest-growing occupations projected through 2010 are in information technology, including software engineers, support specialists, systems administrators, database administrators, desktop publishers and other jobs.

And despite individual accounts of steep pay cuts, data collected by Dice indicates that salaries for technology workers only dropped in the fourth quarter of 2001, after rising through the first three quarters. According to Dice's 2001 survey of 61,000 technology workers, nationwide salaries averaged \$68,400 last year. They were significantly higher in New York City, at \$80,800, and were highest in Silicon Valley at \$87,700, in 2001.

"The good news is it's still a pretty hefty salary at \$81,000," Mr. Melland said. "These are still great jobs."

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