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Report: Average Worker's Tech Skills Not Keeping Pace

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Although unemployment continues to make headlines, the glut in information technology workers is only temporary, experts say. Once the economy improves, demand for IT skills will rise again. But will the workforce be ready?

Already employers are finding a persistent lack of qualified applicants trained in programs such as Oracle and PeopleSoft. The shortages seem most critical in these high-end areas, but a report by the National Policy Association said that the average worker will not be able to compete in a job market in which industries increasingly require technology-savvy workers at all levels.

One technology industry observer notes that for 10 years, there has been a shift in technological expertise away from the United States.

"Rather than a worker gap, there is a skills gap," said James Auerbach, senior vice president at the nonprofit research organization. "When the recovery starts, we will have the same shortage we did two to three years ago."

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Economic Vagaries

The report, "Building a Digital Workforce: Confronting the Crisis," was released by the Digital Economic Opportunity Committee. The committee was established by the association last year to address the skills shortage in the information age economy.

The committee is working with business, labor, education, government and nonprofits to develop ongoing training programs to help the average worker -- not just the most technical.

"We're trying to establish programs that are not subject to economic vagaries and government funding cuts," Mr. Auerbach said.

The report details successful programs that represent partnerships among business, labor and government, but Mr. Auerbach said that all sectors need to do more.

"Employees have to go back to school all the time to keep up to date and employable," Mr. Auerbach said. "Training is not a one-time thing but must be continual."

Less Availability

Ana Kilday, vice president of staffing at Affiliated Computer Services in Dallas, said her company spends more time evaluating the large number of candidates vying for fewer jobs.

"Demand has softened, and there is more availability of IT skill sets, but we do not see the same level of availability in all market segments," she said. "There are still IT market segments where the demand for the desired skills is greater than the supply."

Even though employers can now afford to be choosy when reviewing candidates, the outlook for workers is improving, said John Reed, metro market manager of consulting services at RHI Consulting Inc. in Dallas.

"In the last 30 days, we have definitely seen an upturn in positions," he said. "The most successful candidates have years of experience and have been working for large companies."

Decline in Numbers

Jack Scott, vice president and chief information officer at The viaLink Company, an electronic commerce service firm in Dallas, echoes concerns about the shortage of technical job candidates at the high end.

"From an academic standpoint, there has been a steady decline over the last decade in the number of undergraduates and advance-degreed graduates in the U.S. with technical proficiency," said Mr. Scott, a technical adviser on curriculum for the School of Technology at Claremont Graduate University.

"There are fewer and fewer graduates with computer science degrees. As we become more technologically entwined, where is the next generation coming from?"

Mr. Scott said computer science training is not as "sexy" to students as it was during the high-tech wave of the 1980s and 1990s. In addition, companies such as IBM and Microsoft expect workers to pay their dues in "farm" programs designed to give workers the skills the company demands.

Biz Over Tech

Rather than wait, students are choosing general business careers, where they see a chance for more rapid advancement. Mr. Scott also notes that for 10 years, there has been a shift in technological expertise away from the United States.

The governments of India and China, with assistance from U.S. multinational corporations, are investing heavily to develop home-grown technical skills so that their countries remain competitive in the global marketplace.

"Ten to 15 years ago, it was unheard of to talk about offshore development," he said. Training issues aside, Mr. Scott said employers do have control over the quality of talent they attract. All it takes is marketing.

"I try to give [job candidates] something that resonates with their soul," he said. "I have never had a problem finding good people." **END**

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