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Canada's Association of Information Technology (IT) Professionals

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**Global IT skills shortage fact, or fiction? Part I of a Series**

I was talking with Margaret Evered recently and she has a lot to say that needs to be heard. Margaret has an impressive 20+ years in IT management and fully appreciates the challenges IT managers have in finding qualified staff and retaining them. I invited Margaret to blog her views in Canada's only premier forum for IT managers and pros.

Margaret brings an impressive background so take the time to read and comment on her views.

Margaret's profile:

- More than 20 years in IT management
- Past CIPS Director (Ontario and Toronto boards)
- Helped organize and co-chaired CIPS "Women in IT 2005" conference
- M.Sc. in behavioural science and Executive MBA

Margaret's blog:

In ComputerWorld (March 3 2006 edition) there was yet another article regarding the concerns of CIOs over the shortage of skilled IT personnel in Canada. Depending on who one talks to, employers, employees, recruiters, or academics we may or may not have a global IT staff shortage. Not only is there disagreement on this, echoing back to 2000 if one checks newspaper and blog postings worldwide, but so too are the perceived causes, consequences, and proposed "cures" In this series of blog postings I will try to cast some light on the issues.

Not only in this country, but worldwide, colleges and universities have experienced falling enrollment in IT programmes and a number have terminated course offerings. Long term, if this trend is not reversed, it could have a profound impact on entire economies. For example, it is projected that by 2010 India will have a shortfall of 500,000 IT workers (Nasscom-McKinsey report www.indianembassy.org/indiainfo/india_it.htm). The shortfall of skilled workers is bemoaned from Australia to the U.K. and the Americas. What we have to ascertain is do we have a skills shortage, or a skills gap? Maybe what we are experiencing is a shortage of people matching overly ambitious job posting skills shopping lists, or possibly a shortage of persons who want to sacrifice a life / work balance and are no longer willing to work long hours with or without adequate recompense. Blog postings from IT professionals worldwide also mention, especially since the dot com crash, poor rates of pay being offered by employers demanding incredible skill sets and certifications. A number of postings in N. America have even suggested that IT workers should unionize. Could it be that employers are contributing to a perceived skills shortage?

That employers could be part of the problem, of the skills shortage they bemoan, seems incredible. And yet there are numerous sources of IT workers they overlook. Among these groups are new graduates, the disabled, women, and the 40 years old plus worker. Everyone seems to demand experienced workers who can hit the ground running. Apart from those graduating from co-op programmes most new graduates cannot readily find entry level positions to start building that experience base and so a percentage drift into other careers and are lost to the profession. Although it will not of itself solve the shortage, possibly organizations can consider apprenticeship / internship programmes for the newly qualified. True the same criticism that is leveled at apprenticeship programmes in the trades could be leveled here - that once trained and experienced the individuals will move on - this is a risk, but at least the country as a whole will benefit. Certainly, if the prospect of post-graduation employment is there more students and parents will consider an education in computer science as a good investment. While some enlightened organizations do offer internships / apprenticeships, there are too few who go this route; maybe what are required are greater government incentives for businesses to hire new graduates and give them needed experience. Although SHRC has a work experience program, to assist employers to hire IT recent graduates, I have yet to encounter anyone who is employed by an organization that takes advantage of the program.

The U.K. and Australia also offer programs to help new graduates, and are targeting youth and school leavers to attract them to the IT profession, which is often perceived even in N. America as a boring career. Neither high school students, nor some career counselors, have any concept of the richness of career opportunities computer science can offer and industry does little to contradict this perspective. There needs to be more concerted effort by industry to educate the population in the doors an IT degree or certification can open - but this will not work unless there are post-graduation employment opportunities. Females are the most likely to perceive IT careers as boring and this is part of the reason that globally the percentage of women in IT, and enrolling in computer science courses, has fallen drastically since the early 1980s. Females also tend to bear the brunt of childcare, household chores, and eldercare so shift work and long and often erratic hours are unappealing. H.R. policies do little to attract or retain female IT workers, so employers need to change their attitudes if they are to take advantage of this source of IT professionals. Employers may find that compressed workweeks, job sharing, and part-time work could attract more IT professionals of both sexes - in Australia a survey of 8,000 organizations found they experienced over an 80% increase in productivity once they introduced job sharing! Maybe IT hiring managers and H.R. policies need a paradigm shift?

New immigrants, the disabled, and older IT workers are also an often neglected resource pool: they have problems gaining employment in this so-called skills short market, despite impressive qualifications and extensive experience. Even when new immigrants to Canada gain Canadian qualifications, or have their foreign ones "certified", they still run into that more subtle barrier of "lack of Canadian experience" - this "experience" was spelled out in almost every job advertisement I saw when I immigrated here long ago, now it is less obvious yet still raised by recruiters and potential employers alike. Employers seem resistant too, to hiring older workers and often stereotype them unjustifiably, while ignoring the richness of their experience. The challenges of these groups in gaining employment will be discussed in further postings, as well as their frustrations with employers and recruiters. As far as the above groups are concerned, along with many female IT workers, there is no skills shortage just a lack of open-mindedness by employers and



John Oxley
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recruiters. Educational institutions can also do much to improve the calibre of their graduates and attract students with creative programmes, and some are making bold moves in the right direction too, but more of this later.

Thank you Margaret for sharing your views in this important area and we look forward to your next blog.

Now to the audience, what are your views?

Best regards,
Stephen Ibaraki

Published Monday, March 20, 2006 8:52 AM by [cdnltmq](#)
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Comments

re: Global IT skills shortage fact, or fiction? Part I of a Series

Monday, March 20, 2006 8:37 PM by [jointer](#)

Thanks Margaret for an excellent summary of the perceived problem. As a UG leader in Vancouver I encounter this on a regular basis when people contact me asking about employment. Often, as you say, they are very well qualified but new to Canada. They come here feeling that they have been given expectations but end up delivering pizza to survive, and are understandably somewhat bitter about it. I encourage them to come to our meetings to network and on occasion that has helped.

When you mentioned "older" people that hit very close to home. I personally experienced the problem in my mid-50's. It often seems that employers cannot see beyond the immediate technical qualifications and background and see the depth of experience and attitude that older people bring. I went back to school when I was 50 and did what would normally be a 2 year IT Diploma in 9 months, which I passed with distinction and faired better than 90% of the younger people there. In other words I demonstrated my capabilities and my willingness to work very hard to achieve my goals. Work ethic should never be undervalued.

I did get a job fairly quickly which unfortunately only lasted for about 2 years. I was laid off due to lack of work but not before a lot of younger people went before me. Then despite having acquired my MCSD and PMP qualifications during that 2 years of employment (I studied on my own time), I simply could not get a job; not enough experience was always the cry.

At the time I had been working with computers in one form or another for 35 years but lacked the formal training and qualifications, which is why I went back to school. It cost me \$25K of my own money but I wasn't "good enough to be employed!". I have consistently demonstrated my capabilities throughout my career and have always been a quick study but it seems that I had too much grey hair for the IT industry! Unfortunately, I know a number of others with similar experiences.

I can understand the dilemma for employers regarding their investment in training but many older people would bring excellent value and at the same time be happy to do work sharing/part-time.

So I am not totally convinced that there is an actual skills shortage. Employers may mean that there is a skills shortage but only on their terms!

Cheers
Graham Jones
President, VANTUG

re: Global IT skills shortage fact, or fiction? Part I of a Series

Tuesday, March 21, 2006 4:23 PM by [Tatiana Andronache](#)

What Margaret is saying re: IT employers is true, and so is the fact that less people choose to go into IT. Maybe globalization means thinking not only where to hire the cheapest staff from, but also what are the long-term and far-spread consequences of actions targeted to the next quarter or next project bottom line. No wonder young people have become disenchanted with the IT as a profession. Please don't call now the disabled, the old and the women (always the women!) to the rescue. With one thing I do not agree: IT is not boring and that's not the argument most cited by women for staying away from IT. Another important point Margaret makes is that fears of "training them and losing them" should be offset by the greater good done to the the country or the industry as a whole. Some kind of legal frame would be needed for this, why are IT workers so disposable if they are so important?? CIPS or SHRC or unions or the government could play a role here. No one actually represents the IT worker.

To better times in IT,

TA

re: Global IT skills shortage fact, or fiction? Part I of a Series

Tuesday, March 21, 2006 10:58 PM by [Tim](#)

I thought the Dr. Klawe interview that appeared here last year I think gives real solutions. I still believe there is a skills shortage and it will grow but at the same time the older IT group are not treated fairly.

[# re: Global IT skills shortage fact, or fiction? Part I of a Series](#)

Wednesday, March 22, 2006 6:24 PM by [Stephen Ibaraki](#)

In my chat with Margaret today she has more to add to her compelling post. There's merit in the viewpoints being expressed though I lean towards champions from all sectors in a constructive dialogue. CIPS is pretty active this year and Margaret is a leader here. And, passion from members fuels changes-- that's the key.

Thanks,
Stephen Ibaraki

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