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## Canada needs a show of hands in IT industry

Computer-related job availability is increasing, while training enrolment plummets

**Danny Bradbury, For CanWest News Service**

Published: Saturday, December 02, 2006

Canada's IT industry is looking underfunded thanks to a lack of new expertise -- and that could affect companies' ability to perform, warn experts. The recently renamed Information Communications and Technology Council, tasked by the government with promoting technical skills in Canada, is proposing a broad set of initiatives to reverse the trend.

Figures from the Computing Research Association show computer science degree student numbers plummeting in the United States, and academics suggest the same is true in Canada. The number of incoming undergraduate students majoring in computer science fell by 70 per cent between 2000 and 2005, according to the CRA's Taulbey survey.

"There has been a definite drop in enrolment in the past couple of years," agrees Michael Katchabaw, assistant professor at the University of Western Ontario's computer science department.

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While enrolments fall, demand is increasing. The ICTC has compiled Statistics Canada figures on employment trends in the communications and technology sector and is concerned about the results. The labour force for this sector, which has been broadly rising since last summer, started dipping again in June, falling below September 2003 levels for

the first time. The unemployment rate for professionals in this field has been falling since June 2003, and the most recent figures this summer suggest unemployment figures of about 2.75 per cent. The council expects to see demand for 89,000 new hires in the next three to five years.

The problem presents Canadian companies with recruitment challenges. "We are experiencing some gaps on a number of fronts," says Carol Ariano, vice-president in human resources, global operations at Montreal-based IT services company CGI. The company is hiring hundreds of new people across all of its Canadian offices.

Technology skills are crucial to performance, warns Stephen Ibaraki, a board director at the Canadian Information Processing Society (CIPS).

"Because organizations are unable to get sufficient numbers of skilled workers, that will affect them," he says, warning of the potential impact on competitiveness and service delivery. "Organizations need to adapt very rapidly, and that ability is dependent on technology."

To make matters worse, experienced workers are retiring, Ariano warns. About 31,000 IT workers will retire or otherwise leave the industry within five years, according to the ICTC.

While this is a problem for Canadian industries across the board, Ariano argues it's a particular issue for IT because it's a young sector with falling graduate input. The skills base is being eroded at both ends.



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Part of the reason enrollment is dropping on its perception. Enrollments in post-secondary education in IT courses have dropped by around 50 per cent because of the negative view of the IT sector," says Paul Swinwood, ICTC president.

The post-bubble crisis in IT has turned educators and students away from the sector and they are not recognizing its recovery, he warns. "In reality, there are 35,000 more people employed in Canada today than at the height of the boom in IT."

1 | 2 |

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