

IT PROFESSIONAL

IT SKILLS SHORTAGE CAN BE ADDRESSED

There's a false impression IT isn't cool anymore, but the truth is there are plenty of opportunities across all industries for those with the skills and the right accreditations

By Stephen Ibaraki



There is an IT skills shortage and an anticipated net shortfall in the next six years unless specific measures are taken to address the issue. John Bouford, president of the Canadian Information Processing Society (CIPS), sees CIPS taking an active and essential role working with industry partners to resolve this crisis in skills demand.

CIPS fellow Calvin Gotlieb, a founding pioneer of the worldwide computing industry and professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, has warned, "There is no doubt that there is a current shortage of persons with computer and communication skills. Further, if action is not taken, the shortages will become more acute. A recent report of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics states that in spite of off-shoring there are more IT jobs available today than at the height of the dot.com boom." This is backed up by a Software Human Resource Council (SHRC) report placing the IT unemployment rate at 1.9 per cent in 2005. That's in sharp contrast to the overall rate of 6.5 per cent, and reflects the growth trend in IT.

Charles Hughes, president of the British Computing Society (BCS), said around 150,000 entrants to the IT workforce are required each year between 2005 and 2014. Of these, around 80 per cent are needed to meet replacement demand and around 20 per cent to fill new positions.

What are the drivers behind the shortage? There is a false impression that IT isn't a viable career post dot-com. "IT isn't cool anymore and there is confusion in the marketplace," said Microsoft director John Oxley. "While the salaries are still really high for anyone just entering industry, it is becoming harder to see where an individual's career can go. No longer are people simply IT implementers,

developers and managers. The industry is growing and the roles that make up many IT organizations include user experience specialists, graphics designers, multimedia designers, project managers, business process leads, relationship managers, systems architects and program managers, just to mention a few."

College and university enrolments have also declined as much as 50 to 70 per cent since 2000. "I believe in part

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the shortage comes from the negative message that resulted from the dot.com bust. This was exacerbated by all the talk of globalization, and jobs moving to India and China," Gotlieb said.

CIPS fellow and noted educator Maria Klawe, president of HMC in an interview in the CIPS/Microsoft Canadian IT Managers blog (CIM), talks about the incorrect perception of IT as a "has been" profession due to the dot-com bust and outsourcing. He also points to parents and guidance counsellors advising students not to enter the computer field. This is despite high salaries and more jobs today than before. Contributing to the skills shortage is the increasingly embedded nature of IT into every aspect of our lives, thus driving up demand for IT workers. In addition, 2.9 million workers are within 10 years of the median retirement age (or one in five workers), according to a 2003 Stats Canada figure quoted in a

Workplace Partners Panel report from the Canadian Labour and Business Centre.

The impact of this shortfall in IT skills dramatically impedes a diverse array of areas due to the high dependency upon technology. For example, it affects overall reduction in productivity, profitability, business agility, collaboration, innovation, service delivery, customer responsiveness, competitive advantage, clear differentiation and market focus.

As well, it limits technology adoption rates as well as an organization's ability to leverage that technology to lower operational costs, limits growth opportunities and reduces the ability to bring new products and services to market. It reduces the availability of goods and services to consumer, contributes to higher recruitment costs due to the tighter IT labour supply and competition for a limited IT labour pool, and leads to higher training costs for new employees to replace loss of experience and specific skills.

Solution can be found

The solution to the skills shortage can be found in CIPS's professionalism programs, which are similar to those of BCS. CIPS places an emphasis on a wider skills set that includes business, communications, relationship and technical skills. As Hughes said, "BCS has launched a major program to raise the level of professionalism in IT, which will help tackle these issues.

"We need a profession that plays a full part in the exploitation of IT; is seen as an integral part of business; has appropriate technical and non-technical skills; is about both information and technology; demands greater personal responsibility on the part of practitioners; is attractive

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Career tips

- ✓ Brush up on your business skills if you want to remain relevant in an automated world
- ✓ Certification is key to career development
- ✓ Assume greater responsibilities in your organization where possible
- ✓ Get as much training as you can to keep up with changes