

# IT SKILLS SUPPLY STARTING TO DRY UP

If your water supply was endless (and you didn't mind getting your feet wet) you'd probably just keep adding water. However, if you were facing a drought you'd probably think about fixing the hole in your bucket.

So what does keeping your bucket full of water have to do with an IT skills shortage?

After the Y2K phenomenon we were dealing with a relatively endless supply of skills. While staff had fewer places to go to, if an organization did lose someone they weren't too stressed about it — they'd simply engage recruiters to go find replacements.

Recently all signs are indicating that we are entering a period of drought. The supply of new IT graduates is slowing and the baby-boomers want to reduce their hours. Meanwhile, the aggregate



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demand is increasing. Our water supply is shrinking and the bucket is getting bigger.

In our world of instant gratification it is easier to focus on recruiting rather than retention. Hiring a new resource is a tangible event — you can analyze the exact cost, it is exciting and you can introduce a real person. While an equal investment in staff retention will likely yield even greater returns, these benefits are not as easily quantifiable. Retention can also be tougher than recruiting. Retention strategies involve changing behaviour throughout your organization and the efforts must be maintained for years. It also means following through on

promises made during recruiting. For retention to be effective you need a human capital plan that addresses a wide range of factors, including:

- **Career growth:** Whether breadth of variety or depth of specialty, people must be able to find growth, change, and excitement of new challenges from within your organization, rather than finding that change by leaving.
- **Performance feedback:** People want to know what they're doing well and what they need to improve upon. Many people who desire feedback will never ask for it but they do expect it.
- **Pay for performance:** People must know that strong performance gets rewarded. Adequate compensation and benefit plans are not enough to keep people, but poor plans can drive people away.

- **Respect for work-life balance and providing flexibility** is expected and pays big dividends.

- **Relationships:** People are less likely to leave your bucket if they're a respected part of your team and enjoy working together. Relationships are built through ongoing communication. Make sure you take your staff out for coffee more often than the headhunters do.

As the drought worsens others will be eager to make that hole in your bucket even bigger and attract your best people.

Now would be the best time to start fixing the leak.

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## INDUSTRY MUST UNITE

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to a much wider group of entrants; has a reputation for excitement and makes a real difference to society."

It's essential to bring together business, industry, government, media and academia into an active discussion to counter the misconceptions.

Moreover, attention is being brought to the skills area through the media partnerships and the CIPS communities

found in Canadian cities across the country. The key here is to engage more people in IT and provide a venue for professional development.

CIPS is vocal about the career opportunities available and the increasing growth in IT.

Stephen Ibaraki is the vice-president of the Canadian Information Processing Society and a 35-year veteran of business and IT.

## Retiring boomers about to leave a big hole in the market for skilled legacy system workers

Economist David Foot famously claimed in his best-seller *Boom, Bust & Echo* that demographics explain two-thirds of everything. It appears that information technology is no exception.

The first of the baby boomer generation reached the age of 60 this year and, by 2016, most will be retired. For many, a growing worry is the potential skills gap that the boomers could leave in their wake. It's a gap that's part of concern to banks, hospitals, governments and other organizations that still rely on the mainframe and legacy systems those boomers built 20, 30 or even 40 years ago.

"When there is an incoming skills deficit and another outgoing one looming at the top end from retirees, you have a recipe for a very serious problem," said Stephen Ibaraki, vice-president of the Canadian Information Processing Society (CIPS).

For years we've been hearing about the imminent obsolescence of mainframe applications, but in most cases the costs and time required to migrate or decommission them have been too high.

"Complexity is another factor," said Dave Nikolejsin, chief information officer for the Province of British Columbia. "Conversely, everyone knows how risky it is to try to change out the systems that are running the whole business in one big project."

Compounding the problem is the recent drop in university and college IT



Peter Thompson

enrolment. "Theoretically, market forces should yield higher input into the funnel when demand at the output is high," said Ibaraki. "This has not happened. IT demand is up to near record levels and salaries are amongst the highest in the overall workforce, but the feeder systems are down."

Ibaraki points to a number of reasons behind the drop in IT enrolment, chief among them the fallout from Y2K and the dot-com crash in creating negative perceptions about the profession.

But even if more people were enrolling in IT programs, you wouldn't find them learning about legacy technologies.

"Canadian university programs are not well suited to be a solution," according to Mike Dover, vice-president of syndicated research at New Paradigm. "You could carefully review the syllabus at any of our universities without finding courses that address these specific skills," he said.

Paul Swinwood, president of the Software Human Resource Council (SHRC), agrees. "I have already seen that this is a major problem for those trying to maintain legacy systems," he said.

On the up side, it's certainly a great time to be an expert in legacy systems. Where their roles have traditionally been looked upon as the grunt work of IT, simple market dynamics could make them the new IT heroes.

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