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## Can we close the gap?

PETER THOMPSON

Globe and Mail Update

Close your eyes and think Florida. Home to orange juice, Disney World and...IT consultants?

According to executive analyst Bruce Rogow of business- innovation think tank New Paradigm, several Canadian firms have recruited in Florida for part-time IT contract work, and have found it "a spectacular approach when done properly."

Why on earth would Florida be the next potential hotbed of IT talent? Because it's where many IT programmers of 30 years ago have retired to or spend their winter months. And luring them back is one way companies are dealing with a looming challenge facing IT departments today: With baby boomers hitting 60 this year, who's going to keep the systems they built up running when they retire?

At banks, hospitals, insurance companies and governments across the country, the computer systems the boomers built are still part of the IT backbone today. Certain software built more than 30 years ago—generally referred to as "legacy" applications—continues to power some important IT systems such as our health records, pensions and benefits, bank accounts and more.

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The Government of British Columbia has several such legacy systems, according to the province's chief information officer, Dave Nikolejsin. "The main system that much of our Social Assistance system relies upon dates back to the 1960s and has about four million lines of code. This skills gap is a growing issue and we find ourselves competing with the private sector and other governments

The Software Human Resources Council sees this trend as "very dangerous to our industry," according to SHRC President Paul Swinwood. "All levels of government, finance, insurance and all industries that depend on IT to survive will be affected," he said.

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for an increasingly scarce resource,” he says.

That resource is scarce not only because of an aging work force, but also because fewer people are enrolling in computer science or engineering degrees. “Our July Labour Force Survey data indicates an [industry] unemployment level hovering around 2.5 per cent. This, combined with a 70-per-cent drop in enrolment, could see us with a labour shortage in one of Canada’s more profitable sectors,” says Swinwood.

“This is a problem for the Canadian economy,” says John Boufford, President of the Canadian Information Processing Society. “It’s certainly becoming a problem in ICT and will be exacerbated where colleges and universities are unable, for a variety of very good reasons, to fill the demand for suitably trained graduates. So with the traditional pipeline for retiring talent on the dry side, what are companies supposed to do? Here are five steps to avoid a nasty legacy headache.

### **IT STARTS WITH PLANNING**

Determining the right solution to the legacy skills gap challenge starts with research and planning. At its most basic level, it’s a process of identifying gaps and being prepared to fill them.

CIPS vice-president Stephen Ibaraki advises that “companies must take a proactive approach to the legacy/generational skills gap. This could encompass a risk assessment to determine the impact; a skills audit to provide a road map for addressing the shortfall; [and] programs for succession planning tied into HR.”

To Mike Dover, a vice-president at New Paradigm, the process is equally defined and methodical. “First, they need to assign dedicated resources to the issues. Next, they have to build realistic demand profiles over time. Next they need to map in-house skills and experience to the demand profiles over time. It’s not unrealistic to have a rolling five-year plan for this,” he says.

### **OUTSOURCING & OFFSHORING**

At Canadian Pacific Railway, legacy systems have controlled everything from line switching to ticket reservations over the years. Many have since been retired, as will the remaining legacy applications over time.

In the interim, the skills gap is “an issue that we identified and are addressing by relying on third party support to meet the need,” says Bob Nash, the company’s Director Operations, Business Information and Technology Services.

Fortunately for customers, the number of outsourcing and consulting firms offering niche services in support and maintenance (my own firm among them) is on the rise. Add to that the element of offshore resources and the result is a highly competitive market, with outsourcing looking highly attractive for companies seeking legacy skills.

### **TRAINING AND MENTORING**

Universities and colleges, particularly their continuing education schools, offer courses in a variety of niche IT subject areas. In fact, my firm teaches one such course in managing existing, often legacy, applications—what we call Applications Support and Maintenance (ASM)—through the continuing-education faculties at the University of Calgary and Ryerson in Toronto.

"Having a structured approach and treating ASM as a discipline should improve productivity, reduce costs and provide for continuous improvement," says CPR's Bob Nash, also one of the course graduates.

Boufford from CIPS advises talking to local community colleges where, if sufficient demand is created locally, "people will gravitate to that niche." Across different companies and even countries, the concept of professional mentoring is gaining momentum as a skills gap solution.

CIPS is one organization contributing to that momentum; many of its programs are aimed at encouraging members to network and collaborate, or at keeping senior IT professionals engaged in the profession, says Boufford. "Mentoring provides a vehicle and process for directly addressing this issue," he adds. "Sharing and knowledge transfer soften the generational and legacy skills gap."

## **A TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTION**

Boufford contends that "companies need to look closely at productivity solutions rather than just applying more offshore bodies to the problem."

If there was consensus on what that productivity solution will ultimately be, it is web services—hosted, web-based applications offered on a per-seat or per-transaction basis. Also called "software as a service," some of the most recognized examples include Salesforce.com, NetSuite and—to a growing extent—Google.

"The issue is serious, but can be looked at as an opportunity" says Dover. But Boufford, Dover and others also acknowledge that legacy systems aren't vanishing any time soon.

Nikolejsin explains that, "these systems have morphed over the years to become incredibly intricate and complicated. It is very difficult to take a single business process or function...once you pull the wrong thread the whole sweater can come undone."

As Dover puts it, "while I think firms and governments should be migrating to web-based services, they will need to be creative when meeting day-to-day needs."

## **A REWARDING CAREER PATH**

For Dover, "the best solutions are to search for talent overseas or to recruit retirees on a contract basis."

Whether it's an aspiring mainframe expert or a retired snowbird, attracting and retaining support and maintenance people requires a focused effort on the part of recruiters, and combination of work/life balance, job satisfaction and opportunities for clear career advancement.

Boufford explains that "job satisfaction may have a bigger influence on employee retention in the legacy arena than the leading edge technology arena, where working with the technology is sometimes viewed as a reward unto itself."

He adds, "legacy systems are sometimes stigmatized because we're really talking about application maintenance for the most part. Employees in these positions need to have a career path and professional development that allows them to keep their skills current in order to avoid obsolescence down the road."

Boufford and others also acknowledge that, while the baby boomer impact on legacy systems should not be understated, ever-changing

impact on legacy systems should not be understated, ever-changing skills gaps are a reality in the technology world. IT is evolving too quickly for skills supplies and demands to remain static for any length of time.

As Swinwood says, "the IT industry always faces the issue that our work force is in demand across all sectors of employment. They are needed in hospitals, police stations, small, medium and large companies. There is always a need for IT workers, but the skill set is ever evolving."

*Dr. Peter Thompson is President and CEO of RIS, an IT services firm, and author of SMART Methodology and Maximizing IT Value through Operational Excellence.*

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