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IT industry needs new blood

Computer science enrolment down

Danny Bradbury, Financial Post

Published: Wednesday, November 22, 2006

Another misconception is that offshore outsourcing is starving the IT industry of jobs, warns a report from the U.S. Association of Computing Machinery. The report is skeptical about offshore outsourcing's effect on the IT job market, arguing that outsourcing is creating more job opportunities in the United States.

"We're seeing a demand for higher-end skills in Canada as a result of globalization," Mr. Swinwood says. "We're not programmers to the world. I think India's trying to take that place."

"Higher-end" means skills that mix technical expertise with business knowledge. In addition to traditional software development skills, CGI needs "technical people who can also function as management consultants. And preferably people with deep subject matter expertise." Project managers are in particularly high demand.

Figures from recruitment company Robert Half Technology bear this out. The company's 2007 Salary Survey found that salaries for Canadian project managers in consulting and systems integration range from \$74,000 to \$105,000 -- up 5.6% from last year's survey. Business systems analysts could expect to earn between \$61,750 and \$88,750, which is up 4.9%.

One solution to filling this shortfall, Mr. Ibaraki says, is as near as CIPS, which has a membership base of 6,000 practitioners. The other immediate solution could be immigration.

"Canada is a welcoming country for people with IT skills," Ms. Ariano says. "Increasingly, as we look at a smaller available workforce, people with appropriate qualifications from other countries are certainly welcome."

Mr. Swinwood would like to work with organizations, such as settlement agencies, to ensure people from overseas stand a better chance of attaining business-focused technical positions in companies.

"We want to impact the training they give so that when these people learn English, they're learning a business English," he says.

Many would argue the onus is on developing these skills within Canadian schools and universities. One key to that is co-op programs, which place students in companies for a portion of their study time. Mr. Swinwood encourages more of these programs.

"Our co-CEO Mike Lazaridis was a co-op student when he founded RIM, and we have close ties to the co-op programs at universities," says a spokesman for Research in Motion. The company's headquarters is next to the University of Waterloo, where Mr. Lazaridis studied.

Experiential development programs, where companies work directly with in-house student teams on commissioned projects, can also help students marry business and technology expertise early in their careers.

But these activities won't capture the imagination of high school students. "If the students aren't getting interested in IT at the K-12 level then you're slimming it mightily upstream when you want to get people involved at the higher education level," says Bobby Schnable, a member of the ACM's globalization task force.

Things may not be all bleak, though. Mr. Katchabaw says he sees the decline in new IT students bottoming



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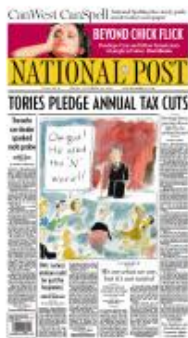
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out. Hopefully, inspired teaching and industry mentoring will help prime the pump to keep Canada's IT industry flowing, and replace the runoff as the older IT specialists begin to retire.

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