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Is IT it?

With a looming shortage of IT professionals close in the horizon, Canadian technology firms are getting increasingly more creative when it comes to trying to lure new students to get into that sector.

Erin Ruiz is a tech-savvy 17-year-old from Toronto who spends most of her spare time in front of a computer. But, when asked whether she wants to make a career in Information Technology, the answer is "Probably not".

Ruiz is entering grade 12 in the fall and has her eyes set on pursuing a program in international business or linguistics. She and her family recently immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong, where she says many computer science graduates are having a hard time getting employment. Not even the fact that her father is an IT professional can convince Ruiz to pursue a career in that sector.

"IT is really not my thing. I tried it in high school where we did programming; I know all the basics, but I can't construct better (programs), so I'm afraid I can't accomplish it and really won't be successful, so I'd rather take up international business and linguistics," explains Ruiz.

Universities and ICT industry associations are targeting students like Ruiz, trying to sway them into pursuing a computer science program as part of a comprehensive drive to spur greater IT enrolment.

A survey of Canadian universities conducted by the Software Human Resource Council (SHRC) showed a constantly decreasing trend in computer engineering, computer science and software engineering enrolment, which is down 11 per cent between 2002 and 2005.

The SHRC is projecting a yearly demand of about 35,000 new workers in the IT sector in Canada.

In 2003, computer science and computer engineering graduates from Canadian universities was at 3,100, according to the SHRC website.

"Where are the other 32,000 going to come from?" asks SHRC president Paul Swinwood.

He adds that Canadian labour market reports are already showing a two per cent unemployment rate in the IT sector, indicating a "very tight labour market."

BACKGROUND

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Direct cause

Industry experts believe there is a huge misconception among students, parents and career counsellors about the prospects of an IT career, which is directly resulting in lower enrolments.

"There is a shortage (of IT skills) because there is a perception problem that happened in (the) post-dot-com and post-Y2K (era) and, as a result, parents and counsellors are not aware of the viability and vibrancy of the IT industry," says Stephen Ibaraki, vice-president at the Canadian Information Processing Society.

This view is shared by many industry groups, including the Information Technology Association of Canada (ITAC), which believes the ICT industry is being hit by a "double whammy": the aging baby boomers on one hand and the false perception among students that there are no jobs in IT on the other, says Bernard Courtois, ITAC president and CEO.

And the situation is expected to get worse before it gets better, says Courtois. "It takes a number of years for people to get to colleges and universities and go through the (computer science) programs; it's a three- or four-year cycle."

Some IT organizations believe the IT skills shortage is no longer "looming" over the industry, but is already happening, here and now.

Intuit Canada, developer of accounting software QuickTax and QuickBooks, has decided to take matters into its own hands by actively working with universities and government agencies to "get people into the computer science programs."

Intuit recently commissioned a survey to study computer science enrolment trends in various provinces in Canada which, as in other studies before it, showed a "great decline."

In Alberta, for instance, despite a consistently high rate of economic growth, the market for IT-related jobs has been decreasing, according to the Intuit study. Demand for computer professionals in that province in 2005 was about 27,938, while the supply of skilled IT workers was higher, at 28,985. This is discouraging students from enrolling in computer science and engineering programs. At the University of Alberta, only half of the 130 available spaces in these programs were filled last year.

"Government and business should work together to help educational institutions fill the computer science programs and provide incentives there," says Stephen King, Intuit Canada vice-president.

IT outsourcer EDS Canada is similarly taking a more proactive approach to the skills shortage issue, according to the firm's recruitment manager Deanna Spohn.

EDS is directly collaborating with various colleges and universities, including the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, University of Manitoba, University of Regina, University of Waterloo and McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.

By participating in job fairs and talking to the students about the opportunities available at EDS, the company hopes it can attract the specific skills it is looking for.

Part of its hiring strategy is establishing centres of expertise that group specific skills into geographical locations. In Winnipeg, for instance, EDS seeks out .NET professionals, while in Ottawa it's J2EE and in Toronto and Durham Region the company requires z/OS skill sets.

"(We're doing a) real education and awareness approach rather than waiting for universities to say, 'We've got students that are ready.' We want to go out and be there on-site," says Spohn.

Intuit's King suggests the skills shortage could also be alleviated by creating a sound working environment that will increase the chances of retention. Programs such as

career development and fitness programs are some of the ingredients to keeping an employee satisfied, King says.

SHRC's Swinwood says solving the IT skills deficit entails the participation of all sectors involved: industry, educational institutions and government.

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