

Dropping the Boom

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

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By Peter Thompson

Economist David Foot famously claimed in his bestseller *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 of particular 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 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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