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Hot Jobs & Skills for 2007

January 2007 - Matt McGrath

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2007 promises to be a strong year for IT job seekers with the right technical skill sets. The first wave of baby boomers turned 60 in 2006, and while these IT veterans are beginning to retire, the number of people entering the computer field is declining rapidly. According to the Education Research Institute at UCLA, interest among prospective students in computer science as a major dropped 70 percent between 2001 and 2005.

This massive decline in the supply of future IT workers, combined with the aging IT population, might spell trouble for U.S. global competitiveness down the road. But it's good news for techies who wish to move up within their IT departments or for those who seek entry-level IT jobs — although supply might be down, the demand for IT workers continues to grow.

According to a recent survey of 140 chief information officers by the Society for Information Management (SIM), nearly two-thirds of technology executives plan to maintain or increase the size of their IT staff in 2007. The increasing need for IT professionals possessing technical skills across the board is being fueled by a U.S. economy that continued to grow in 2006. As the economy improved, businesses expanded, and with this economic expansion, companies have started to invest again in IT projects that were stalled or put on hold because of shrinking IT department budgets in



previous years.

Concerns Over Outsourcing Exaggerated

Since the 2001 dot-com crash, there has been seemingly endless hype that IT jobs are being shipped in droves offshore. According to today's conventional wisdom, however, these claims were exaggerated. The conclusion of most organizations that track such statistics is about 5 percent of all IT jobs have been displaced by foreign workers. Most jobs that are being outsourced are lower-level coding jobs, technical support positions or call-center work — the most difficult IT work is likely to remain in the United States. According to the September 2006 SIM report, only 3.3 percent of 2007 corporate IT budgets have been allocated to offshore outsourcing programs.

So, what are the hottest IT skills for 2007? That, of course, depends.

Robert Half Technology Report

The most recent and comprehensive study of the IT employment outlook was completed by international IT staffing firm Robert Half Technology. Its 2007 Salary Guide extrapolates data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and a survey Robert Half conducted of more than 1,400 CIOs from companies with 100-plus employees. The guide breaks down the 50 states into nine regions, and it gives a hint as to which IT skill sets will be most sought after in 2007 for each part of the country.

The overall employment outlook is good. According to the report, 13 percent of IT executives plan to hire IT workers in the coming quarter, while only 3 percent plan on reducing their IT staff.

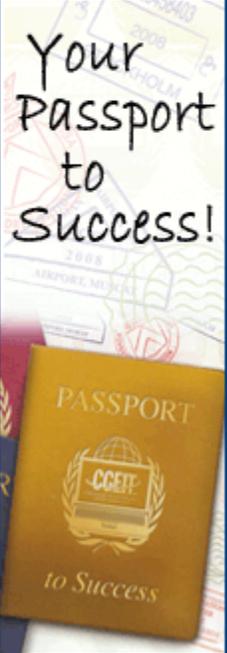
From a national standpoint, the report predicts the following 12 technical skills will be most needed in 2007 based on companies' probable investment in network security, Web applications, wireless communication, business intelligence, regulatory requirements and capital expenditures. The skill sets are listed in order of perceived demand:

1. Windows administration (Server 2000/2003)
2. Network administration (Cisco, Nortel and Novell)
3. Database management (Oracle, SQL Server and DB2)
4. Wireless network management
5. Firewall administration
6. Business intelligence/reporting services
7. .NET development
8. XML development
9. ERP implementation (Oracle/Peoplesoft, SAP, Lawson)
10. Linux administration



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11. Java development

12. CRM implementation

Hot IT Jobs

Don't confuse hot IT skills with hot IT jobs. While the 12 skill sets listed above represent a sort of wish list by America's IT executives, the Robert Half report points out in the beginning of its salary guide that the "job category experiencing the most growth within IT departments is help desk/end-user support." Help desk and end-user support jobs can be found in abundance everywhere. And not only has the demand for these positions increased substantially over the last year, but the pay has increased nicely, as well. Just a year ago, A+ Certified professionals in the Kansas City, Mo., area were commanding only \$12 an hour on average. Today, many schools don't have enough students to fill recruiters' requests for these tech support positions, and the average graduate is starting between \$16 and \$21 per hour. Not bad for someone entering the IT field. As Patrick Draney, placement coordinator for Kansas City-based Midwest Consulting Group, said, "If you are A+ certified and can't find an entry-level help desk job, you either have a felony on your record, or you are wearing the wrong deodorant."

Experience Important but Not Essential

Most IT salary and skills reports are quick to point out that experience within a given technical area is essential to finding a job in today's IT market.

Although there is certainly no substitute for the real-world skills gained through years of on-the-job experience, in many technical areas suffering from a shortage of veteran IT workers, recent graduates have little difficulty securing a job upon completion of a certification or IT education program.

For example, the entire country is witnessing an explosion in the demand for .NET developers. The last two Centriq Foss C#.Net IT career tracks, which primarily consisted of students with only basic end-user skills and no programming experience, have enjoyed a 100 percent placement rate. One graduate of the last .NET career track — a 60-year-old former COBOL programmer with no object-oriented programming experience — received employment offers from the first two companies with which he interviewed. Despite the fact that his IT experience was in a different and outdated language, both employers took his years of COBOL experience into consideration when making him an offer for a .NET application developer position. He started his career at a 20 percent higher salary than he had earned at the peak of his COBOL career. In 2007, the shortage of workers with skills in the latest technical tools such as .NET and wireless networking is allowing certified individuals with no prior IT experience to get jobs. These inexperienced, recent graduates' compensation, however, is considerably less than the pay received by IT workers who possess the skills and have work experience in the field. A seasoned application developer in the Midwest typically will start in the \$75,000 range, whereas a newly trained and/or certified .NET developer with no IT experience will most likely find a job — but might start in the low to mid-\$40,000 range.

Of course, those trained IT job seekers who are new to the industry are much less likely to have success in their job search if they study technologies that have been around awhile — Java or Oracle, for example.

Jobs in Demand

The ongoing need for entry-level IT talent is being outpaced only by the demand for workers at the other

end of the IT spectrum: IT managers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this group now makes up 11.2 percent of the entire IT workforce, which represents a 44 percent surge since the 2001 dot-com collapse. Although the overall number of programming and technical support jobs shrank by 200,000 between 2001 and 2006, the U.S. economy generated 119,000 IT managers. According to Eric Chabrow of InformationWeek, "The growth in IT managers isn't attributable just to small businesses. ... Big companies are spreading management responsibility in order to get decisions made faster."

The demand for last year's hottest IT commodity — information and network security professionals — continues to remain strong, but compensation for security specialists is coming down, as more IT workers have jumped on the security bandwagon.

Business Skills Becoming More Important

A report published by Gartner Inc. predicts that by 2010, six out of 10 IT professionals will assume business-facing roles. In 2007, a continuing trend will be the desire for a more well-rounded IT professional. Although the pure technologist still can find work, more companies seek IT candidates who possess more than specific technical skills in networking, programming or database administration. According to a study by SIM, "IT professionals will have to evolve their skill sets to include more business-related capabilities."

Today's ideal IT worker is one who possesses hard-core technical skills but is also able to see the big picture and possesses business skills areas such as analysis and project management.

"The biggest trend that we've seen in recent months is that companies do not simply want a candidate with a certain technology — they want the ideal candidate with that technology," said Troy Oliver, account manager with Kansas City-based staffing firm Intronic Solutions Group. "They simply want less headache, they want individuals that are accountable and mesh with their team ... basically a common sense-driven approach to hiring." According to CIO.com's 2006 Mid Year Staffing Update, 65 percent of IT executives surveyed cited business analysis, and 64 percent cited project management when asked which business skills were most in demand at their organizations. It is no longer enough to have general project management experience — employers now seek project managers with industry-specific knowledge. For example, an insurance company might seek a project manager with experience dealing with compliance issues concerning HIPAA. Likewise, project managers interested in working for a bank should have some finance background.

Strong Need for Business Analysts

While the demand for qualified project managers has been strong for years, the urgent need for business analysts is a fairly recent phenomenon. IT departments continue to become more refined because of businesses deeply affected by their information systems and technology, and they are expected to influence the bottom line and support the overall business objectives.

To ensure this, there must be a constant collaboration between the technology department(s) and the business to manage the progress of projects and business strategy. IT professionals who can entrench themselves in an organization and learn to bridge the gaps between business strategy and IT function can take their careers to new heights.

One job that has taken flight for both IT and business professionals is business analyst (BA).

The BA is one of the fastest-growing jobs today. Common alternative job titles are business systems analyst, systems analyst and functional analyst. BAs have to act as a liaison between business people, who have a business problem, and technology people, who know how to create automated solutions. A BA serves the mission-critical function of understanding the business need, determining and documenting accurate requirements from a business unit and presenting these requirements in a manner that is agreeable, measurable and flexible enough to meet project and stakeholder needs. BAs actively contribute to the development of methods, procedures, processes or systems, and they understand the impact of the changes. BAs should have some skills in IT system capabilities, business processes, modeling and project management. A BA often will play a role in systems development life cycle (SDLC) through assisting with the business requirements, functional and nonfunctional requirements to report specifications. Although there really isn't one way to become a BA, people interested in this position should have a technical background, whether operating as a programmer or a network engineer. A BA often will become a consultant or project manager, but because BAs work in different industries, they don't always work on IT-related initiatives and projects.

Soft Skills are Key

Across the board, today's hiring managers are looking for technology professionals with strong interpersonal skills or soft skills in areas such as communications, negotiations, budgeting and IT leadership. Increasingly, IT managers want workers who can clearly explain complicated technical ideas and concepts to a variety of people throughout the company.

According to the Robert Half 2007 Salary Guide, "When evaluating a job candidate, managers are assessing that person's oral communication, interpersonal and writing abilities, among other qualities. An understanding of broader business and industry trends also is valuable, as IT professionals assume more visible roles in shaping a company's strategic decisions. Forty-one percent of respondents in a recent Robert Half Technology survey of CIOs said they are placing greater emphasis on knowledge of business fundamentals when evaluating candidates for IT positions."

The demand for IT workers with the most current skills will continue to grow in 2007. The number of retiring baby boomers will only grow over the next five years, and if trends continue, the number of young people choosing IT as their career will continue to decline.

Simple supply and demand says the time rarely has been better for those IT professionals who are wishing to switch gears and make a horizontal career move within their organization. Experienced IT veterans have plenty of options from which to choose.

If you are considering making a career change and getting into IT for the first time, you should pursue a course of study in any of the newer programming frameworks such as Microsoft .NET or one that involves infrastructure and troubleshooting in technical or help desk support. Once you have your feet wet and have obtained some real-world experience, you should continue along your career track into networking and/or database administration. Make sure to choose a program that teaches you not only the hard-core technical skills but also IT business and soft skills along the way.

Fastest-Growing Occupations

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, through 2014, five of the top six fastest-growing occupations — by college-educated job seekers — will be IT jobs. The following is the bureau's list of technical jobs in demand based on the job's expected growth rate:

1. Network systems and data communications analyst
2. Computer software engineer-applications
3. Computer software engineer-systems software
4. Network computer systems administrator
5. Database administrator Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Location, Location, Location

Of course, what's hot in one part of the country might not be so in another. Security professionals, for example, are in greater demand in Washington, D.C., where hordes of defense contractors reside, but they might not be needed so much in Iowa. According to the 2007 Robert Half Salary Guide, the following are the regional hiring trends:

- New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont)
 - Project manager, business systems analyst, help desk specialist
- Mid-Atlantic (New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania)
 - Business systems analyst, developer/programmer analyst, database administrator
- South Atlantic (Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia)
 - Applications architect, help desk specialist, network security administrator
- West North Central (Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota)
 - Database administrator, LAN/WAN administrator, network engineer
- East North Central (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin)
 - Applications architect, project manager, QA analyst
- West South Central (Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas)
 - Developer/programmer analyst, desktop support specialist, project manager
- East South Central (Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee)
 - Developer/programmer analyst, applications architect, network security engineer
- Pacific (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington)
 - Application developer, business intelligence analyst, systems administrator
- Mountain (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming)
 - Developer/programmer analyst, help desk specialist, data analyst and report writer

Source: Robert Half Technology 2007 Salary Guide

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