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As economy turns, tech workers reboot

Market could brighten for information technology pros

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Once upon a time, information technology was the nation's hottest and most promising job sector. But as in most fairy tales, nothing lasts forever. Eventually, those IT employment titles that often dominated conversations about new jobs during the 1990s began to fall from favor with both job seekers and recruiters. Soon after, the money-losing ventures of the dot-com boom began to become commonplace. By the time 2000 rolled around, the passing of a need for tools and technology to combat Y2K worries led to a slip in the industry. But many experts believe that's about to change.

In fact, popular opinion now suggests that the IT industry is poised for a comeback — assuming people are ready and willing to make necessary changes to their skill set, as well as their expectations.

"The IT market is rapidly improving and is nowhere near as bad as it was over the past few years," says Jim Childs, CEO of Impact Innovations Group in Alpharetta, Ga. "I see a bright future for the IT job market."

Childs explains that once the accelerated demand for IT jobs began to slide, "corporate America just had indigestion with IT — companies pulled back on IT spending."

With the artificial high came the lowest of lows and the result was painful. Today, however, as the economy continues to improve, companies are moving out of their indigestion period and creating a new demand for the IT professional.

Service call

This new way of thinking makes it imperative that those currently looking to embark on a career in IT are willing to adapt to these changes.

"IT is currently undergoing a huge transformation and the people who see this and take advantage of it will benefit," says Joe Santana, co-author of "Manage I. T." (Lahaska Press, \$14.99). "On the other hand, people planning for a career using the old frame of reference will find it hard to market themselves."

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Sell yourself

According to Fitzgerald, those who focus on the service side of IT and have a wide range of communication skills will find it easier to market themselves to potential employers.

“It’s critically important to have business skills to augment your technical skills now,” Fitzgerald says. “With the development of HTML, Front Page and Dreamweaver, you don’t need to be a coder anymore to write programs. With the Internet, you can go online and cut and paste software code to make a program do what you want it to do. Because of this, IT workers will need to be business and customer focused.”

The biggest goal for IT professionals will be to help people and businesses integrate new technology into their lives.

“We’ll see more companies take the responsibility and say, ‘We’ll handle all the integration for you,’” says Fitzgerald.

Offshore jobs

Bruce Fenton, founder of Atlantic Financial, Inc., an Internet investment firm in Westboro, Mass., says jobs moving overseas is one of two major concerns he sees in the IT industry.

“Major pressures on this sector are twofold,” Fenton says. “One is technology replacing experts — in other words, programs that can do the work of a dozen programmers. And the other is foreign competition. As IT jobs have become easier to replace, they are being sent to India and other areas.”

While this has raised concerns in some corners of the industry, Childs feels the entire situation is being overblown and receiving more attention than it deserves.

“Offshoring can never fill the demand that the U.S. economy will create with new IT jobs,” Childs says. “Even with China emerging and India as an established power, you’ll always have language, culture and space barriers.”

Local products

In the United States, the need for people who truly understand the inner workings of their business will be high. As a result, many of the jobs that end up overseas will focus on development.

“You’ll see middle talent go offshore, but there will always be a high demand for knowledgeable developers in the United States. The higher level jobs will stay here,” says Childs. “Someone with business skills will make good money and be very employable.”

Marc Hebert is the executive vice president for Sierra Atlantic in Fremont, Calif., which specializes in offshore services. He says that the IT jobs moving overseas are generally less interesting than the ones that remain here.

“Companies are keeping the most important IT jobs closer to home,” Hebert says. “They’re pushing off the stuff that’s not critical and they’re replacing it with more mission critical jobs.”

While the “good old days” of IT may have passed, opportunities will continue to emerge for people who can adapt to the times.

“There are huge opportunities for people who correctly take advantage of these changes,” says Santana. “I don’t think the industry is preparing a comeback to the traditional way of doing business.”

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