



Technology's human need

Just as computer industry has started to make a comeback, fewer people are entering the field

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When Marcus Carty first started to study computer science in the late 1990s, the industry was booming. Everyone wanted to work in computers, and the jobs were plentiful.

When he graduated from St. John's University in 2003, the picture was much darker, with job cuts, not new positions, the norm.



Two years and about 300 resumes later, Carty, who lives in Rosedale, landed a job, working in technical support for ADP, a human resources company in Edgewood. It's a temporary position, but he's hoping it'll lead to a more permanent spot.

"Now we're slowly getting jobs, but before it was hard," said Carty, 26, who got his current job through Adecco, the Melville-based staffing company. "I can't believe how many resumes I sent out."

In part because it fell so fast in the wake of the dot-com bust five years ago, and in part because of more recent outsourcing and productivity trends, information technology has been one of the last industries to make its comeback. By most accounts, companies are finally adding computer-related jobs, though slowly.

But now the problem is filling those jobs, since fewer college students are choosing to enter the industry.

That may change as job prospects improve. In the first half of 2005, computer industry employment increased 5.3 percent in New York City, according to the Fiscal Policy Institute, a Manhattan think tank that issued a report this week on information technology employment. And the state Labor Department is projecting the industry could gain more than 20,000 jobs in the city by 2012, the institute said in its report.

"A year ago, computer jobs were starting to come back nationally, and it hadn't shown up in New York City," said James Parrott, chief economist with the Fiscal Policy Institute. "It looks like New York City has finally caught up."

Although the available industry data for Long Island are less detailed, Long Island, too, shows similar trends.

"I think that it's showing a significant improvement," said Gary Huth, a labor market analyst in Hicksville. "It's finally rolling down into even areas like computer support and programming, which I think were some of the areas that really got slammed in the IT downturn."

Companies, however, may have trouble finding workers. Across the nation, colleges and universities are facing a downturn in enrollment in fields like computer science. And that same trend is occurring as well throughout the metropolitan region - where enrollment is down as much as 60 percent in the past five years, according to some reports.

That decline is evident at Stony Brook University, for instance, said Yacov Shamash, the dean of engineering and applied sciences there.

"We're still producing a fairly nice number of graduates now," Shamash said. "But it's going to get very bad. A year or two years from now, the pipeline is empty."

The dot-com bust is to blame in part, because students saw few jobs in the field and headed elsewhere. But broader trends such as outsourcing also played a role. Unfortunately, Shamash noted, if enrollment continues to decline and companies can't find workers here, then outsourcing will only continue.

The same problem is affecting the City University of New York system, said Ted Brown, who heads CUNY's computer science doctorate program, as well as the CUNY Institute for Software Design and Development.

Brown, however, is hoping that enrollment will improve as the job market continues to grow. And he's hoping to make small changes to CUNY curriculum to meet the needs of employers, particularly those in the finance sector, which employs 26 percent of the city's computer-related workers, according to the Fiscal Policy Institute report. The report suggests that schools like CUNY incorporate finance and business coursework into their technology and computer-related curriculums to meet that demand.

"The computing field is very quickly evolving, as it always has," Brown said. "You need to be adaptive. ... You need to be able to learn new things easily; it's not just about knowing the old stuff well."

However, others say it's important to focus on the technological skills - not on finance or any other specific industry. "You don't want to train them in a specific application, because you narrow their options," Shamash said, noting that demand is everywhere, from defense to health care to finance.

Either way, computer workers need more specialized skills than in years past before they walk into an employer's office. Brentwood resident Edward Korth, 23, just started a new job on a computer help desk for a Westbury Web-based company. He had been working at another job on the Island, but through contacts at staffing firm Spherion Corp., he found a better job at better pay, he said - and went for it.

Korth noted that he never would have been able to job-hop in the computer sector even a year ago, but he said the industry has markedly improved. Having the right skills and not requiring a lot of training, he said, is key.

"As long as you're qualified enough, you should be able to get a job right now," he said. "But if you're not qualified, it could be hard."

Spherion, which has offices throughout the metropolitan area, is finding it far easier now to place skilled IT workers, according to professional services president Eric Archer. In a recent study, Spherion found that 72 percent of those workers feel secure in those jobs, and 50 percent of those with jobs are likely to look for new ones.

But companies are still cautious.

"In the boom days, it was a bunch of drunken sailors. You couldn't hire fast enough, and you couldn't spend enough," Archer recalled. "Now, demand is outstripping supply, but it's being done in a responsible manner."

Barbara Viola, president of Farmingdale-based technology consulting firm Viotech Solutions and head of the Association of Information Technology Professionals, was even more optimistic: "We're on the cusp of a real job boom."