

Laid off IT pros shouldn't switch careers



By: Rafael Ruffolo - ComputerWorld Canada (19 Feb 2009)

There's no such thing as a safe industry to work in anymore and many tech companies have certainly helped drive that point home recently. But for worried IT professionals, there are more than a few reasons to avoid making a career change.

The grass isn't necessarily greener for displaced IT workers contemplating a potential career change, according to industry observers.

"They may skip over the border only to find out they're in worse shape than they would have been had they stayed put," said Carmi Levy, a London, Ont.-based independent technology analyst. "They'd be better off looking at newly emerging opportunities within IT and ensuring that their skill sets align closely enough to give them a realistic shot at getting a job."

Despite what some IT professionals might believe, there are no employment safe havens in any market, Levy added. This means that IT employees – and those who work for related companies such as technology vendors or resellers – are just as vulnerable to layoffs and challenging job searches as their colleagues in manufacturing, education and health care.

Still, this might be hard to believe for some.

It's been nearly impossible to keep track of all the layoffs in the tech sector over the last few months, as industry giants like IBM Corp., Sun Microsystems Inc., Intel Corp., Microsoft Corp. and EMC Corp. have been cutting by the thousands.

And for enterprise IT professionals, cuts also appear to be on the way.

According to a CIO (U.S.) IT Budget & Staffing survey conducted in January, more than half of the 208 IT heads who responded plan to slash IT budgets because of the struggling economy. Roughly a third of surveyed CIOs also indicated that they plan to reduce their full-time, in-house staff.

But even with all this doom and gloom, workers shouldn't be flocking away from IT anytime soon.

"In the tough economic times of the early 90s, people just jammed the brakes on IT," said Sandra Lavoy, an Ottawa-based regional vice-president with staffing firm Robert Half Technology. "Because things have advanced so much since that time, companies have no choice but to continue implementing technology."

Lavoy pointed to increased needs in teleconferencing, IT security and e-health as potential areas for IT professionals to consider flocking towards.

A recent study conducted by Boston-based IT staffing firm Veritude Inc. suggested that many enterprises are looking to hire workers with business intelligence skills and expertise in C, C++ and C# programming, despite the weakened job market. The demand for Mac developers has also increased steadily over the last year, the study found.

"What separates IT from other sectors is its rate of change," Levy said. "Things evolve rapidly in this space. New technologies drive new workflows, which demand new skills and new roles. As older, obsolete roles in technology are closed out, new roles open up at the leading edge of the transition."

The decision for most IT workers, he added, should not be whether they leave the industry altogether, but rather what alternative roles might be available to them within IT.

"If you look at the year leading up to the last few months, all we heard about in IT was that it was difficult to find talent and there were major shortages," said Terry Power, president of Toronto-based IT staffing firm Sapphire Technologies Canada (formerly CNC Global). "We're in a tough period in Canada right now, but this will pass and companies will realize that IT will be a strategic part of every business going forward."

It also wasn't too long ago that the aging workforce was big news among IT circles, Power added.

"That's not going to change because of the downturn," he said. "When we climb out of the recession, that underlying issue will pop up again. The long-term view for IT people – especially younger professionals – is very positive."

For Power, concentrating on shoring up your business and industry-specific skills will improve your job prospects in the field. Those with general IT skills will continue to be challenged as the economy struggles, he added, but IT pros who seek out specific skills that are in demand will reap the benefits even during difficult times.

"It's all about being flexible," Lavoy said. In addition to adapting to changing industry needs, that might also mean IT professionals will have to tough it out with contract jobs for the next couple years.

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