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Where the jobs are

Information technology jobs shift under economy

By Jill Gambon, Special to Mass High Tech

Hiring managers looking to fill information technology jobs over the next few months can expect to find an abundance of talent in an ever-expanding labor pool, as fewer companies plan to hire IT staff and more companies plan cutbacks.

A recent survey conducted for the staffing firm Robert Half Technology showed that while national IT hiring projections for the third quarter are essentially flat, New England lags behind. According to the survey results, in New England, 9 percent of respondents plan to decrease their IT staffs while just 5 percent plan to increase hiring. This shows a sharp decline from the first quarter, when 14 percent of respondents in New England reported plans to increase staff and just 2 percent planned cuts. Hiring cutbacks are the result of shrinking IT budgets, as well as reduced or consolidated workloads and companywide layoffs, the survey said.

New England's IT hiring may trail other areas because this region was hit by the economic slowdown later than some other parts of the country, so the recovery may kick in later, suggested Jack Fellers, regional vice president with Robert Half Technology. Still, some technology skills such as network administration, security and virtualization remain in demand, Fellers said.

Fellers cited some key trends that are propelling demand for those hot IT skills: An increasingly mobile work force is expanding the need for networking to support remote employees. Those decentralized operations are placing higher demand for security expertise to protect systems from hacks and intrusions. With businesses tightening spending, companies are trying to maximize efficiencies by reducing the number of servers they support, which is driving demand for virtualization skills, he said.

Tom Silver, senior vice president and chief marketing officer at Dice.com, a job site for technology professionals, said that while hiring is down, a recent survey of hiring managers by his company showed that some 90 percent of respondents reported openings for hard-to-fill jobs in such areas as security, virtualization and some programming languages like Java. "Companies are hiring. They are just hiring a lot less," Silver said. "They are focusing on jobs that are strategically important." At Dice.com, which has 2 million unique visitors a month, the number of job listings is down 45 percent from last year, Silver said. The surplus of technology workers is putting downward pressure on salaries. Research by Dice.com showed that 58 percent of hiring managers expected to pay less for new hires.

In Massachusetts, there are bright spots in the IT job market, namely biotech, said Tom Hart, an executive vice president with Veritude, a Boston-based provider of staffing services.

"Biotech leads the way," he said. When these companies get into later stages of drug trials, the need for data analysis, data mining and report writing increases, he said. There is some hiring for tech jobs in the insurance, health care and high technology industries, but financial services and manufacturing remain weak, Hart said.

Reluctant or unable to bring on permanent employees until the economy rebounds, many businesses are turning to consultants or contract workers to plug gaps in their IT staffs.

"Some companies may win new business and need to bring in hired guns," to meet their obligations, Hart said. Often, contract positions can lead to permanent jobs, an arrangement that can be beneficial to everyone involved. "It allows both the employee and the employer to kick the tires," Hart said. "It's not a bad way to go."

New England lagging in IT, but think networking

Fewer New England CIOs expect to increase staff than decrease it

Region	% increase	% decrease
U.S.	8%	6%
New England	5%	9%
Mid-Atlantic	8%	6%
South Atlantic	11%	7%

... yet there are jobs out there.

Which single job area is experiencing the most growth?

Response	Percentage
None/no growth	20%
Networking	16
Help desk/tech support	15

App development	11
Information security	9
Data/database management	8
Internet/intranet development	8
Project management	6
Systems analysis	2
All areas	1
Other	2

Base: 1,400 CIOs

Source: Robert Half Technology IT Hiring Index and Skills Report