Computer Careers: Succeed in an IT Job

“Watch hot trends and pay attention to your own skill set.”

by Pete Choppin

If you ask the experts what to expect in the information technology (IT) sector for 2010, you will get more responses than there are careers in the field. It seems there is never one single correct answer. As the calendar turned to the New Year, endless amounts of reports, predictions and surveys came out that told us the tech-employment picture is getting better—or worse or both—all at the same time.

Perhaps more useful than the myriad statistics and predictions is the outlook on specific IT job titles. For example, at the end of the year recruiter Robert Half Technology named three IT job titles they found to be the best prospects for prosperity and salary increases, a definite anomaly in these recessionary times: network administrator, information systems security manager, and systems engineer.

Is this, however, a realistic measure of IT careers? And perhaps a more important question might be, what does this information do for *your* career and job stability. It's interesting, but not necessarily critical, to read this kind of data with the hope of seeing definitively into the future. It's also not particularly helpful in the short term to learn that a particular job title is hot if it's an area you know nothing about or have no intention of pursuing.

That's why after a little research, my advice is simple: Be conscious about your own career and where you want to be going. Embrace your specialty; get better at it, Twitter about it (maybe), network in person and online, and get ahead of your competition. At the same time, do pay attention to the sweeping trends in hot IT job categories. Maybe you don't know anything about security or virtualization or cloud computing, but what if you start learning about it now with an eye toward steering toward it next year? That sounds like a sensible New Year's resolution to me.

Another step toward career stability is to make sure to maintain (or upgrade) what we refer to as your marketable skills. Here are six of the most valuable, according to *Computerworld*:

1. Programming/Application Development

A colleague of mine once told me early in my career in IT that no matter what area I choose with computers, I will at some point need to learn some programming. That has turned out to be increasingly true as I have become more skilled. Beginning in an entry-level help-desk position for me was fine for a while, but eventually I moved on. As positions required more complicated tasks, I found that in order to get the results from whatever task I was performing, some kind of scripting, coding, or programming was required. This was especially true in Web development. I could only drag-and-drop for so long until I had to modify the code behind the pictures and Web apps. According to Dave Willmer, a *Computerworld* columnist and executive director of Robert Half Technology, a provider of IT professionals on a project and full-time basis, companies will look for developers with knowledge of .Net, Java, Web development, open source and portal technologies such as Microsoft Corp's Sharepoint.

2. Help Desk/Technical Support

My heart is still in IT technical support. That is where I started in this business and I actually enjoyed it. Tech support gave me the foundation of troubleshooting, people skills, communication and the technical experience that I still rely on today.

The fact is that the need for support technicians tends to reflect general business conditions, and companies will hire more people as business grows, which in turn requires more technical-support positions. But the same skills required by a technician are valuable in almost all areas of IT.

3. Networking

The growing complexity of networks—which includes virtualization and popular approaches to application delivery, such as cloud computing and Software as a Service—will require more IT professionals to be knowledgeable with network technologies. There will be a need for people with a mix of server, software and networking skills to support networked storage and server devices contained in a single chassis. This will require a level of troubleshooting that crosses multiple technical boundaries—from hunting down a network communication problem to discovering it was merely a locked table in a database—all in the same appliance.

And let's not forget how much has been transformed from analog to digital with emerging technologies such as voice over IP (VoIP) and video conferencing, as well as mobile computing, wireless networks, smartphones and iPhones, all requiring the well-honed skills of network IT professionals that coordinate and connect it.

4. Project Management

No part of a business is immune to or exempt from the need to use computing any longer. Where I work, the need to look at a lean workflow is driving projects that are converting what was once entirely a paper process to a streamlining of digital information. Knowing how technology fits into each business process and taking advantage of those processes, making them more efficient in time and labor, will be highly desirable and add value to any company you work with. The ability to coordinate and manage the people working in all aspects of these projects is becoming important to business. IT professionals interested in building skills in these areas should seriously take a look at improving their project-management skills.

5. Security

Security is one of those skills that never become obsolete. If you know how to help keep your company's information secure, there will be a home for you forever. This is especially true now with so many business applications being transferred to the Web. Security needs are changing from high-tech firewall and intrusion skills to experts who can manage all business communications, responsible for keeping all the enterprise's communications secure, not just the network. Internal users pose the biggest risk to the enterprise through their use of hard-to-control technologies, from cloud computing to crowdsourcing, that leave the enterprise vulnerable to attack or manipulation.

What does that mean? It means that the way information security does its job will change and there will be an increase in demand for staff with surface-level knowledge of security technology, as well as a decreased need for technical depth, at least for many of the

technologies that currently exist, as well as knowledge of business processes and the risk management associated with these processes.

6. Business Intelligence

Business intelligence put simply is the information that companies use to analyze where they are and where they will be going, and then to make business decisions based on this data. It involves trends, technologies and applications that businesses use to predict performance and other factors that help make better business decisions.

Business Intelligence (BI) has traditionally been understood as a system that collects historical data and provides tools to analyze it. Businesses are now more interested in real-time BI that relies, for instance, on people entering competitive data into a wiki and providing that information almost instantaneously via a portal.

Professionals with data-gathering skills combined with programming/analysis knowledge to work with and who can relate the numbers and raw data of data tables, database joins and data structure to business requirements, will always be in demand.

Conclusions

The IT professional is no longer just the stereotypical computer genius that works in a data center staring at a computer screen all day writing code. Skills such as business savvy, communication and interpersonal skills are now valued as much or more than technical prowess. IT professionals with a much broader skill set and the ability to see how technology can add value and reduce the cost of doing business will be what employers are looking for in 2010.

Be prepared to continually upgrade your skill sets, whether you are currently working or are in the market for a change. The ability to learn new technologies, apply these to business processes, and to market yourself as a "value-add" to the company is how IT professionals will secure their careers in the future.