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IT jobs go in - and out - of favor

Microsoft Windows Server 2002/2003 administration is the skill set most in demand

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By **MARY JACOBS** / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

If you read the fashion pages, the lists of "what's hot and what's not" may decide whether you keep a favorite purse or toss a T-shirt.

But if your career is in information technology, whether your skills are hot or not could determine the salary you command – or whether you can find a job at all.

Businesses' IT needs change; some technologies advance while others recede, and hardware comes and goes, buffeting IT workers with system-specific skills in waves of high, low and no demand for their skills.

Figuring out the "next big thing" is so important that every year consultants, recruiters and analysts start crunching the numbers, surveying the hiring managers and peering into their crystal balls in an effort to track where the hiring mojo is heading.

So what's the word on what's hot and what's not?

Microsoft remains a big player. In a survey conducted for Robert Half Technology, 77 percent of CIOs who responded ranked Microsoft Windows Server 2002/2003 administration as the skill set most in demand.

Network administration (Cisco, Nortel, Novell) was close behind, cited by 71 percent of CIOs, followed by database management (Oracle, SQL Server, DB2) cited by 63 percent of CIOs. The survey was conducted among 1,400 companies with 100 or more employees. CIOs were allowed multiple responses.

The CIOs' observations echo the findings of the Bureau of Labor Statistics list of the 30 fastest-growing occupations 2004-14. The six IT job titles that made the list were:

No. 2 – Network systems and data communications analysts (55 percent growth projected)

No. 5 – Computer software engineers, applications (48 percent growth)

No. 8 – Computer software engineers, systems software (43 percent growth)

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JUAN GARCIA/DMN
'We're seeing a lot of interest in engineers and database administrators,' said Rick Martinez, founder and CEO of r2 Technologies, a Plano-based IT recruiting firm.

No. 11 – Network and computer systems administrators (38 percent growth)

No. 12 – Database administrators (38 percent growth)

No. 25 – Computer systems analysts (31 percent growth)

"I can't argue with that list," said Rick Martinez, founder and CEO of r2 Technologies, a Plano-based IT recruiting firm. "We're seeing a lot of interest in engineers and database administrators."

What's driving those "hottest" job areas?

Compliance is a big factor that will keep many IT professionals employed, especially in jobs affected by the Sarbanes-Oxley federal law on financial disclosure and other regulations.

Competition will drive companies to create increasingly user-friendly yet sophisticated Web sites.

The online banking industry, for example, needs people with skills in artificial intelligence, data mining and data warehousing to do that.

Outsourcing and offshoring are still strong factors.

That means some jobs will head overseas, but it also means companies that rely on third-party providers need staffers qualified to manage those relationships.

Some purely technical areas will become victims of their own success, with jobs getting automated out of existence. A Computerworld.com report predicts that by 2010 "the nuts-and-bolts programming and easy-to-document support jobs will have all gone to third-party providers in the U.S. or abroad. Instead, IT departments will be populated with 'versatilists' – those with a technology background who also know the business sector inside and out."

That jibes with what John Reed, vice president of Robert Half Technology, is seeing in Dallas.

"The skills going abroad are the low-level technical jobs and tech support," he said.

The most secure jobs are those positions "that require the business skills, communications skills and the ability to work across multiple units of the company."

He cited another Robert Half survey, which reported that 41 percent of CIOs are placing greater emphasis on job candidates' knowledge of business fundamentals than they were five years ago.

To get those skills, Mr. Reed advises, the best avenues are internal mentoring programs that match newer employees with those experienced in those areas. Courses and seminars are helpful but don't offer the opportunity to put the knowledge immediately into practice.

Understanding basic accounting and capital expenses is important, too, Mr. Martinez said, because the engine driving IT hiring now is revenue generation. "Companies are asking, 'What can we do to generate more money?'" Those are the projects getting funded."

He's also observed that hiring managers seem more willing to add "headcount," making longer-term investments in IT positions rather than hiring contractors or temporary staff.

"Clients are saying, 'We've had to make do with smaller staffs for so long; now we finally have management approval to add headcounts,' " he said.

The Computerworld report named transportation and manufacturing as the sectors doing the most IT hiring nationally. In Dallas, however, financial services remains one of the biggest sources of IT jobs, Mr. Martinez said.

Whatever the industry or job, the overarching theme is this: Jobs that combine business knowledge with IT skills are likely to remain in high demand.

"There was a time when IT sat off in the corner and had limited exposure to accounting or finance or other departments," said Mr. Reed. "Now, the workplace is more team-oriented. IT people have to understand the business and communicate effectively across all kinds of business units."

"Companies are looking for those additional skills, and often, that's what's differentiating the candidate who gets the job."

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