

HIGH-TECH HEAD-HUNT BOOSTS SALARIES COMPETITION KEEN AS EVEN UNDERGRADS CAN QUIT SCHOOL, NAME THEIR PRICE

Guy Boulton

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Students in computer science and computer engineering at the University of Utah sometimes forgo graduation in favor of lucrative job offers.

That's just one manifestation of the shortage of people with the skills needed by the information-technology revolution.

"Many of our students are going to work and making more money than I am," said David Hanscom, director of the U.'s computer-engineering program.

The shortage shows no sign of abating. And given the laws of supply and demand, salaries continue to climb.

The median wage for computer programmers in Utah is now \$50,000, according to a new survey by the Utah Information Technology Association. In other words, half of the computer programmers in the state make more than \$50,000 and half make less.

Programmers are in the shortest supply, followed by marketing and sales people with a background in technology, said Peter Genereaux, president and chief executive of the trade association.

The survey, which includes information from 257 companies, breaks down salaries by job, region, company size and other measures. It is designed to give employers an idea of what they need to pay to attract and keep people.

The Utah Information Technologies Association estimates that Utah has 2,400 companies with some connection to the information-technology industry. And nearly all of those companies struggle to find people with the technology skills needed in today's economy.

The people who can set up and run Internet sites, who can design computer programs and hardware, who can write software and who can oversee a company's computer system are in short supply.

"The competition in Utah is getting stiffer all the time," said Tessa Matthews, director of human resources at Powerquest in Orem. The company, which employs about 300 people, designs software that protects and manages data on computer networks.

Experienced programmers now make more than \$60,000 a year. But the competition for skilled people goes beyond just wages.

Powerquest offers such perks as dry cleaning delivery and haircuts on-site. It even periodically arranges for employees to have the oil in their cars and trucks changed in the company's parking lot.

Employees also are given stock options on the chance the company someday goes public.

"That's something that's non-negotiable in high-tech now," Matthews said.

Novell Inc. currently has hundreds of openings for software engineers and technical people, said Dan Reilley, a staffing manager. But the company also employs about 5,000 people. In other words, 500 openings works about to about one in 10 positions.

Quick solutions don't exist. For one thing, universities can't suddenly turn out more engineers. The high wages are attracting more students to the program. But the rigorous programs are not for most students.

The U.'s computing engineering program graduates about 30 a year, said Hanscom, director of the university's computer-engineering program. Its computer science department graduates about 60 a year.

That's not enough.

The trade schools and community colleges, which produce the technicians in demand, have had a bit more success responding to the shortage.

"They are far more nimble and can change their curriculum to what's needed in the marketplace," Genereaux said.

Nor can information-technology companies look beyond the state's borders. The shortage is nationwide. And Utah does take some selling for people who have never been here, said Reilley of Novell.

The task has gotten easier in recent years. Novell touts Utah's quality of life, its cost of living and its abundance of recreational opportunities. "It's not a hard sell, but you do have to sell it," Reilley said.

But he said Utah is not right for some people. The state also has to compete with such technology centers as Austin, Boston or Seattle. The abundance of information-technology companies in those cities means more career opportunities.

"In Silicon Valley, there's a saying you don't have to change parking lots and you can change jobs," Genereaux said.

Utah is home to its share of information-technology companies. Novell is in resurgence. Intel Corp. plans to build what could be a future research center. Evans & Sutherland is prospering. And such companies as Tenfold, Emware and Powerquest are on the rise.

The downside of that is it means more competition among Utah companies. And, in all likelihood, the laws of supply and demand will favor people with technology skills for years to come.

"In the short term, nothing is going to change that is going to be very significant," Genereaux said.