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IT CAREER EXPERT

Halfway to 2005: Trends to keep watching
Jon Boroshok, Contributor
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At the beginning of every year, journalists try to show that they have crystal balls and make tech predictions. 2004 was no exception, as Microsoft mediums, computer clairvoyants, and software psychics read techie tarot cards and made their bold predictions.

Experts predicted things like: offshore outsourcing becomes an election issue; the NASDAQ hits 2500 again; Linux begins to look like Windows; tablet PCs finally catch on; anti-spam filters start working correctly, etc.

Midway through this year, few of these predictions are showing that they were any more realistic than alien landings in Roswell, but one or two spur the imagination for making predictions for the rest of the year into 2005.

Very simply, from IT to employment, the key to 2004-05 will be security,

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security, security.

Anti-virus and anti-spam technology will continue to merge and become more proactive: It doesn't take a rocket scientist to make this prediction. One of the biggest tech challenges in business today is security. Worms, viruses, spyware and spam have become the scourge of IT, costing staggering sums in lost productivity, compromised security, and even complete crashes.

According to Stu Sjouwerman, founder and COO of Sunbelt Software in Austin, Texas, there will be real growth in anti-spyware software. Spyware for the enterprise will arrive and needs to be dealt with on a corporate level. He also sees advances in anti-spam software.

"It's a chess game, and the bad guys have white," said Sjouwerman. "You're in reactive mode to defeat what they cooked up." He sees spam filters that are smart enough not to kill an entire domain. Some promising technologies might cut spam by 50%. Technologies like sender verification is like Caller ID for spam. This is an improvement of today's challenge-response technologies, which make e-mail senders do something twice, and hobble honest e-commerce.

Virus construction toolkits and Trojan backdoors combined with worms will continue to grow, spurred partly by financial incentive -- crime pays. Proactive detection is becoming a bigger necessity. Oliver Schmelzle, senior product manager for Whole Security of Austin, Texas, said that signature-based software is only as good as the last signature. He sees growth for behavioral decision technology, which looks at what programs are doing and can stop them using different mitigation processes and quarantine.

As the industry matures and specific technologies prove successful and become the gold standard, look for a shakeout and industry consolidation.

IT's Sarbanes-Oxley nightmares will get worse but create jobs: Sarbanes-Oxley compliance is already living up to its advanced billing as a ball of confusion for accounting and IT departments, and it's going to get worse. According to Kevin Hudson, vice president of product development, information technology, for Kforce Professional Staffing in Tampa, Fla. Big Five auditors have kept busy getting ready for compliance. Exposure has been found, and repairs are underway. This has created new ERP financial modules for compliance and has also created openings for data architects. "IT auditors are in big demand," said Hudson, who sees more IT hiring to bring companies up to compliance. There will also be increased hiring in IT security and the rewriting of applications.

The great job shift: If the election-year promises and predictions do come true and the jobless recovery starts creating jobs, there will be a major shifting of jobs. Survivors of downsizing and layoffs have become increasingly dissatisfied with their jobs and have been waiting for a safe time to jump ship. Techies tired of long hours and long commutes are ready to send out resumes. Whatever happened to work-life balance, flexible hours and family friendly policies? A 60-hour week (that's working 50% more for free) leads to burnout. As they feel more secure about the job market, look for employable techies to bail.

Linux, Windows, Lindows, Windex… Will 2004-05 really be the year Linux cuts into kowtowing to Redmond? Not quite, said Jennie Grimes, worldwide director of enterprise integration and development services for HP, but "the market is getting serious."

Palo Alto, Calif.-based HP is shipping 1000,000 client systems per quarter, but mostly to Asia. This is a grain of sand compared to Windows, as

Microsoft has more than 90% of the desktop market. Grimes said that right now, Linux is barely looking like Windows in part because of the lack of applications. There are suites like "OpenOffice," but more customer demand is needed before commercially viable applications become readily available.

Grimes sees lots of customers deploying Linux servers for application servicing. "These are big names, not dinky companies. They are Fortune 200 companies." She attributes the Linux server growth to cost reduction. There is increasing demand for open source referenceable architecture and open source mitigation.

As IT departments become more familiar with Linux on the server side, they may fuel demand for Linux on the desktop and for mobile use. A familiarity with the technology will lead to greater adoption.

This may spell more job security for Unix professionals too. They're the easiest to train on Linux because the OS fundamentals are identical.

Jon Boroshok is an accomplished strategist and freelance writer in Groton, Mass. His articles and columns have appeared in The Boston Globe, The Christian Science Monitor, Crain Communications, ZDNet, CMP Publications, and TechLiving magazine.

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