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Is IT enough? Business skills for the IT geek

by Jon Boroshok

It's impossible to follow the news without hearing about IT jobs being downsized or outsourced. For the survivors, salaries are down, while hours worked are up. They've seen colleagues move from cubicle to collecting (unemployment insurance) and have watched jobs go overseas faster than a Concorde jet.

These are tough times for techies, but it's not all doom and gloom. Some IT workers can actually come out ahead if they have the right mix of technical, business and interpersonal skills, street smarts and perhaps a bit of entrepreneurial spirit.

John Hawley, the director of workforce technology for Boston-based Decision Logic, a division of TAC Worldwide Companies, advises IT workers to get PMI certified, because developer certification makes them more competitive in a tight market. He also noted that product managers, architects and business analyst salaries are actually up.

"Get leadership expertise, and do mentoring," said Hawley. "Start taking steps now. Assume you will be laid off in the next year. It takes time to get skills and expertise."

Another way to remain employed is to understand how business works and learn skills that reflect today's management philosophies. "IT workers used to work in a very narrow scope and worked independently in a cube," said Ralph Kirkland, vice president of human resource development of Houston-based COMSYS Information Technology Services Inc. "Now there is more collaboration, with fewer folks doing the work. There are more meetings and more collaboration tools. It's not just cranking code." He says that IT workers must understand these tools as well as why they are being used.

Interpersonal skills are vital for today's IT workers, says Adam Nelson, vice president of product development and technology for Ninth House Inc., San Francisco, which provides training and e-learning. "Communication, team dynamics, setting clear expectations, knowing how to manage up and finding common ground are an extremely important part of an organization," said Nelson.

P.J. Guinan, an associate professor at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., agreed. "Overly tech folks aren't worth as much anymore. They must go from order taker to consultant," he said. Consulting skills such as listening, communication and relationship building are valuable -- and harder to do overseas. So are negotiating, marketing, managing an IT portfolio, talking to clients and cost justification.

"They don't want to take themselves out of the market, but they want to increase their value by being more than techies," said Guinan. She pointed out that IT workers are very analytical and great problem solvers. She advises them to demonstrate an understanding of the business rationale of their projects and products, including costs and benefits.

Paul Cronin, president of Techies.com, a tech career Web site based in Minneapolis, implores IT workers to master basic communication skills. He said that they should be strong in soft skills, as employers look at individual IT workers and ask, "Do they play well with others?"

Companies want people with both technology and business acumen, and an IT worker who can be the liaison between the coder and management is still valued. "They understand the experience their companies are trying to deliver to customers," said Cronin. "Any cost-benefit analysis skills are a plus -- make improvements in the customer experience while containing costs."

For techies looking for jobs, he recommends a business approach. "What have you created that developed a competitive edge?" he asked. "How will you help a company solve problems and do more with less?"

Another way to avoid losing a job to outsourcing is to make yourself an outsourced commodity. Boca Raton, Fla.-based Computer Repair Systems LLC runs a Web site that matches technicians with companies to answer service calls. The technicians are listed online with their skills, a photo and ratings/feedback provided by companies they have worked for. It's almost a cross between a dating service and eBay.

"Internal on-site technicians are being laid off," said CEO Jeff Leventhal. "Companies are looking to save costs, and they outsource repair to technicians on demand." The technicians work as independent franchisees, with Leventhal's company providing advice, billing and collection, as well as a means of being contacted. The entrepreneurial techies simply pay a percentage of their billings back to Computer Repair Systems. Leventhal sees potential earnings of $50K-$60K the first year and above $80K per year after that.

One such tech entrepreneur is Jason Abel of Mechanicsburg, Pa. After being laid off several times, Abel decided to try working on his own. "I outsource myself to bigger companies and do work for smaller companies on a small contract," said Abel. He does warranty repair work in his local area for several major computer companies, and his rationale is simple -- he costs clients less.

Abel has no formal business training and is motivated by a refusal to let someone else control his professional fate. He is profitable, making more money than he did when he had a full-time job, and he is working fewer hours. "Do it yourself, or don't do it at all," he advises.

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