

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Career Choices

By Douglas E. Welch

Throughout my years of writing this column, I have often heard from readers who were contemplating changing to a high-tech career. The fast growth of Internet-related companies led some to believe that high tech was the career “promised land.” As we have all seen, though, high-tech jobs are no guarantee of future career success.

In fact, so many people have sought out work in high tech that we are now experiencing a glut of workers in some areas, while jobs requiring specialized knowledge remain open for months. If you are looking to work in high tech, either as a first career or a career change, you would be wise to consider the reality of the market and where you might find a fit.

Everyone and Their Brother

During the height of the Internet boom, thousands of people downloaded an HTML editor, brushed up their skills, and hung out a shingle as a Web page designer. So many people, in fact, that there is a huge glut of Web designers, of varying skill, all competing for the same business. Worse still, those Web designers with extensive skills are finding themselves competing with less able designers solely on price.

The result is a horde of Web sites that are difficult, if not impossible, to maintain, frequent downtime, and clients who lump all Web designers in the same, mostly rotten, basket. It has gotten so bad that many talented Web designers are leaving the field, unable to find a way to demonstrate the difference that quality Web design can make to a company.

Graphic designers have also experienced a similar influx of people. Many people bill themselves as graphic designers, whether for the Web or traditional media, but many fail to live up to the skill level that one might consider average for a professional designer. Again, though, with so many people looking for work, prices continue to fall, and more experienced designers are finding themselves losing work to less qualified—though cheaper—workers.

Glut, Then Famine

In stark contrast to the fate of Web designers is that of programmers, system administrators and database

designers. These specialized jobs often sit empty for months before a company finds a suitable candidate, let alone someone they can hire. I would recommend that anyone looking to start a high-tech career today should closely investigate these and other specialized jobs if they wish to build their career for the future.

Similar jobs would include deep knowledge of XML and other specialized forms of Web data transfer, Internet-related programming, the ability to design and/or program Macromedia Flash applications and interfaces, administration of Apache Web servers and their associated hardware, and wireless applications of all kinds.

I must admit, developing your skills in these areas is much more difficult than the relatively simple world of HTML, but your career will benefit greatly. Developing specialized knowledge in any of these areas could mean the difference between a successful high-tech career or none at all.

That said, don't let any technical school or high-tech program tell you that its training will guarantee you a high-paying job the moment you finish your course load. I doubt whether this was ever true, but today it is even less so. Too many schools will promise you nearly anything to get your hard-earned money. As with all sales pitches, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

You should remember that skills alone will not guarantee you a successful career. You will still need to demonstrate your skills, both technical and people-related, to anyone wishing to hire you. Gone are the days of the reclusive and eccentric programmer-genius. Companies and managers are less likely to put up with attitude or behavior problems in today's job market. You don't necessarily need to be the quintessential “company man,” but maintaining a sense of reality goes hand in hand with a successful career.

I don't necessarily want to scare anyone away from developing a high-tech career. In fact, I think the need for high-tech workers will only increase as technology continues to become even more intimately connected to our lives. What I want you to remember is that working in high tech is much like working in any other field. There will be competition, bureaucracy and even stupidity from day to day.

You need to enter your career with open eyes so that you can avoid as many of the pitfalls as possible. A high-tech career is no guarantee of happiness—merely a wonderful opportunity to find meaningful work and a great career. □