

# Job Market Intelligence for IT Grads

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**It's a great time to be an IT grad. Companies across Canada are fighting for your talent.**

**Discover the latest information on the job market and find out which skills you need for a successful, long-term career in IT.**

The job market is booming for information technology grads – hiring is in top gear, salaries are up and even bonuses are back.

"We're recruiting very aggressively and we're hoping to hire over 1,000 candidates from various colleges and universities (in North America) by 2008," says Janelle Godfrey, a technical recruiter with Microsoft.

## **Who Is Hiring IT Grads?**

Shaping up to be the strongest market since the dot com crash, opportunities are everywhere – from major corporations to small companies.

In Canada, a national coalition was formed in December to address the country's shortage of IT professionals after the Conference Board of Canada found that Canadian businesses are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit IT staff.

Led by telecommunication giant Bell Canada, the Canadian Coalition for IT Succession is made up of technology companies and major players in telecommunications, financial services, energy and transportation who rely heavily on information technology to do business.

"Neglecting to take the necessary steps to significantly grow the pool of IT workers in Canada will have repercussions," says Stéphane Boisvert, president - enterprise for Bell Canada.

"Each vacant IT position represents an average cost to the Canadian economy of \$119,000 a

year...failing to fill the 89,000 or so IT jobs that will become available over the next three to five years would represent losses in excess of \$10 billion – and this is a conservative estimate."

While retirements account for many of the openings in both Canada and the U.S., many experts see a drop in IT enrolments since the dot com bust as an even bigger concern.

"Enrolment has really dropped, especially in what I call the tech programs – computer science engineering and computer engineering," says Rob Babin, associate director of the IT management program at Ryerson University's Ted Rogers School of Management.

"We're now starting to see the effects of that so enrolments really need to increase."

## **How Employers are Fighting for You**

With short supply and big demand now stoking the hot job market, competition for jobs is taking a backseat to competition between employers to recruit the best and the brightest.

"It's definitely competitive and we have to spend a lot more time branding our organization and offering unmatched and compelling experiences for new hires," acknowledges Jeff Beavers, Whirlpool Corp. director of global university relations.

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## Higher Salaries and Bonuses

All this competition among employers is good news for job-seekers. Not only are opportunities greater as companies like Whirlpool aim to significantly increase entry-level IT positions, but so are salaries.

"We're predicting a 4-5% increase in salaries and this is the first year in a long time we're seeing a significant jump," says Kelley Bishop, executive director of the career and placement department at Michigan State University. "Bonuses are also back and they're coming in multiple ways."

Instead of a signing bonus, Bishop says some employers are offering to pay back student loans. Performance bonuses are also in play with employers wanting to hold onto top talent once they get it.

"When technology is hot, it's a tough market," says Microsoft's Godfrey. "If you're a great worker, we're going to reward that."

Average starting wages for entry-level IT positions in North America range from the low \$30,000s to the high \$60,000s for very specialized graduates. Most new hires can expect to be in the \$40,000 to \$45,000 range. After a few years, salaries are usually between \$50,000 and \$100,000, depending on career path.

## What Are the Hot Skills?

The latest Robert Half Technology Hiring Index and Skills Report for the first quarter of this year found that Windows administration (Server 2000/2003) is most in demand, with 74% of employers polled citing it as the most sought-after technical skill.

Networking is the top job category, for the second straight quarter, with database management (Oracle, Microsoft SQL Server) and firewall administration ranking high.

"Companies are investing in a range of technology initiatives, including Web 2.0 development, wireless communication and network security and are recruiting IT professionals to support these projects," says Katherine Spencer Lee, Robert Half Technology executive director.

Experts agree telecommunication and security expertise are hot skills to bring to the table, as well as digital media and website development know-how.

"I don't care what job you're offered, you've just made yourself more valuable if you can develop a website because it's becoming the major mode of communication," says Bishop. "Folks realize this is now the front door of their business and they have to do it well."

Top areas tech companies like Microsoft are looking to fill are software developers, and software and program managers. For more traditional sectors such as industry and manufacturing, project management jobs top the list.

"We're not looking for a technical expert as much as we're looking for a strong project manager, a strong leader, a strong business manager," says Whirlpool's Beavers.

"We're hiring individuals that have strong information skills, strong project skills, strong leadership skills and strong business acumen so they understand how the information systems are impacting our business."

## Long-Term Prospects and Offshore Fears

As it turns out, those are also the same skills that will help give a career longevity – especially in the constantly changing field of technology.

"Most companies when they hire someone are looking at it for the long-term, say five to 10 years, and it's those interpersonal and business management skills that are more important and harder to develop than the technical skills are," adds professor Babin.

The most technical jobs are also the ones that are at a greater risk of being outsourced overseas, which is a big concern for many graduates. The good news, say experts, is that jobs that involve integrating the business with the technology – or finding ways to boost the bottom line – are here to stay.

"More than half of IT is about the user and what the user needs – not so much the technology. But can you make the technology solve the problem you have. That's not necessarily something you can do off-site," Bishop says.

Jobs that involve project management or leading a team are also good bets – especially in the global marketplace where "soft" people and communication skills are now valued above geek squad intelligence.


"At the end of the day, organizations want to work with someone who is good to work with and will have a long shelf life," Babin explains. "If you've only ever done academics, you're less desirable."

## How to Stand Out from the Crowd

Employers, recruiters and experts all say the two things that will make you stand out the most from other job hunters are strong people skills and real world experience such as an internship, co-op or related summer employment.

"If they've shown their ability to manage people, influence others, communicate effectively, manage expectations and meet deadlines, they're going to be a stronger candidate," says Beavers.

And despite the hot market, standing out is key if you want to land a great job. As for the future, be prepared to be flexible and make sure your skills are transferable because job titles that are hot today could be cobalt tomorrow.

"You can be a highly paid, specialized person today and be obsolete next week," says Babin. "But while the mode may change, the key skills are the same – the solution is the same solution." 



## Takeaways from this Article

- There are lots of opportunities for entry-level IT professionals because of a North America-wide skills shortage.
- Companies are competing among themselves to hire the best talent, so salaries are rising, bonuses are being offered, and other incentives, such as paying back student loans, are on the table.
- The hot skills in IT right now are Windows administration, networking, database management and firewall administration. Telecommunication, security expertise and website development skills are also in demand.
- For a long-term career, it's good to be skilled at project management, leadership and business management – integrating business with technology. Be flexible and make sure your skills are transferable.
- To stand out from the crowd, have strong people skills and real-world experience, such as an internship or summer job.



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