Graduate Opportunities

The technology job market is hotting up, reports Helene Zampetakis.

Information technology and communications graduates hoping to advance their careers may be buoyed by forecasts of a gradual rise in job vacancies, but ambitious professionals will need to expand their skills if they want to meet the demands of a changing industry.

ICT job figures due to be released by the Australian Computer Society at the end of February are expected to show a slight rise in job vacancies last year, but with unemployment remaining well above the national average of 5.1 per cent.

Last year's figures showed unemployment fell by 1.8 percentage points from 2002 levels to 10.6 per cent.

At recruitment company Seek, total volumes of job ads in ICT grew 50 per cent in the past year, but the number of applicants failed to keep pace, partly because IT graduate numbers have declined over the past few years. The trend is leading employers to worry about meeting their skills requirements.

Insurance Australia Group's chief information officer, David Issa, says that with numbers down and expectations of renewed industry-wide investment in technology, "this could create a general skills shortage problem in the next few years".

This presents lots of opportunity to those looking to upgrade their skills. Paul Bassett, chief executive of Seek, says there is a preponderance of vacancies for database and network administrators, programmers with emerging languages (such as .NET), and business analysts.

There is also demand for large systems integration expertise, business intelligence knowledge and enterprise resource planning capabilities, according to the president of the Australian Computer Society, Edward Mandla.

Employers across the board are looking for expertise in new technologies such as wireless networks and
wide area networks.

IAG's Issa for example will be looking for VoIP (voice over internet protocol) and fast growing programming language .NET in the year ahead.

At AMP, technology investment will be doubled over the next 12 months and so the institution plans to double its graduate intake in ICT this year from 10 in 2004.

Anyone who has specialised in data warehousing or has knowledge of Siebel's latest customer relations management systems will be in demand.

Lee Barnett, AMP's CIO, anticipates a raft of new projects on the drawing board and will be looking for talent in managing this.

"Project skills are hard to find. Projects have downsized recently but the environment that people are building into is much more complex than it used to be."

Specifically, she points to more complex integration requirements and the need for high-level change management skills.

Barnett adds that some ICT capabilities, such as commercial analysis to oversee sourcing, will be grown internally although not necessarily from AMP's technology department.

"Organisations are generally gearing up with new investments and they need people to identify what their needs are and scope the project. You need a combination of skills for this and it's hard to find," she says.

The overall outcome of the job rise is that IT salaries have increased by around 10 to 15 per cent over the past 12 months, according to research by recruitment company, Ambition.

But while there are now more technology jobs to be had at better rates particularly in niche areas securing a promising job can still be tough.

At graduate level, for example, a theoretical technology degree is no longer a certain passport to lucrative employment while at executive level, career paths are "blocked", says ACS's Mandla.

"Executives without a job could be on the bench for six to nine months," he says.

That leaves ambitious ICT professionals needing to make some smart career decisions.
While technology professionals who choose to specialise in a particular field can continuously upgrade their vendor certifications to take them deeper into the technical side of the industry, those looking for management positions will need to diversify their expertise.

Employers are now favouring ICT professionals with business skills.

"The modern graduate needs more qualifications in business," says Mandla.

"IT has shifted from working privately in a dark room to being out there finding the business problems, becoming aligned to the business.

As an adjunct to this, soft skills such as vendor pre-sales skills, are also growing in demand. CORRECTION - Following the report, "Jobs rise but skills in short supply" on February 14, 2005, AMP has pointed out that its technology investment will rise over the next 12 months but will not double as stated in the story. (AFNR, 21/02/2005)