

Business

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Skilled worker shortage feared in technology

Perception of tight job market blamed
Lack of tech students 'quite troubling'

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The Canadian high-tech sector may be in full recovery, but a serious skills crisis looms unless more students, parents and high-school guidance counsellors shed the perception that information-technology jobs are in short supply, two industry groups are warning.

"There's a dichotomy at the moment in what kids are being told and what's needed, and that's creating a (skills) shortage and a problem that will emerge," says Bernard Courtois, president and chief executive officer of the Information Technology Association of Canada.

He says many students continue to be dissuaded from entering computer science and computer engineering programs despite the fact that employment in the sector is growing at levels not seen since the dot-com boom.

According to Statistics Canada, nearly 13,000 new jobs were created in the country's computer and telecommunications sector in 2005, bringing the total to 597,600. It's not as high as the 664,200 jobs reached in the peak year of 2001, but it's the

first gain in four years.

Those figures exclude information-technology jobs outside the industry, such as with banks, retailers and other sectors, where demand for skilled workers who can implement and manage IT systems may be growing faster than the domestic market will be able to handle down the road.

Lynda Leonard, a senior vice-president at the IT association, says the trend is "quite troubling" and needs to be addressed.

"The industry has to figure out what to do to intervene, to get the message out that there's still really good, well-paying jobs in the sector."

The same trend is being observed at the Software Human Resource Council, which has been tracking the labour situation in the nation's software sector since 1992.

"I can't tell you how many parents are telling their kids not to go (into computer science), or how many guidance counsellors are saying it, but what we're seeing is a significant drop in enrolment, particularly at the community college level," says Paul Swinwood, president and CEO of SHRC.

Swinwood, who routinely holds meetings with college and university officials, says most college representatives to whom he's spoken have reported a 30 per cent to 50 per cent decrease in program enrolments since 2002, and many universities have experienced declines of 20 per cent or more.

"We've had colleges close their IT courses. We have had complete faculties laid off," says Swinwood. "We're quite concerned."

He says the situation becomes more worrisome when one considers that a substantial portion of information technology workers in the country will be retiring over the next few years.

In the federal government alone, 40 per cent of IT staff will be eligible for retirement come 2008, he adds. "How is that gap going to be filled?"

Douglas Howe, director of the school of computer science at Carleton University in Ottawa, says there doesn't appear to be a crisis at the moment. He reports that before 2004 there were substantial drops in computer science enrolments across North America, but the environment has since improved.

"In the last year or two, enrolments seem to have stabilized," Howe says.