

The Washington Post

SPECIAL SECTION: Technology Career Advice

Transitioning into the tech industry

Thursday, April 11, 2011

by Duane Craig

How difficult is it?

Individuals in careers outside of IT who have project management skills and very strong and well-rounded communications skills can make the leap to information technology. Those looking to make the move must keep in mind that experience levels serve as the greatest challenge in this transition.

The extent of job opportunities for people transitioning from another field to IT is fairly consistent from market to market, according to Barry Downs, Washington D.C., branch manager for staffing firm Robert Half Technology. Downs noted that those making the transition should focus on positions such as entry-level help desk roles, analyst opportunities and quality assurance.

Jill McKay, account manager at staffing firm TrueBridge Resources' Washington, D.C., office added that positions such as business analyst, digital marketer and project or product manager are good bets for transitioners, and went on to note that sales and recruiting positions easily translate to technology. In the D.C. area, McKay said that media and telecom industries are growing their tech departments and that people working in these industries should inquire about on-the-job tech training.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, jobs in the technology sector will be growing steadily from 2010 to 2018, and in a report released in Dec. 2010 by the Tech America Foundation, D.C. was ranked second in the nation for high-tech jobs. But those companies hiring to fill traditional IT jobs that are technical in nature still demand experience.

“Candidates that are looking to transition into the technology sector job market face several different challenges,” Downs said, “the most obvious being the lack of real-time experience. Companies that are hiring in today’s market are typically filling roles of highly skilled professionals that were let go during the downturn. Therefore, with no valid experience, candidates are up against a big challenge. Also, new and entry level roles are being filled with people that have prior experience.”

In general, Martha Heller, president of Heller Search Associates, a technology executive search firm located in the Boston area, also emphasized the importance of project management knowledge and the “ability to bring a project from inception to completion” as a valuable skill to bring to a tech job.

Terry Erdle, executive vice president of skills certification at CompTIA, an IT industry advocacy group, agreed that having project management skills with certifications eases entry into the technology sector when transitioning from other careers. He also noted that communications technicians may find the move

easier than most. Still, he cautioned, those applying for jobs with very specific skill sets, such as working with relational databases, will be challenged without experience.

Augmenting acquired skills with education and training can help ease the transition. Erdle noted that certifications can trump degrees when the job is specific to the certification, and that vendor-neutral certifications such as CISSP and CPP can broaden opportunities.

Michelle Mercurio, associate dean of career services for DeVry University, consistently sees people with in-demand technology certifications, especially those with MCITP, MCSE, CCNA, Security+, CISSP and PMP certifications in the D.C. market.

CompTIA advises via its Web site to pay close attention to your references, get certifications, be willing to start at the bottom and try entry-level positions as springboards to the desired job.