

## Canada's technology sector facing major skills shortage, web job postings soar

By David Friend, THE CANADIAN PRESS



TORONTO - Calling all computer geeks and techies - Canada's technology sector needs you!

It began by posting "help wanted" signs, turned to a nationwide search, and now some companies are making a desperate effort to find computer technicians to fill a widening employment gap.

The Canadian economy may be slowing and the jobless rate creeping higher - as the industrial sector in Ontario and Quebec comes under renewed pressure from a looming U.S. recession and high dollar. But there are still major skills shortages and lots of jobs available in technology, services and skilled trades.

At Workopolis, the country's largest online job search operator, postings for qualified computer software programmers and hardware technicians have soared more than 300 per cent over the last year, and applicants are hard to come by.

"The majority of people that we've interviewed over the last little while are new Canadians, rather than people who were born in Canada," said Patrick Sullivan, president of Workopolis.

He said part of the problem lies in the fact that few Canadians are trained in computer and network programming, which would've surprised any high school guidance counsellor a decade ago.

Computer programming positions were once the holy grail of aspirations for freshly graduated high school students because they were in high demand by companies like Nortel (TSX:N) and Microsoft (Nasdaq:MSFT).

But all of that changed after the tech bubble burst and Nortel and others were wracked with mounting losses and massive job cuts and corporate streamlining.

"I think parents said to their kids 'Hey, you don't want to go into technologies,'" Sullivan said.

"There was a real slowdown in the number of kids entering tech fields in universities. So you can tag it right to those years and it hasn't recovered."

A recent report by the Conference Board of Canada suggested that the country will need 90,000 information technology workers within the next five years, in part to fuel the explosion in wireless and Internet businesses. Each position that isn't filled will cost the economy an estimated \$120,000 per year.

Last month, Bell Canada (TSX:BCE) teamed with a group of Canadian companies to

start a hunt for Canadian information technology workers.

"Youth are not interested in IT skilled careers because... they don't see the value and the impact of the IT function within our companies and our society," said Francois Morin, chief of staff at Bell Canada.

"They feel it's so embedded in our day-to-day now."

Information technology jobs tend to slide off the radar when it comes to monthly unemployment reports.

Economists have been focusing on the shock that Canada is feeling from the staggering U.S. economy. Local manufacturers are already struggling with a slowdown in exports, partly from a persistently strong loonie, and their sector is under a microscope.

"We are in a downturn on a cyclical basis. Canadian growth is slowing," said Michael Gregory, an analyst with BMO Capital Markets.

"Unfortunately with the double whammy of a likely U.S. recession plus the Canadian dollar still flirting with parity, that is going to create some major headaches - even more headaches - for Canadian factories going forward."

January's unemployment report from Statistics Canada is scheduled to be released Friday, and it's likely to show a gearing down of the job creation machine, Gregory said.

Job growth is expected to be "modest," and the unemployment rate unchanged at six per cent, with an estimated increase of 9,000 workers, less than one-third of the 30,000 per month annual trend, according to BMO Capital Markets.

Hotel and food services industries are expected to be one of the major growth performers once again.

Last month, Statistics Canada said the economy lost 2,900 jobs in December, revised from an initial reported loss of 18,700. That followed seven straight months of gains.