

Turning Our Backs on Tech

Corporate America has to **make IT jobs sexy again.**

IN THE GLOBAL BATTLE for infotech supremacy, is America surrendering? Recent evidence suggests that the U.S. is at least thinking about giving up. I'm talking not just about America's ability to produce the fastest chip or most popular software but also about something potentially even more serious: the ability of all businesses to be world-class users of information technology. "As a nation we need scientists and engineers if we're going to be successful," says Microsoft research chief Rick Rashid. "All the new businesses are built around that." The trouble is that U.S. companies haven't developed nearly enough qualified chief information officers. And at the talent pipeline's beginning, America's kids have concluded that infotech is a dead-end field for nerd losers, and they're avoiding it like last month's ringtone.

Both problems are immediate. The CIO shortage is harder to spot because companies always have people holding that title; they're often just not the right people. The field's top professional group, the Society for Information Management (SIM), has just published a report ("Grooming the 2010 CIO") concluding that U.S. companies have far fewer good CIOs than they need, maybe less than half as many. The reason is that in a world where IT is central to strategy, today's CIO needs substantial business acumen, relationship abilities, and leadership skills—but most don't have those traits because most companies are lousy at developing future CIOs.

The more worrisome problem is what's happening with the kids. Moving herdlike, as usual, they've decided that IT is excruciatingly uncool. Of course it was the coolest thing on the planet just seven years ago, when interest in computer science as an undergraduate major hit a 20-year high. But then a lot of things happened. The dot-com boom went bust at just the time companies stopped hiring staff to fix Y2K problems. More important, the pop culture image of infotech workers flipped from dot-com billionaires in Gulfstreams to Dilbertesque drones writing code in cubicles and Third World masses working for pennies an hour. The number of undergraduates in computer science and related majors plunged. Though nationwide data aren't available, "some schools saw enrollment drop to 25% of what it had been," says Kate Kaiser, an associate

professor of infotech at Marquette University in Milwaukee. "The press over-inflated outsourcing. The impact was not nearly as great as parents and guidance counselors suggested."

But is it really a problem? After all, if Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, and others can do our infotech work for less, why shouldn't they? The answer is "Yes, it's a problem," because most people don't understand the reality of today's infotech work. "A lot of IT jobs in the future will deal with face-to-face interaction," says Stephen Pickett, CIO of Penske Corp. and past president of SIM. "You can't do a process analysis over the phone. You

can't understand the inner workings of a corporation over the phone. You have to understand how a user wants to use software. Those are face-to-face jobs, feeling the good times and bad times, knowing enough about the company."

It isn't coding in cubicles anymore. Those jobs really are going offshore, and they should be. The jobs that remain are more demanding, higher paying, and multiplying fast—if only there were people to fill them.

To change students' minds, SIM has been holding sessions at colleges and universities across America with speakers from Microsoft and local companies. They know how to get students' attention. At Boston's Northeastern University, for example, speakers included the IT chief of the Red Sox, a senior IT exec from the Patriots, and the founder of a hip-hop website, who explained that IT training enables him to do what he does. Is the sales campaign working? Pickett thinks so, though it's still early.

In this, as in many things, I have abiding faith in the market's ability to solve the problem. But

that doesn't mean we should do nothing. "There's a danger that if you let some of these processes go on too long, they become irreversible," says Microsoft's Rashid. We have to hear what the market is telling us, and right now it's telling us two big things. One message is to top executives: You have to do much, much better at developing future IT leaders. The second is to all the adults in students' lives: Companies big and small desperately need well-rounded IT experts, and that's a huge opportunity for young people and for the country. **E**

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IN COMPUTER
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