



THE RIGHT TIME TO BUILD A CAREER IN IT IS NOW!

Whether you are new to technology or have been in the field for some time, the recent bursting of the dot-com bubble might have left you scrambling for answers.

What happened?

Is information technology (IT) a good career choice?

Is the industry in decline, or do opportunities still exist?

Rest assured that IT is and will remain one of the most dynamic and rewarding careers available. In fact, the recent changes in the industry are cause for celebration—forcing the industry to better define its objectives and allowing true innovators and professionals to create dynamic career growth.

CHAPTER 3

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: A GREAT CAREER

Information Technology (IT), once a hotbed of easy employment and rapid advancement, has become an enigma of sorts. To be sure, the need for skilled IT workers remains high. Companies are still building information infrastructures, applications, and web technologies. But thousands of IT workers seem to be caught in a vortex of declining salaries, career indecision, and a more difficult job market.

Reports seem to say that thousands of IT jobs remain unfilled, yet job postings remain unanswered, résumés sent in response to newspaper ads are unrequited, and day by day, we become jaded to the opportunity that just a short time ago seemed so commanding.

In addition, a dilemma largely unknown in the mid to late 1990s has reared its ugly head—experience requirements. During the technology boom of the late 1990s, when the convergence of the Internet as a business medium and the most robust economic growth of the past 50 years caused an unprecedented demand for technology workers, experience became an unrealistic expectation.

The need for technology workers far outstripped the physical bodies who worked in the industry. This gave rise to entire new industries hoping to cash in on the IT skills gap. Boot camp training, CD-based curriculum, and web-based training tools promised to provide the skills needed to build a career in IT. And for some, it worked—at least for a time.

However, the dot-com revolution gave way to a more tempered and realistic approach to the adoption of new technology. Dramatic technology project failures and the loss of millions of dollars preceded a correction in the IT job market. More importantly, companies changed their requirements regarding technology professionals.

Having a degree or certification has quickly become secondary to your experience. The term “paper-certified,” meaning an individual who has technical certifications but little

hands-on or practical experience, has entered the employer's vocabulary. In fact, certifications, once highly demanded, have given rise to skeptical analysis. An *"Oh, you're certified; I won't hold it against you!"* attitude has risen among prospective employers who were either directly burned or have heard the horror stories of CCNAs who cannot perform the most rudimentary tasks and MCSEs who cannot bring up a server or correctly install and support the most basic of business applications. The same holds true for certifications in project management and other areas.

Where before the certified professional received daily calls from headhunters, busy stealing talent from one company to place at another, the phone remains silent and many technology workers are faced with shrinking salaries and no longer receive calls touting the latest opportunity. The face of IT career advancement has taken on a distinct squeamish pallor.

All of this gives rise to the compelling question...

Is IT still a good career choice?

The answer: A resounding Yes!

The first thing to understand is that IT is neither a new field nor a declining field. In fact, it remains one of the greatest career choices both in demand and opportunity. The fact remains that the need for IT talent continues to grow, and a good number of technology jobs remain unfilled.

Few fields offer the wide variety of career paths, opportunities for promotion, and sheer enjoyment from fun and challenging work. And, if past experience is an indication of future potential, it's only going to get better.

However, the "correction" experienced the past few years is simply a normal reaction in a maturing industry, bringing it closer in line with other professions and careers. The idea that someone leaving school with a technology certification should earn 30 to 40 percent more than his peers in another nontechnical industry is unrealistic. And yet, this is the complaint. I hear of people complaining that they cannot find work in the \$50 to 70K a year range after gaining their certifications. Of course, they can't!

I realize that radio advertisements still dangle the "big money" carrot, claiming that after you take their courses and have your certifications, you can earn \$50, 60, 70 thousand or more, right out of school. Yes, and if you take this little pill, you will lose all your extra weight and develop the body of your dreams without exercise while eating everything you want.

As a budding IT professional, you need to have a realistic idea of the market. More importantly, you must understand the steps necessary to advance your career as rapidly as possible. The

entry-level dilemma of experience needed to gain the experience needed is simple to solve. However, your career moves after you are in the field will have a much greater impact on both the speed and level to which you rise in your profession.

IT is and will remain an incredible opportunity for the career-minded professional. It has historically offered, and will continue to offer, rewards more readily than many other careers. More importantly, it is a *production/results*-based career. That is to say, in the final analysis, career advancement will depend largely on production instead of tenure and formal education.

That should be cause for excitement. What that means is that your career potential in IT falls largely on your shoulders. You are in control. Few other careers offer as much opportunity for results-based advancement as IT. In fact, the trend is moving down this path right now. This is why, on discussion boards and in conversations, the talk has shifted from how to pass the next exam in your current certification track to how to acquire needed experience. More precisely, how do you get the necessary experience in a catch-22 situation?

I regularly hear complaints about the difficulty of breaking into the field. *“I need experience to get the job, but the entry-level position requires more experience than anyone in an entry-level position would have.”* Although in actuality this might be true in some cases, it is important to understand the employer’s perspective. Rest assured that, in most cases, a prospective employer is not posting a position with the idea that no one can fill it. The employer is typically in need of a skill set. More importantly, he is in need of a solution. Most companies would not take on the effort of posting, collecting, and reviewing résumés, and conducting interviews with dozens of candidates or more, if they were not interested in eventually filling that position.

Employers are looking for someone to do something. It is your job to convince employers that you are the person who can do that needed something, and that they should pay you a decent wage to do so.

The chapters in Part II, “Filling Your Toolkit,” discuss how to do this with résumés, interviews, and other things.

Why IT Is a Great Career

With a job market apparently teeming with people but suffering from scant opportunities, it would appear that IT has seen its day as a great career. I hear from technologists who have paid thousands for certifications and spent months looking for their first opportunity.

Many are now second-guessing their decision to become technologists. The promise of unrestricted growth, high pay, and opportunities has given way to a somber realization—they cannot find a job.

Perhaps the preceding description fits you. Perhaps you entered IT, excited about the prospects of attaining success in a lucrative field, and one that has the byproduct of respect, too. But now you worry that you have made the wrong choice—that you’ve been had. If that is the case, I want to give you some hope.

I do not believe that the career prospects from IT are dead. In fact, I believe that the current status of the market makes sense in the context of the past boom, and it is cause for guarded optimism, if not outright celebration.

Why? Because IT remains an incredible career for the same reasons I started down that path in the 1980s. The primary reasons are these:

- Options
- Performance-based advancement
- Opportunities for continuous learning
- Pay and perks

I’ll address each of these in the sections that follow.

Options

Options. That one word might be a defining reason why IT is so compelling as a career choice. It is a vast field. In fact, it is segmenting daily into new and growing areas of specialty, including the following:

- Multimedia
- Network operations
- Application development
- Web technologies
- System analysis
- Database administration
- Security analysis
- ...

This segmentation is a great predictor of opportunity. Companies are looking for expertise in a number of areas. Each area represents the need for talent, whether you are an in-house expert or whether you work for a company that provides these valuable services. In each case, a person, a job, must be created to fill that particular need.

Because all these varied areas fall under the IT umbrella, career moves are more easily made, providing movement from one area of expertise to another while maintaining the consistency of being an IT professional. It creates an artificial sense of job continuum while allowing you to move, in fact, from field to field without having to rebreak the entry-level barrier.

That's exciting! If you are a technologist who has expertise in an outdated technology, you can parlay your conceptual knowledge with your actual years of experience into new career directions without starting over.

This is why I counsel programmers, for example, to frame their careers in relation to their broadest skill set. I explain that they should not say they are a "Cobol programmer" or a "VB programmer." This has the effect of placing them in the undesirable position of having to be completely retrained in newer, more prevalent languages. Instead, I want them both in conversation and mentally (in their own psyche) to refer to themselves simply as "programmers." The language of choice is simply a tool they currently use.

In this way, when programmers learn a new language or even begin their study of that language, they are simply continuing to advance their career as a seasoned programmer who uses .NET or VB as a tool.

IT provides choices unknown in other industries. More exciting, however, are the prospects and qualifications for advancement.

Performance-Based Advancement

IT certainly provides its practitioners with choices. It is neither industry nor geographically limited. This means that your expertise is not tied to where you live or the type of company you work for. Every company out there, from large multinational conglomerates to the mom and pop bakeries down the street, uses computers in one way or another. Yes, this is exciting, but the qualifications for advancement are even more so.

IT as a career offers a unique opportunity for what I call "performance-based advancement." What this means is that you are not limited by a specialized degree, as, for example, a doctor or attorney is. After you are in the door, your success will largely be gauged based on the perception and actual practice of the users of your product.

This is great news! If you are confident in your ability to produce effective solutions with the technology at your disposal, you have the capability to quickly separate yourself from the rank and file. Technology, when properly applied, has a dramatic effect on how successfully people work.

Because of the incredible positive impact technology can make within a company, your effectiveness at developing solutions has the potential to propel your career. When you, as a technology professional, make a solid contribution to your company, it is noticed.

It quickly becomes apparent that you are a producer. Technology affords this notice much more readily than virtually any other industry. Understanding this phenomenon is a key to rapidly developing a successful career. Learn to identify the areas of need in your company and proactively develop solutions using technology, and you will reap the rewards.

Opportunities for Continuous Learning

I am impatient and easily distracted. I admit it. Prior to entering the IT field, I bounced from job to job. I drove a plumbing truck, managed a bookstore, worked for a bank, sold copiers, and had assorted other jobs. Keeping my attention has always been a challenge. What is new seems to shine and catch my eye, while the mundane and repetitive quickly lose my interest.

Looking back over many years as an IT professional, I recognize that a technology career was a savior of sorts. IT is in a constant and rapid state of change. It forces professionals to remain in a state of constant learning and provides new and exciting avenues for growth and career direction.

Many careers have continuing education requirements involving an hour or two a year to stay current. In contrast, technology's continuing education requirements are daily.

In fact, this should be a factor in your decision to stay in the field. Although performance-based advancement might be a wonderful product of the field, if you do not want to be under the constant pressure to learn new technologies, study the upcoming trends, and watch other sectors of the industry, you will quickly reach a point of burnout.

To remain at the top of your game, you must include time for reading new literature, the quantity of which can be huge. Of course, there are creative ways to manage this.

When running my own company, I discovered that the number of weekly technology journals and magazines was amazing. We could receive 3 to 5 magazines on any given day. Titles included *Information Week*, *Eweek*, *Network Magazine*, and *Windows 2000* magazine, to

name just a few. Often, we would receive one for each person in the company. Most sat unread and became huge quantities of recycling at the end of the week.

We all wanted to read the magazines. But the fact was that most of the content was not pertinent to our careers or current company projects. We did not, however, want to miss the mention of a product or methodology we could adopt personally or as a company.

Our solution was to assign different magazines to different people in the company. Each person's job was to peruse his magazine looking for those nuggets of wisdom that needed to be shared with the rest of the company. If someone found an article that included information that the rest of the group might find interesting, he copied and distributed it.

I still employ this tactic today with other peers in the contracting and independent consulting fields. I simply make the request that if they read something they feel I might have an interest in, they should pass it along. Sure, sometimes I receive duplicates of items I've already read, but in most cases, they are passing me articles I have either overlooked or forgotten about.

This think-tank approach can greatly help you with the tasks of staying up to date on evolving technologies and trends. In addition, it forces professional correspondence with your peers which, as you will see in Chapter 12, "Building an Active Contact List," is critical to accelerating your career growth.

Pay and Perks

Although the recent job market includes a trend toward lower pay for technology professionals in general, I want to emphasize the positive outlook for pay in the industry.

Once again, you must first understand the unrealistic pay previously offered to the rank and file technologist during the late 1990s. Of course, as the correction is made, the pay offered to entry-level technologists will drop greatly. You should expect this.

In most cases, the dropping pay scale is primarily focused on what I consider "widget" technology. These are technology jobs that involve repetitive clerical-type tasks. An example of this is a LAN administrator who maintains desktops and adds users to the network.

This type of job has never required extensive training or experience. It is not synonymous with network engineering, system architecture and planning, and more importantly, aligning IT projects with the business model and goals.

These are entry-level types of positions. They are where you start your career, not the apex of your career. If you view them as such, you will be far less concerned about reports of lower pay.

The fact remains that technology professionals fare much better than those in other industries when you compare education and experience.

For example, consider someone entering medicine. This person spends 9 to 12 years in school, at considerable expense, and then puts in a few more years as an intern before he can achieve the financial rewards associated with the career.

If you are a technology professional and have put in a good 10 to 15 years of career development, chances are you will be earning a decent salary, too. If, however, you expect to be earning the big money 1 to 5 years after entering the field, you have set yourself up for disappointment.

Technology professionals are those who have worked to perfect their craft, add value to their companies, and put in place the various tools at their disposal to advance their careers. For them, the pay and perks will always be available. If you are willing to put time and planning into your career development, you can also earn good money.

These reasons make IT one of the greatest career choices you can make. Current market conditions notwithstanding, you have the ability to advance more quickly, in more areas, without the burden of performing the same stale tasks day after day, week after week, and year after year.

Take that as an affirmation. If the idea of constantly learning new technologies and tackling business challenges appeals to you, IT might be a great career choice.

What About Outsourcing?

Outsourcing is, without a doubt, the single-most cited reason for malaise in the IT sector. Articles about lost jobs, disenfranchised workers, and the demise of an industry abound.

But will all IT jobs be outsourced? Is there a place for the IT worker in an outsourced/off-shored economy? Can the astute technology professional develop skills that will make him both employable and not easily displaced with a low-cost replacement overseas?

The fact is that all jobs will not be outsourced. In fact, the current government forecasts through the next ten years still place technology jobs as having the greatest growth and higher average pay.

Although I will not minimize the impact that outsourcing has had on some, the bulk of technologists have remained employed and are fairly well compensated. Normal economic cycles have played as much a part in the industry malaise as outsourcing.

I am a huge believer in the agile/free-agent driven workforce written about in books like *Free Agent Nation*, by Daniel Pink, and *Winning the Talent Wars*, by Bruce Tulgan. I have found their message pertinent in both my own professional life and that of other technology professionals who strive for advancement.

When speaking of outsourcing, I am speaking more precisely of off-shoring, or the practice of hiring workers in other countries due primarily to economics. *Local outsourcing* also exists—the movement of business departments and functions out of an organization and over to an organization with competencies in that area.

Outsourcing of the offshore variety is what worries and angers many technology professionals. The problem, as they see it, is that there is an uneven playing field. To a large degree, they are right.

There are moral and economic challenges when a company sends work to an underdeveloped country without the same standards and restrictions regarding environmental protection and working conditions.

With that said, however, notable failures in corporate off-shoring are also prevalent. It is my belief that many of the more analytic and business-centric functions of IT will create nearly insurmountable challenges for outsourced projects. These will turn into opportunities for the astute, local technology professional.

Outsourcing Is About Value, Not Costs

Many companies do not see a significant value in keeping jobs in the country. They find it difficult to quantify talent of their in-house technology workers.

If you are going to pay a premium for talent and get little perceived or realized value in return, why not send the work overseas? Companies sometimes find that their in-house staffs are not providing value. By sending the jobs overseas, they still receive little value, but the bottom line is protected.

The objective for technology professionals is to better define their value. This is a common theme throughout this book. Value to the business is what makes technology appealing, not the rote tasks associated with technology maintenance or even implementation.

Such tasks have to occur and are critical, but they are not quite as critical in the overall scheme of things. Executive management is looking for ways to drive profits. For many companies, technology is a necessary evil and has little strategic value. If your company has this perspective, your job will always be less secure. Your ability to create value will become your greatest source of job security.

If you are a technology professional, or you aspire to be one, you need to quickly see where you stand in the value chain of your organization. Initially, while you develop your skills, you will be pretty low on that chain. However, the quicker you adopt a value-driven mindset, the quicker you will find your career advancing.

Companies outsource primarily when the IT function in question is perceived as more of a cost than a strategic value. If you are a producer, it is less likely that a company will want to let you go. Even if particular functions are outsourced, highly productive employees stand a much better chance of being placed in another role within the organization.

You might also find that your company outsources to create a second shift—effectively increasing the length of its workday without paying a premium for overtime or after-hours talent. Once again, your ability to provide a greater strategic value should be the silver bullet of security that you strive to attain.

This is less about working harder, per se. It involves your ability to see smarter, more effective ways to perform your tasks. In addition, it involves becoming better at determining company needs and then delivering value-rich solutions. This has always been the case. Outsourcing has merely accentuated the need to adopt this strategy.

The Jobs That Won't Be Outsourced

Although outsourcing is highly publicized, it is much more prevalent in larger corporations. Most jobs, however (80 percent or more), fall into the small-business category. The small-business category is composed of companies that have between 10 and 500 employees. Most of these companies maintain small IT departments, where the overlap of talent and business knowledge is critical.

These small organizations provide the greatest opportunity. Because of their size, you might be required to provide training one day, infrastructure support the next day, and simple programming assistance the following day. In addition, due to the smaller size, you will be required to be more aware of company projects and plans. You will be forced into a more strategic role. This has great career benefits.

You should also consider jobs that have geographic significance. Managing outsourced projects, working to train and support technology staff at smaller organizations, onsite integration of technology, and others provide clues as to which jobs will remain within your country. In summary, you will find that more strategic roles and those requiring communication with staff and management tend to remain within the country.

Later, should you plan to take your skills into a larger organization, the more comprehensive skills will help you. You will, quite simply, provide more value.

Actions & Ideas

1. Create your vision of value: What makes you valuable?

2. Use the Career Concepts Goal Sheet that you can find on the CD-ROM accompanying this book to define what you want in a career in IT.
3. Identify fears that you have with tackling an IT career. Then think of two actions to compensate each fear or anxiety. Action—with directed focus—is great at dispelling anxiety.

4. Of those reasons why IT is a great career, which appeal to you? Rank them and think about why. Do you see your reasoning changing in the next 5 to 10 years?
