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Shortage sees computer desk jobs pay as much as mining

Courtney Trenwith
August 9, 2011 - 7:13AM

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Cashed up ... the information technology industry has seen a dramatic rise in wages over the past six months.

Want to earn bucket loads of money but not keen on becoming a fly-in, fly-out worker or relocating to the middle of nowhere? Jobs in information technology have become the new cash cow with wages soaring up to 25 per cent in the past six months.

While bloated salaries have seen hoards of people migrate to mine sites in far flung places like the Pilbara and Kimberley, those au fait with computers are quietly pocketing similarly soaring wages from the comfort of their desks in metropolitan cities.

In the past six months, salaries for information technology workers have ballooned by up to 25 per cent and recruiters predict the upward pressure will only continue because fewer people are choosing computing as a career path.

It is now not unusual for university graduates to be offered up to \$80,000 for their first job, while those with only a few years experience are receiving well over \$100,000 as a project manager, according to acting head of Curtin University's School of Information Systems Peter Dell.

While the skills-shortage spotlight has been focused on roles needed to fulfil billion-dollar mining projects, it was revealed last week that the internet now accounts for a similar percentage of Australia's Gross Domestic Product as the nation's iron ore exports - about \$50 billion or 3.6 per cent of GDP, according to Deloitte Access Economics.

Thousands of Australian companies are becoming increasingly dependent on their IT staff, with the Deloitte report also showing the internet contributes \$27 billion in productivity increases to businesses and government in the form of improvements to the way they operate and deliver services.

The increasing reliance on IT skills has fuelled a massive shortfall in workers, with the Australian Computer Society, which represents ICT professionals, warning the industry will be short 25,000 people by 2020. WA recruitment company Candle says IT projects will soon be forced offshore without a major increase in workers.

Twenty one-year-old Matthew Trent is one of those who easily scored a high paying job immediately after graduating from Curtin University in 2009, working for one of the big four IT companies.

Within one year his salary had increased 26 per cent.

"The reason why I got in to [information and communication

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technology] in particular is because I identified it as an extremely high demand area ... where there would be less competition and therefore a better chance of getting a good job straight out of university," Mr Trent said.

"Also, three years ago the general consensus was that wages in the ICT industry were on the rise, similar to the current perception."

While he could have sought similar wages in mining, Mr Trent reckons his day job is far more interesting.

"Most of my friends who have gone to the mines have been doing the same job constantly, have worked longer hours than desired and have burned out and gone back to study or menial jobs, within a year or so at the most," he said.

"If you are talented you should be able to obtain similar or higher wages in the ICT industry with minimal effort in around two to three years.

"Also, technology is an enabler of such industries as mining, so even if the mining boom takes a downturn and people lose their jobs in direct mining roles, ICT professionals will always be able to transfer their skills to other industries – so the security of the industry is definitely another reason why I'd recommend it."

And recommend it he does. Mr Trent is actively encouraged to help recruit others into his company, such is the difficulty in attracting quality staff.

"It is definitely hard to employ staff, and retention is an issue as there are more job prospects and options available for people already established in the industry," he said.

WA general manager of IT recruitment company Candle, Mark Parnell, said even workers in their 60s were being lured by high salaries, opting for higher-paying contracts when traditionally they had preferred the security of a permanent role.

He said the salaries would continue to balloon for the foreseeable future, particularly as the mining industry kept fuelling demand.

"I don't think we're close to where it's really going to peak in regards to the shortage," Mr Parnell said.

"We're another six to nine months away from that because a lot of [mining] projects have been delayed. When those projects do kick off I think we'll start to see a number of [further] salary increases."

The increasing demand from the expanding mining sector was putting pressure on thousands of companies across other industries that also required such expertise, such as help desk staff and project managers.

WA state manager of IT recruitment company Finite, Kelly van Nelson, said it was taking longer to recruit appropriate employees and it was not uncommon for applicants to be offered a position only to turn it down for a better counter offer forcing the company back to the drawing board.

"We had one [company] client last year that didn't offer any bonus [but] this year they offered 17 per cent if you saw your project through [to completion]," she said. "So they're making sure they get 12 months commitment from new employees."

A contractor on \$600 per day last year recently knocked back an offer of \$1100 per day, she said. Another turned down a \$20,000 increase for an even higher offer.

Ms van Nelson said on average workers recruited through Finite had been receiving \$50-100 more per day in recent months.

"Every contractor is looking for more on every new role," she said.

Mr Parnell said it had become so difficult, non-mining companies were being forced to find alternatives to hiring skilled IT workers.

"[They're] looking at slightly less skilled or senior people and up-skilling them internally to the role in order to save on the salaries that people are looking for," Mr Parnell said.

But some up-skilled workers were then deserting their employer to accept higher wages, often in mining companies, six months later, he said.

"Companies not able to pay as much as the resources sector tend to go down the path of recruiting permanent workers rather than contract workers for that very reason," Mr Parnell said. "But



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"Companies not able to pay as much as the resources sector tend to go down the path of recruiting permanent workers rather than contract workers for that very reason," Mr Parnell said. "But it can be quite a transient sector."

Professor Dell said the problem had escalated since the dotcom crash earlier this century, followed by dramatic declines in the number of students studying IT.

The number of Australian university students studying IT has halved since the peak of 32,000 in 2002, according to the Graduate Destination Survey.

In WA, the number fell from almost 500 in 2005 to just over 200 four years later.

"The peak was the dotcom boom then there was a dotcom crash and it's just never recovered," Professor Dell said.

"The economy moved on five years ago but the students enrolling into courses never picked up again."

Mr Parnell said there was no quick fix to the shortage of IT workers, other than skilled migration. Encouraging more students to study computing would take years to have an impact, but it has not dissuaded the industry from vigorously trying to recruit potential IT students.


"IT is something that's continuing changing, it's not something that's going to fold out, it's only going to get bigger," Mr Parnell said.

"There are so many more remote capabilities now so absolutely [it will continue to grow]."

Professor Dell said demand for IT workers would remain for the foreseeable future.

"What industry doesn't rely on IT these days?" he said.

"The problem doesn't seem to be going away and the only consequence from this can possibly be that salaries keep going up."

 **Follow Courtney Trenwith on Twitter @ctrenwith**