



Tech firms hard hit by talent gap

By David Reich-Hale

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The slow economy isn't stopping Vormittag Associates' plan to double its employee count. A dearth of tech talent in the region could.

The Ronkonkoma-based software developer is actively seeking programmers for its headquarters location, said Robert Vormittag, president of VAI, which has 130 employees nationwide, including 100 on Long Island.

The firm, which has \$30 million in sales, plans to add at least 100 employees nationwide and half of the new talent is expected to focus on Java-related work, a specific programming language used to develop Web sites.

Vormittag said about 15 percent of the company's revenue is from Java programming. He expects that to hit 50 percent in five years.

"Web-based applications are a growth opportunity, that's obvious," Vormittag said. "But the talent shortage is real. In this area, younger people have an alternative. They can go to Manhattan and get higher-paying positions and live in Manhattan. Other young people choose to move to the Carolinas or somewhere else."

The company has already reached out to local colleges, including Hofstra University, Long Island University and Briarcliffe College, to tap area talent before students leave the region. VAI recently hired two interns from Stony Brook University's Center of Excellence in Wireless and Information Technology.

The agreement, in which VAI contracts with CEWIT to put students on company projects, is part of a larger internship program the center launched late last year, said Scott Passeser, director of industry outreach for CEWIT.

"The shortage is very severe and it's going to get a lot worse," Passeser said. "Nanotechnology, homeland security, biotechnology, none of these specialized areas have even spawned jobs yet. Where is the talent going to come from?"

The Department of Labor reports that the domestic technology industry will add 1 million new jobs by 2014. To fill those positions, Passeser said companies are going to cast an overseas net.

“Full enrollment in every college in the United States will bring us less than 200,000 in that time,” he said. “There’s real anguish in the industry because of this.”

Passeser said many U.S.-based companies have decided to outsource technology and engineering work to China and India, where there’s willing and less expensive talent waiting to do programming work.

The drawback, he said, was companies that outsource programming functions lose touch with the development of their own products.

That’s why Vormittag said he plans to fill his Java jobs on Long Island, not India, China or even satellite offices in Illinois, Florida or California.

“It’s not appealing to put them anywhere else because we need to be in constant contact with the Java team,” he said.

Bob Colavito, director of training at Denville, N.J.-based API Systems, said companies such as Vormittag could be forced to turn to H1B visas, which are for foreign nationals working on U.S. soil.

“Most of those jobs are exported,” Colavito said.

Barbara Viola, president of Farmingdale-based Viotech Solutions, an information technology staffing and consulting firm, said those positions could fill some of those open Long Island positions by hiring programmers with less-than-ideal Java experience.

“We’ve tried to convince clients that it’s alright to take someone who has been a programmer and train them on new technology,” Viola said. “There are a lot more companies willing to do that.”

Viola added that her firm often receives applications from neighboring New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania.

As for Vormittag, he remains optimistic.

“We’re going to continue to build this company,” he said. “We’ve done it before and we will do it again.”

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