Networking: IT training a retention issue

January 30 2006

Training and education of experienced IT professionals already established in the workforce is becoming a major concern, one certain to be on the consciousness of senior management at corporations all over the United States in the coming year, experts tell United Press International's Networking.

A survey, released last week by the Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA), a trade association for the IT industry, based in Oakbrook Terrace, Ill., in suburban Chicago, indicates that workers are taking the initiative to get the new training and skills they need for their careers, and that employers, thus far, are not providing guidance as to what skills they want for the future.

"Employers may be doing themselves a great disservice by not taking a more aggressive role in setting priorities when it comes to the continuing education and re-skilling of their IT workers," Neill Hopkins, vice president of skills development at CompTIA, said. "The cost of recruiting, hiring and training new tech workers, due to high staff turnover is significantly higher than an investment in ongoing training for employees already on the payroll."

The survey, a copy of which was provided to Networking, was based on interviews with 462 IT professionals. The majority of respondents, 85 percent, said that they determine which IT training and educational courses they need, based on their own career plans. Only 8 percent make these decisions based on specified requirements set by an employer, the survey said.

What is more, this lack of career-path planning by companies may actually be leading to turnover. The survey said that among those who are looking for new jobs, 80 percent said they hope to land a position with a new employer. That's because only 20.5 percent of those surveyed said their employer provides paid time away from the office for training and education; 88 percent of those surveyed said that they pay for all, or some, of their own training.

These workers spent an average of $2,200 per year on training, and expect to spend the same amount in the coming year, the survey said. Workers are spending about 11 hours a week on learning new technologies and skills.

"Clearly, the IT professionals we surveyed have the desire and willingness to advance their skill levels so that they can more effectively contribute to their employer's success," said Hopkins of CompTIA.

One of the major areas of concern for IT workers is learning about so-called open source technologies, according to experts. Online sites like Slashdot and SourceForge.net are at the front of a training and communications trend, as IT professionals can visit the URLs and download the latest open source codes and applications.

Other skills in need are in peering, co-location and interconnection, for Voice over Internet Protocol networking and for the Internet. Employees at a company called Switch and Data recently deployed 10 gig switches to the largest peering exchange (PAIX) in North America, located in Palo Alto, Calif. They also deployed 8 gig switches at nine other PAIX sites throughout North America, linking 330 carriers and networks together, a spokesman said.

Big growth is expected in peering and collocation and interconnection -- and skilled employees are needed to complete the work. The growth is

being driven, for the most part, by content providers, content aggregators and media companies, including Google, Yahoo!, eBay, DirecTV and others, which are looking for higher-capacity networks to ensure their customers get the best reliability and performance. The idea is to improve the customer experience of those on the Internet.

Still, Microsoft Windows -- including NT, 2000, and XP -- administration remains the technical skill set most in demand, according to another survey, this one by Robert Half Technology, based in Menlo Park, Calif., in the heart of entrepreneurial Silicon Valley.

"A key component of the technology economy is IT employment, and it's going through a major transition," a spokesman for Robert Half Technology, an IT hiring firm, told Networking. "Slowly but surely, it's turning back into a market in which the employee wields much more power -- a huge change from the last five years."

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Citation: Networking: IT training a retention issue (2006, January 30) retrieved 6 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2006-01-networking-retention-issue.html