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Can you hack IT?

Experts say fewer applicants for computing degrees, a lack of skilled professionals and recent high-profile hacking cases could lead to a serious IT skills shortage. By **Niki Chesworth**

THE IT industry needs over 100,000 new recruits this year and employment in this sector is set to grow five times faster than for the average UK industry. Such a phenomenal rate of expansion makes IT attractive to anyone looking to train, retrain or move industry.

However, it also presents challenges. For employers, there can be difficulties finding suitably talented individuals. For employees, the challenge is to acquire the right skills – and to keep them up-to-date – in an incredibly fast-moving sector.

“Employers often report gaps in the skills of their existing IT workforce as well as in new recruits, with our research showing that higher level technical and business skills are often thought to be among the most lacking,” says Karen Price, CEO of [e-skills UK](#), the sector skills council.

“We also know that cyber security is an issue facing the UK, and that employers place a premium on having IT professionals with the right security skills to protect their businesses.

“However, at the same time, many smaller IT businesses and IT professionals tell us that they often don’t know how to go about acquiring these skills, or that they’re unable to afford the cost of the training they need. For many, this has meant missing out on developing the skills they need to grow their business or advance their career.”

Recruiters and industry experts say this skills gap needs to be addressed in

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schools and colleges. Since 2002 there has been a 33 per cent reduction in applicants to computing degree

courses. In contrast, applications to other STEM courses have increased by an average of 23 per cent over a similar period.

“There is no shortage of candidates entering the workforce who are skilled at using software,” says Andy Powell, group brand and marketing director for Adecco, which has been holding a series of round table discussions as part of its campaign Unlocking Britain’s Potential.

“However, there is a worrying mismatch between this technology-savvy generation and the number of people who take IT-related courses at GCSE, A-level and degree level to acquire specialist skills. As a result, the number of candidates qualified to actually develop software is decreasing at a worrying level. This is a missed opportunity when you consider how many people are out of work.

“The business community in particular feels that there is a need for initiatives that offer young people the right training opportunities to help them move into IT roles. ICT lessons in schools teach pupils how to use

software packages but not how to develop them, and fewer young people are considering computer science as an option.”

One way to address the skills gap is to attract more women into IT.

“We do not have enough people coming into the sector and into information security roles in particular,” says Maggie Berry, MD of Women in Technology. “If I was asked, is IT an area I should be looking at in terms of jobs, I would definitely say yes. With less than 20 per cent of the IT industry made up of women, one way to address forecasts that there will be a skills shortage in future is to make sure we are inspiring girls to learn about IT.

“The difficulty with technical training

is that it is expensive, courses can cost thousands of pounds. So you have to be sure that the area you are training in is an area that you want to work in and where there are roles available.

“Another challenge of being an IT professional is keeping on top of all the new versions of software. This is a sector where development is moving at a rate of knots. That is why training programmes from employers are so appealing, particularly as the jobs we will be doing in 10 years’ time haven’t been invented yet.”

That is why, in addition to addressing the issue of IT skills within the education system, e-skills feels there should be more support to train those already in the workforce.

ACQUIRING THE RIGHT SKILLS

To help individuals and small business access to the high quality training and resources needed to keep their skills up-to-date, the UK’s National Skills

Academy for IT has recently launched a subscription service aimed at providing the sort of learning opportunities only available to big businesses.

Bringing together content from multiple sources, including online learning leader SkillSoft, the £95 a year service includes training courses for industry-recognised cyber security qualifications from leading vendors such as Cisco, ISC2 and Microsoft.

“For the first time small businesses and IT professionals can be on a level playing field with larger employers when it comes to skills development,” adds Price. “With more than 1,000 courses available, from bitesize chunks to the knowledge needed for major certifications, there is something to suit the needs of every professional.”

■ Visit [itskillsacademy.ac.uk](#) for more information



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IMPORTANT FOR EVERYONE

It is not only IT professionals who need to upskill, we all do, according to Price. "IT underpins every sector of the economy and, increasingly, every aspect of our day-to-day lives," she says. "That's why it's so important that everyone in the UK has the skills they need to make the best use of technology – from the IT professionals who drive the systems and software that form the backbone of the economy to the wider population using IT at work and in their everyday lives."

JOIN THE IT CROWD

Higher Education: study an IT-related degree such as the information technology management for business degree. Ideally one that includes a work placement such as the e-skills Internship.

Apprenticeship: a range of blue chip companies including IBM, BT, Cable & Wireless, O2, HP and Fujitsu have been working with e-skills to design apprenticeship programmes.

On-the-job training: there is a range of employer-backed qualifications including the ITQ run by e-skills, which enables employees to develop the skills more relevant for their needs. Units include IT security and IT maintenance.

■ Visit e-skills.com for information

TECHNOLOGY – JOBS OF THE FUTURE

■ The UK's IT & telecoms industry contributes nine per cent of the total UK economy.

■ One in 20 people in work is employed in IT & telecoms.

■ Exploiting the full potential of

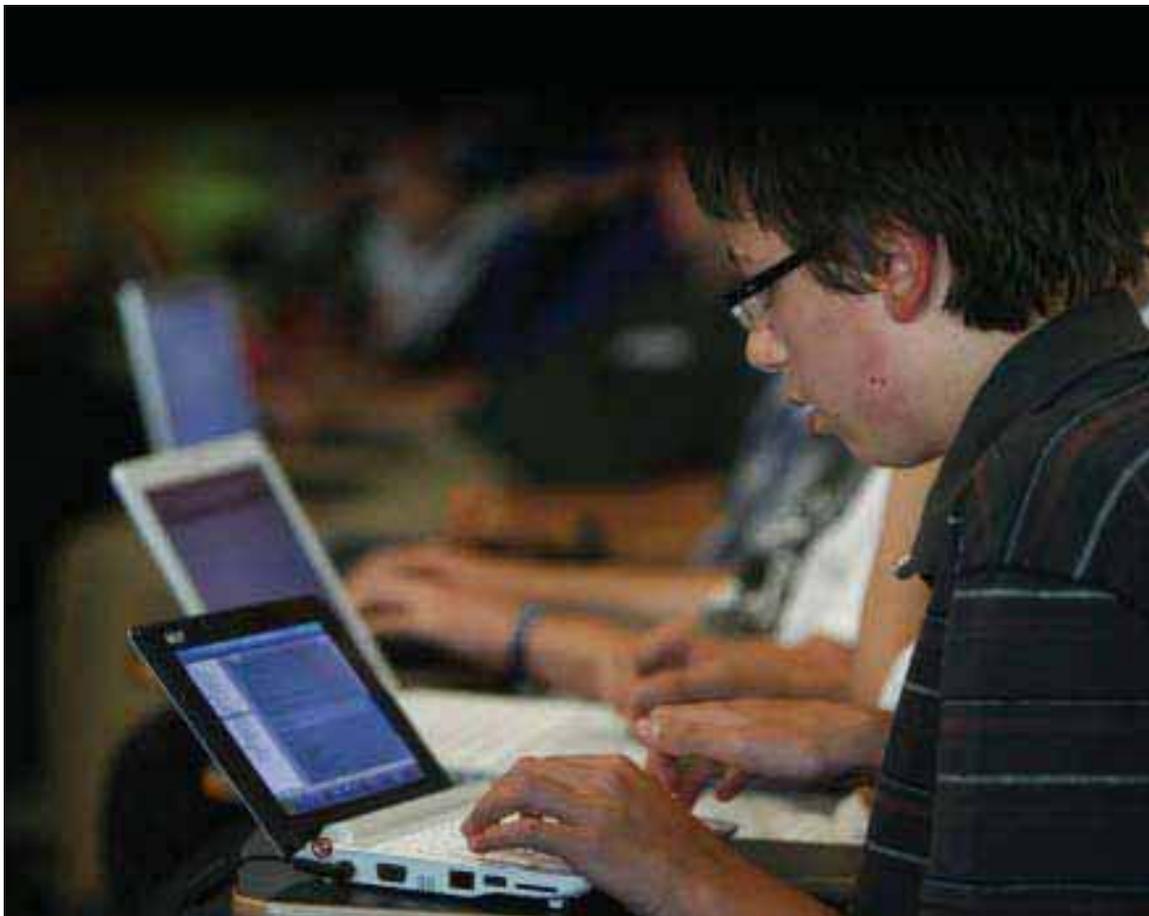
technology could boost the UK economy by an additional £50 billion over the next five to seven years.

■ Employment in the IT industry will grow nearly five times faster than the UK average over the next decade.

■ Over 500,000 new IT & telecoms professionals are needed in the next five years, working across all sectors.

■ Almost half of recruiting IT & telecoms firms report skills shortages in applicants for IT & telecoms posts.

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