

Looking for Mr./Ms. Techie

Nearly every state reports there is a scarcity of information-technology workers. As high-tech employees seek better paying and more challenging jobs, a CSG survey finds states can do more to attract and keep these highly skilled employees.

BY ED JANAIRO

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How tough is it for state agencies to recruit and retain information-technology workers? It is “an absolute, significant challenge,” said Brian Callahan, director of organization effectiveness in Delaware’s Office of Information Services.

Callahan is not alone in this sentiment. A recent Council of State Governments’ survey found that every state but one reports that their agencies are suffering from a shortage of information-technology workers.

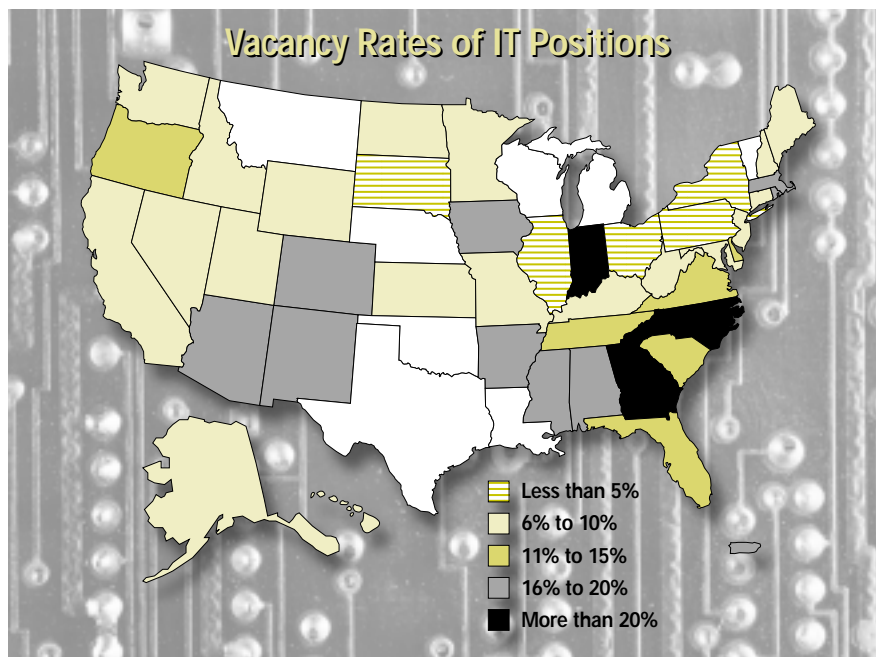
Some thought that with the new year and the end of Year 2000 preparation, programmers and analysts would become available to fill information-technology needs. But the end of Y2K was not the panacea that many hoped it would be. Jerry Simonoff, director of Virginia’s Department of Technology and Planning, said, “Finishing Year 2000 [preparation] provided a little bit of relief,

but there was still a backlog of projects." Since January, states have continued to struggle to recruit and retain IT workers.

According to CSG research, at least 20 states have more than 11 percent of their state IT positions vacant. At least 14 of the 20 have IT vacancy rates of 16 percent or greater. Not surprisingly, state information-technology administrators report

that the biggest obstacle to recruiting new IT workers is the low base salary that state agencies typically offer.

States also report a shortage of qualified workers. This is not surprising since the past decade has seen a drop in the number of students studying computer technology. This trend



started to reverse itself only recently.

In addition to these impediments, another commonly cited obstacle facing state IT recruitment efforts is the poor image of civil service in the eyes of potential candidates. Many job seekers assume that state governments are still in the Stone Age when it comes to

computer technology. They believe that state agencies do not use the newest and most glamorous technologies on the market and they turn to the private sector to find more challenges.

Because of the difficulty in recruiting information-technology workers, many state agencies have turned to outsourcing some IT functions. Outsourcing may not be such a bad idea.

There are routine, low-skilled and inexpensive functions such as data entry that are well suited for outsourcing, and short-term projects that require highly skilled and expensive IT professionals temporarily. Unfortunately, however, the CSG survey shows that many states find themselves in the position of outsourcing long-term and expensive IT functions such as database and Web site administration and systems analysis. IT workers who fill these outsourced functions are usually consultants who charge high hourly rates. Although state agencies might attempt to put these workers on permanent staff, a consultant's wage is too enticing for these skilled workers.

Recruitment is not the only difficult task. Keeping IT workers proves to be as challenging for state agencies. Eighteen states report that their IT positions have turnover rates greater than 11 percent. Ten of these states have turnover rates greater than 16 percent. States have difficulty competing with the private sector. Low salaries and insufficient reward systems are encouraging workers to leave state posts. Also, some states report that workers are leaving because they have too few high-profile projects.

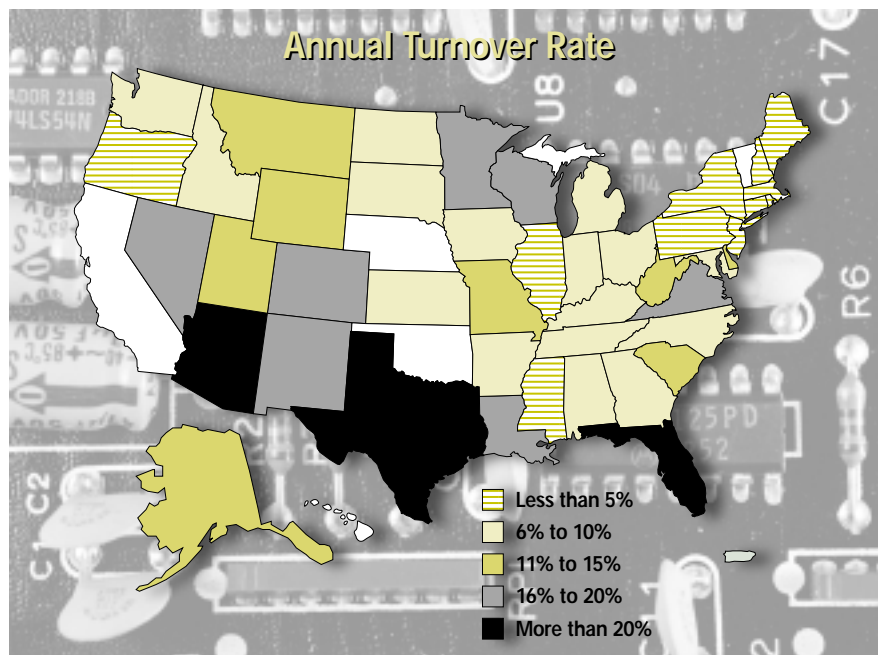
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"Fundamentally, a sound, forward-looking economy depends directly on high-tech companies, and high-tech companies demand [of a state's institutions] the same level of technology."

~ Brian Callahan, director of organization effectiveness in Delaware's Office of Information Services.

This desire for better salaries and more cutting-edge work should not be surprising, according to a recent *InformationWeek* survey. In this survey, IT workers gave the highest ranking to jobs characterized by challenge and responsibility. Workers value next highly the atmosphere of the workplace and then salary. This may be good news for states. State agencies may capitalize on the worker's desire for non-monetary benefits and states may tout the quality of the government workplace. Some states, such as Arizona, Florida and Kansas, report efforts to implement higher profile projects to retain workers. Several states have implemented telecommuting programs and flextime or alternative work schedules to enhance retention efforts. Many states are changing their workplaces to retain workers.

Indications are that these changes are starting to pay off. Mississippi, for example, has updated its classification system for IT workers and implemented higher IT salaries. Mississippi also has created a cross-agency committee of IT administrators to pool resources and plan cooperatively for recruitment and retention of IT workers. According to Mississippi's Department of Information Technology Services' *Strategic Master Plan for Information Technology*, the state has been better able to recruit new college graduates and lower the turnover rate of IT workers by raising salaries. Also, with information-technology administrators of various state agencies working cooperatively, Mississippi has decreased agency-to-agency job-hopping by IT employees.



Oregon has created a similar committee of IT administrators, the Information Systems Cooperative. Again, through the joint efforts of several agencies, Oregon has offered concentrated information-technology training programs and established more uniform compensation systems across agencies. This is expected to lower job-hopping among agencies.

Other states are beginning to implement programs to address the worker shortage. Callahan reported that Delaware's IT-21 project plans a job-rotation program that they call a "technology fellows program." This program will temporarily fill IT managerial positions with personnel from various other state agencies who have a distinguished record of project management. If, for example, an agency must implement an "enterprise resource planning" project, a successful and effective manager from another agency may head up the project. In effect, this manager would take a sabbatical from his or her regular assignment to act as a "fellow" to oversee the IT project.

The Council of State Governments' IT survey also offers further encouraging news. CSG found a correlation between changes to a state's compen-

sation system for IT workers and low turnover rates for those positions. Most states retain IT workers more successfully after making changes in compensation and classification.

The tight market for IT workers will not last forever, but there are signs that information-technology personnel will be scarce for the next several years. State agencies are working hard to overcome the difficulties of recruiting and retaining information-technology workers. States that stay on top of technology are more likely to attract industry. Callahan of Delaware said, "Fundamentally, a sound, forward-looking economy depends directly on high-tech companies, and high-tech companies demand [of a state's institutions] the same level of technology."

In the competition to keep jobs, states cannot afford to fall behind in recruiting and retaining IT workers to run government programs. ★

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CSG resources

For more, contact CSG's States Information Center at (888) 274-4742.

IPMA/NASPE Human Resource Benchmarking Project, International Personnel Management Association and the National Association of State Personnel Executives, www.ipma-hr.org.

The Digital Workforce: Building Infotech Skills at the Speed of Innovation, U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Technology Policy.