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Title:

So, You Want To Work In The IT Industry?

Word Count:

2289

Summary:

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Keywords:

Work,Job,IT,Industry,Recruitment,Microsoft,Linux,Salary.Salaries

Article Body:

So, you want to work in the IT industry? Great, good choice, salaries can become very high as you work your way up through the ranks. When you have 5 or more years in the industry you will be much sought after for your sage-like knowledge and razor-sharp skills. But, right now you need to concentrate on some of the crucial questions about which sector of the IT industry to target, what type of training to undertake, and what else you could be doing to make yourself a desirable package to a potential employer.

Let's run through a few bullet points that are the main ingredients of the answer to my first question:

Be honest, is IT really what you want to do, what inspires you and what you feel is your natural 'home', or is it a fad you picked up from someone else?

Are you excited about the challenges of working through complex, repetitive, problems with few reference points and little support?

Do you feel 'at home' sat in front of a computer using applications, or are you more comfortable connecting computers and peripherals together, and configuring operating systems and applications?

Are you inspired by the thought of managing an IT project from beginning to end, documenting every stage and reviewing and reporting each twist and turn?

Does the idea of working in a highly structured environment, with daily scrums and endless meetings turn you on?

Do you get all shivery when you contemplate sitting for hours and hours writing JAVA, VB or C++ code?

Does the idea of working for days in a freezing cold, and very noisy, server room press your buttons?

Do you get all girlie when you see the latest report from Gartner and view the Magic Quadrant for the new Hypervisor system?

If you said yes to all of the above, you are in urgent need of psychiatric help! No-one gets turned on by any of the above. It's just part of the everyday routine for those of us working in the different sectors of our industry. And that is the point I am making. IT is an industry, not a way of life. Make sure that you leave your rose-tinted specs at home when you start to contemplate a career in my industry. Keep them on, and you will be sorely disappointed.

Working in IT is like any other job. It can be exciting and energising, but most of the time is just plain boring and tedious. Just like your current job in fact. What can make it fun for more of the time is your early choices about what you intend to do and which sector you intend to make your initial home. I say initial, as you will probably move about a bit as time passes and you find your niche and the things that appeal to you.

What not to do:

Don't take any notice of IT training company claims. They're in 'selling' mode guys! They want your bum on their seats. How do I know this? I ran an IT training company for four years. They will tell you how incredibly important an MCSE is, or how useful an A+ or Server+ is. Sorry people, none of this is particularly important. Any kind of certification that is relevant is useful, but only to a very minor extent. Most recruitment companies are looking for enthusiasm and passion for IT, some experience in the technologies pertinent to the vacancy, and a CV that catches their eye. Doesn't hurt to be able to put a couple of MCPs on the CV. But if the job is working with UNIX or open-source, an MCP is hardly likely to get you noticed. Not everyone uses Microsoft products, surprisingly. Most Internet network systems are Open-Source, most heavy-weight database systems are UNIX, and most video editing and desk-top publishing is done on the Macintosh and SGI systems. Microsoft Windows may dominate the desktop, but in the big wide world of IT it has only a small percentage of the back-end server-side installations, and a very small piece of the Internet market. You need to address this issue and NOT concentrate your energies only on Windows based technologies. You may be a hot number working on your PC at home, with Windows XP Pro installed, but that is not what is required in the IT industry. No-one will be looking for a PC expert with XP experience. There are millions of them, so you are not going to make a living working with PCs or Windows at that level.

Don't take too seriously anyone who spouts techno-babble. They have probably just read an IT magazine, been to their favourite IT web site, or it's their first month working as a help-desk operator for a local call-centre, or treading the boards in PCWorld. The fact is they know 'squat' and that is exactly what you will learn from them. You don't need techno-babble, you need to listen to someone who can relay anecdotal experience and information to you. That's the best way to learn about the industry. You have to make the effort to find the information you need, as it is unlikely to suddenly appear.

Don't bother getting a part-time job shifting boxes of computers around, or humping crates for a computer auction company, or working in a retail computer shop. You'll learn nothing and probably end up with a strained back or a headache. You have to go 'industrial strength' if you want to have a well paid IT based career. If you can get a job working as an assistant to a networks engineer, or network administrator in a company with more than 5 servers, you may learn something useful.

What you can start to do:

Talk to people who are actually working in the industry and have been for more than three years. Less than three years and they are still juniors themselves and will not have been around enough to have any well formulated opinions based on fact and experience. They only 'think' they know. That's not good enough for your purposes. Someone who has worked in a few different areas and has a global view of the IT industry is much more valuable as a resource.

It's not always useful to talk to someone who has been in the same company for many years. They may be loyal workers, but their knowledge of the IT industry and technologies will be blinkered. In IT today you are expected to move on after two to three years. If you don't you will be out of touch with developments. Moores Law states that our industry goes through a technology change every eighteen months. My 'Law' says it's more likely to be nine months. Some Gartner and IDC analysts will tell you it's now down to six months.

Read the 'serious' IT magazines, not the PC Plus, or Active PC type of 'user-end' mag'. I would advise that you subscribe to Computer Weekly. It's quite clued up and the people who write articles for that magazine, tend to be the more experienced person rather than the more excited, if you see what I mean. There are some very useful web sites that you can join as a member. IT Toolbox is very good and informative, so is TechRepublic. You have to move away from the PC world of gadgets and gizmos, and into the world of serious industrial strength technologies. IT subjects, articles, and discussions can be very 'dry'. It helps you if you make an effort to research the issues that are being discussed. Get involved, some of this stuff is really quite interesting!

Get used to learning and doing in-depth research. I spend 30% of my time learning about new systems and technologies. I research them even though I may not use them. Being informed means you have something to say and you can take part in discussions with some idea of what is being discussed. Be 'wordly' about IT. You might find that there is more to IT than just machines connected with wires. IT is very, very deep and very, very wide. So, getting used to the jargon and the topics of the day are both important assets for someone wanting to be taken seriously by their industry peers.

Realise that the industry is divided into sectors: Hardware, software, design, support, administration, security, storage, Internet, object orientated and service orientated architectures. There are many sub-divisions. You will have to investigate and determine which interest you enough to want to work in that sector for years. Be sure you understand how each one works and how it interrelates to others.

Training:

Is training useful? That is difficult to say. It would depend on what you want to do in relation to the training you are or have undertaken.

I advise strongly AGAINST boot-camps. You need a very high level of knowledge to get anything useful from a 12 hour-a-day cram session. Boot-camps can be productive for people in the industry who want a quick hyperdermic-full of hot knowledge. But for the beginner, not a useful experience. Getting any kind of certification from such places is like collecting waste paper. No substance, all rubbish. You won't actually learn anything useful, you will just get crammed full of disjointed facts and figures. Making sense of them, or trying to apply them is pointless. If you get a certificate, well done. Now bin it, as you have nothing to back it up with. Any astute interviewer is going to know that within 5 minutes of technical questioning.

Don't waste your time and money embarking on a long and expensive training binge. It's true, some folk become training junkies. They don't feel fulfilled unless they have signed up for another obscure course that promises a job and a certificate.

If you decide to do a training course make sure that:

it is relevant to your target sector

has a practical and hands-on approach

is an accredited company (accredited to whichever vendor technology you are addressing)

the training company has been in business for at least three years

you can talk to someone who has completed a course with your chosen training company

you can visit, look around, sit in on a class and talk to the trainer/s

the course doesn't last for more than three weeks each session

the course is over in less than six weeks (courses that last for 5 years are not serious)

the course is not run by your local college of FE (they don't have the industry expertise)

course is NOT correspondence based (these courses are useless � take too long � no industry expertise available � support is intermittent)

there is after-care and a possible job placement (make sure the job placement is relevant)

the certification is internationally recognised by the IT industry (not just the training company's own certificate)

you have the basic technologies under your belt before you start the course

Quite a lot to think about isn't there? But it is crucial that you do the thinking as an informed choice is, usually, a logical and productive choice.

What about University IT degrees? Teaching is usually academic, rather than hands-on. Most Universities and colleges do not have the cash to install racks of expensive servers, Fibre Channel, other technology boxes and so forth. Neither do they have the skilled and experienced teachers. University IT courses are more suited to those who are aiming for a career in Project Management, Business Impact Analyses or some such managerial practice. If you want to go the University route, make sure that the course is relevant to your needs, has appropriate funding, has the ability to interface with the IT industry and that the tutors have a solid IT systems engineering background, or at least ten years as a Project Manager in a FTSE 100 or Fortune 500 IT company. IT is not algebra. If the tutor rides a bike and has a pony-tail, think seriously about your position.

What can you do before you start your course, or apply for your first IT job?

Get as much hands-on experience as you can, with servers. Workstations are not really important. Everyone uses one and most companies are only interested in data storage, transmission, security and so forth. The PC/Workstation is considered to be a mere terminal that is easily replaced and a not very important part of the infrastructure. Rolling out desktop operating systems is usually automated and centralised. It's unlikely that you will ever use the experience you gained at home installing and configuring your PC.

If you can build a small network at home, which includes at least one server, then you have the opportunity to simulate a corporate network. The principles and protocols you will use to build this network are exactly the same as those you will use to build a corporate network. The differences will lie in methodology and costs. By designing and building your own network you will gain very useful experience and skills that will supplement any certification training course you might attend. It's these skills and knowledge that matter. Always remember that certification is a means to an end, not the end in itself. There is NO replacement for experience.

If you would like to ask a question, get further help and advice, ask about industry and technical matters, please visit my web site www.1techguy.com. It contains much that will be of use to you during the early stages of your career. Everything is free, so it will provide you with a useful resource.

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