

Confused About Careers? Ask Jack



ACM's career consultant, Jack Wilson, answers questions from students about their forthcoming careers in computing and information technology.

Q: In terms of my future career, what is the value of having a Master's degree?

A: In starting your career and seeking your first job in business or industry, the Master's degree will make you somewhat more competitive, and even at the entry level, should command an additional increment of salary over a BS only. There is a point beyond which though, your years of work experience will eclipse the value of almost any degree, including a Master's. In deciding whether to pursue a further degree, you need to weigh the cost and time required against your job prospects otherwise.

This is a good question to be asking interviewers during campus visits or job fairs, to see what worth their particular company places on it. Typically, those that attach a high value will have programs that sponsor or support your continued education toward an advanced degree after joining the company.

Q: I am about to graduate with an MSCS and have been offered a three-month contract programming job at \$25/hour, which the recruiter says is equivalent to a full-time salary in the high 40's. How can I make a realistic comparison between this hourly rate and a salary?

A: To keep the math simple, let's assume that out of 260 potential workdays in a year (5 days * 52 weeks), you will work 240, with 20 days of holiday/vacation. Assuming further that each workday is eight hours, you would be earning \$200 per day; thus, totaling \$48,000 per year. So the recruiter is right. Right? Wrong!

Hardly any self-employed person can be 100% productive in doing billable work, especially when first starting out. To achieve that would mean no down time, no time for nonbillable activity, such as marketing, education, research, professional development, etc. As an independent consultant, I target a 50% rate, which means one day of business development for every day of billable work. If you used this same 50% rate at \$25/hour, your equivalent salary would be more like \$24,000. There are other considerations (e.g., taxes) too complicated to go into here, but I would guess that as a contract programmer, you could achieve about 75%, which means three-months of billing out of every four-month period, roughly equivalent to a salary of \$36,000.

Q: How important is it to include my part-time work in my resume?

A: Very important, especially in today's business environment, and the more relevant the work is to your objective, the more impact it will have. Employers are increasingly interested in evidence of your experience -- part-time, summer, internships, co-ops -- and what you have accomplished in the world of work. This is not to say that such factors as quality of your school or program, degrees, GPA, class standing, coursework, etc., are not important. They are, but when you are competing for employment with other great students from good schools, with good grades and skills, your relevant work experience can make a big difference.

Q: Would you please give me a critique of my resume?

A: Yes, if you are an ACM member. In fact we are looking for sample resumes that we can post on the CareerLine Web page with annotations indicating some ``dos" and ``don'ts" for the benefit of all student members. We will of course remove your name and address to preserve your privacy. If you are interested, please mail a hard copy, along with your ACM Member number and your permission to post an anonymous version of your resume, to:
Career Sciences, 100 Mill Plain Road, 3rd Floor, Danbury, CT 06811.

NOTE: This service is no longer being provided as of January 31, 2000.

Ask Jack in Person at Computing Week '96

Jack Wilson will conduct a series of free Career Workshops and Resume Clinics at CW96, February 16-18 1996, in Philadelphia. Those participants with specific resume and career questions can sign up at the Workshop for a 15-minute, one-on-one Resume Clinic session. For exact schedules of the career clinics and workshops see the ACM Computing Week Advance Program.

Site Visits Planned to Philadelphia Area Computing Industries

Several excursions are being planned to companies in the Philadelphia region for which computing is a substantial activity. These half-day trips will involve tours of facilities and presentations by technical and human resources personnel of each corporation visited. All trips will leave from the Philadelphia Marriott hotel (home site of CW 96). All trips are free to student registrants for Computing Week as well as full registrants for any of the four Computing Week conferences.