What Ever Happened to the Sexiest Job of the 21st Century?

Do a search for “data scientist” on LinkedIn, and you might be surprised to see how many of these pros have “seeking new position” headlining their profile.

There certainly appear to be a large number of between-job data scientists right now. That might lead one to assume they are no longer in the “sexiest job of the 21st Century,” as the headlines heralded a few years ago.

Technical recruiters argue it isn't a case of data scientists being less valuable.

Sure, the coronavirus has a lot to do with larger unemployment numbers. But the reality of some data scientists being between gigs can also be a reflection of organization's poor understanding of the role of data science, and the subsequent ineffective use of those in the role.

“I would consider the data scientist to be a misunderstood job,” said Kate Cascaden, executive team lead and a technical recruiter focused on data scientists and data engineers at Jobspring Partners in Philadelphia. “Coding languages are sexy, data principles are interesting and intriguing, and they will absolutely affect the way technology is developed in the future. But it is also a market that is not fully understood by many organizations.”

Where the Most Data Science Jobs Are

Perhaps the best job market right now for data scientists is at “smaller companies who are starting to put their toe in the water and see how data scientists can improve their organizations,” said Joshua Crawford, a data science, data engineering and artificial intelligence recruiter and the managing director at Proprius Search in Baton Rouge, La., and the managing director of Get Hired Secrets, a company established to provide training for candidates looking to find their dream jobs. “These companies typically offer great growth opportunities and give the data scientist a lot of freedom with new projects.”

That said, healthcare, research institutions, bio pharmacy firms and ecommerce organizations are among the “hot” industries for data science jobs, recruiters said.

But Crawford echoed Cascaden's warning that many firms don’t really understand why they hire data scientists in the first place.

“I would caution data scientists considering making a move to these smaller companies,” Crawford said. “Too many times we have seen companies who hire a data scientist and have no idea what to do with them. They give them a computer and a desk, and tell them to get to work pulling data. That is the worst thing that can happen. For a data scientist to be truly effective, they need a seat at the table so they can better understand the needs of the organization and the freedom to discover how they can best help the organization. The more descriptive the organization can be regarding their wants and expectations, the more the data scientist can deliver.”

You Can’t Fake Sexy

Many might argue that you can’t fake sexy. Either you are or you aren’t — you have it, or you don’t. And even if some organizations don’t quite know how to best tap the talent of their data scientists, if those professionals are the “real deal,” that appeal can’t be denied.

“Data scientist is still the sexiest job of the 21st Century,” insisted Crawford. “The professionals in this field are absolutely amazing and extremely intelligent. In what other field can you be part detective, part innovator, and, depending on who you work for, part international spy.”

“The technology these professionals are actively developing continues to better the lives of all globally,” Crawford continued. “From the small manufacturer who is now using data to become more efficient, to the behemoths like Google, Walmart and Amazon, data scientists are changing the way we live and conduct business. For example, big data improves manufacturing by allowing companies to meet the demands of consumers in real time, which in turn improves profits, which trickle back into the economy through higher wages, better insurance and other benefits. Not to mention, the efficiencies developed by data scientists are improving quality of products, reducing waste and improving the environment.”

Growth Demand Will Favor Data Scientists

So, should we still be calling the data scientist the sexiest job out there?

“I would say ‘yes,’ but it depends on how and why you are using it,” said Frazer Spackman, a data science recruiter at Huxley Associates in Boston. “If you are working for a business where data science is integral to the business product, vision and success, then this statement is true. But a lot of companies are misrepresenting ‘data science’ when really they are looking for data analysts, data engineers or business intelligence analysts, in which case, the statement above doesn’t apply.”

But as more organizations attempt to find their “new normal” and growth becomes paramount, the role of the data scientist will become more critical, all sources interviewed for this article agreed.

“Data architects are becoming very much in demand due to the sheer volume of data that companies are processing. I don’t think any data science role is declining in favor,” said Justin Zhen, co-founder of Thinknum Alternative Data in New York.

Crawford is even more upbeat on the demand for data scientists, both now and over the next two or three years.

“I only see the demand for data scientists continue to grow for the foreseeable future,” said Crawford. “Artificial intelligence is everywhere and as the industry continues to become more mature and defined, it will be interesting to see what sectors will benefit most from it.”

Regardless of which industry a data scientist works in, there are certain skills and traits that will separate the top workers from the rest.

“I believe strong engineering skills will be important — being able to not research and design algorithms, but also be able to implement and productize them,” Spackman said. “Exposure to cloud technologies will also be important.”

Equally important, “data scientists are also expected to be more and more business-facing, so skill sets such as communication skills and business acumen are critical,” Spackman stressed.