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Streaming Services Compete for Tech Workers

The industry is booming, and that's good news for people with a range of tech skills



The “Game of Thrones” finale showed the complexity of streaming video, watched by millions on more than 20 types of devices.
PHOTO: HBO

By Sarah E. Needleman

Oct. 23, 2019 10:30 am ET

Streaming video services are in fierce competition for more than just eyeballs. They also are fighting for software engineers, data scientists and other tech professionals at a time when joblessness in the U.S., especially for computer-related work, is historically low.

Fortune 500 companies such as Apple Inc., Walt Disney Co. [DIS -0.96% ▼](#) and AT&T Inc., [T -1.13% ▼](#) and startups like Quibi Holdings LLC are aggressively hiring to challenge incumbents Netflix Inc. and Hulu Inc. Businesses that create and manage streaming apps on behalf of third parties are also scrambling to hire tech talent.

“If you really understand streaming video, you can kind of write your own ticket,” says Jeremy Legg, technology chief of AT&T’s WarnerMedia, whose streaming properties include HBO Go, HBO Now and the forthcoming HBO Max. “There is a shortage of these people.”

Companies and recruiters say they are racing to find folks to handle a range of tasks, including building apps, developing back-end payment systems, analyzing user data, and writing algorithms for personalized content recommendations.

Yet these firms are competing for workers during one of the tightest labor markets in decades. The U.S. unemployment rate dropped to 3.5% in September, the lowest level since December 1969, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unemployment in computer and mathematical occupations—an indicator of tech-sector employment—reached a 20-year low in May at 1.3% and was 2.4% in September.

Those figures underscore the challenges that employers face in hiring, says Ryan Sutton, an executive at recruitment firm Robert Half International Inc. [RHI -0.11% ▼](#) “This is literally the peak of competitiveness,” he says.

Demand for movies and shows at any time online has prompted companies to rethink how they bundle access to libraries of older works in addition to new, original programming.

Apple TV+ and Disney+ are launching in November, while Peacock, a streaming platform being developed by Comcast Corp. ’s NBCUniversal unit, HBO Max and Quibi are set to make their debuts next year. They’re competing against industry leaders Netflix and Hulu, as well as YouTube, part of Alphabet Inc. [GOOG 1.31% ▲](#) ’s Google, Amazon.com Inc. [AMZN -0.20% ▼](#) ’s Prime Video and others in seeking to stream entertaining content without any hiccups and in ways that will keep subscribers hooked.

Netflix’s streaming technology, as well as heavy investments in content, have helped the Los Gatos, Calif., company amass 158.3 million world-wide subscribers, more than double the amount it had four years ago. Disney-controlled Hulu reported in May that it had 28 million subscribers, up from more than 25 million at the end of 2018 and roughly 17 million at the end of 2017.

To illustrate the complex nature of streaming video, WarnerMedia's Mr. Legg points to an evening last May when roughly 4.6 million people simultaneously watched the finale of "Game of Thrones" across more than 20 types of devices ranging from tablets to big-screen TVs. He nervously watched, hoping that viewers didn't experience glitches or other problems in the video stream.

"You can generate and build excitement around the programming, but you have to have tech infrastructure to support a large number of consumers," he says. The competition for talent is so stiff, Mr. Legg says, that WarnerMedia has recruited entire teams of data scientists and people from outside of entertainment, such as the airline industry.

Netflix is sometimes filling vacancies in just a matter of days because so many job candidates have multiple offers in hand, says Lauren Frank, who oversees tech-related recruiting for the company. "We can pull out all the stops to move fast," she says. Netflix currently is looking to fill about 200 tech positions, mostly in California's Bay Area, she says.

On the hunt for workers, companies lean on employee referrals, attend job fairs and scour websites like Microsoft Corp. 's LinkedIn for prospects. Some also work with staffing firms.

Shaun Newsum sees the demand for tech gurus from both sides of the fence. The 37-year-old software developer is technology chief at Culture Genesis, a firm he co-founded last year that provides live, interactive streaming services for media companies. So far he has hired six people for the Santa Monica, Calif.-based startup by tapping his personal network. At the same time, he says he has fielded as many as two to three messages a week from recruiters using LinkedIn to try to fill streaming positions.

“I’ve always got people reaching out,” says Mr. Newsum, who cut his teeth in streaming about a decade ago working for MLB Advanced Media, Major League Baseball’s technology arm and an early entrant in video streaming. “But it’s definitely increased a lot more now that the streaming wars are heating up.”

Los Angeles-based Quibi, a larger startup that is developing a mobile video-streaming platform, has hired roughly 185 people in the past year, mostly tech professionals, says Meg Whitman, who leads the firm founded by Hollywood mogul Jeffrey Katzenberg. Ms. Whitman, who previously was CEO of Hewlett Packard Enterprise Co. and eBay Inc., says Quibi has about 28 tech openings. Her pitch to potential recruits: “We offer the chance to join a new company investing in the future of mobile entertainment.”

Hulu, founded in 2007, employs about 900 tech professionals and has openings for 70 more, says Shannon Sullivan, a senior vice president who oversees human resources at the Los Angeles-based company. To appeal to candidates, Ms. Sullivan says Hulu offers benefits such as help with student-loan debt, extensive parental leave and child-care support. “Companies have to differentiate themselves,” she says.

Perks that other streaming services are dangling include options to work remotely and invites to movie and television-show premieres, executives and recruiters say.

At streaming companies, base salaries for senior tech jobs tend to be 10% to 15% higher than they are for similar jobs in industries such as banking and health care, according to David Perry, an executive recruiter based in Ottawa. “If the service does well, you can get a great bonus at the end of the year,” he says.

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