

Information Technology

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IF YOU'VE DECIDED THAT THE INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND ELECTRONICS (ICTE) INDUSTRY IS WHERE YOU WANT TO WORK, YOU'LL BE GLAD TO KNOW THAT SOUTH AFRICA IS IN DIRE NEED OF PEOPLE QUALIFIED IN THESE FIELDS. ACCORDING TO BEVERLY SOLLINGER, DIRECTOR OF SPECIALIST IT RECRUITMENT COMPANY, DATAFIN (WWW.DATAFIN.COM), 'THERE'S A HUGE DEMAND FOR CANDIDATES, AND A SHORTAGE OF SUPPLY'. IN OTHER WORDS, GRADUATES WITH QUALIFICATIONS IN ICTE ARE ALMOST SURE TO FIND EMPLOYMENT, AND THERE ARE MANY SPECIFIC AREAS OF IT-RELATED WORK TO CHOOSE FROM.

Career opportunities

Sollinger observes that programmers are in greatest need, especially .Net developers. 'Clients phone every day asking for them,' she says. 'They will get placed. On the networking side, Linux skills are also in great demand.' In terms of development positions, more open source technicians and people with PHP skills are needed.

Sonja Durant, managing director of The IT Department, a company specialising in meeting the IT requirements of small businesses, points out that there is also a shortage of field technicians, saying, 'Currently, with the economy so strong, more businesses have capital to invest in their IT, so demand in the industry is really taking off.'

Durant also recommends the Microsoft-certified MCP and MCSE qualifications (available at various technikons), and both agree that experience is a big plus. 'I suggest students do anything to get some commercial experience under their belts,' says Sollinger, 'even if it's at a low rate, working for free on developing or networking for their friends.'

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She admits though, that given the severity of the current skills shortage, any graduates with a computer science degree will find employment, even without much experience. And, conversely, she says that, 'for some companies, experience counts more than a degree or diploma, and they would rather employ someone with two years of hands-on experience in working on large projects, regardless of whether or not the candidate has studied for an IT qualification.'

Remember that many employers will remunerate according to experience, so the more you can list, the better, and the wider your understanding of technologies, the more doors will open to you. In other words, if possible, don't limit yourself to one particular technology but learn about as many as possible.

BEE and transformation are key issues in the traditionally white-dominated, male-led ICTe sector at the moment, and black female candidates in particular are in very high demand and can command high salaries.

In terms of personality

The ICTe industry offers numerous different types of jobs, and each requires specific character traits, but Durant believes that an ability to problem-solve is necessary across the board, as are flexibility and the ability to adapt. She also observes that self-starters that take initiative and get on with the job will do well. She points out that if you are working on the customer service side of the industry, you should be prepared to work long hours when necessary.

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She admits that salaries have risen impressively 'over the past two years in line with increased demand. Sollinger notes that one of the reasons behind the skills shortage in the industry is that South African ICTe skills are being lost to offshore markets as South African IT becomes more competitive on a global level, although many people do return to South Africa after working abroad, bringing their newly acquired skills with them.

Other ICTe-related professions include project managing, business analysis, system administration, java development, quality assurance and many more.

Choosing a course of study

Sollinger says that in the past, those looking for positions in IT could find a job easily without having studied any particular qualification. Today, that has changed somewhat, and she recommends that candidates have at least a National Diploma (available from a technikon or through reputable training colleges). Many of her clients expect prospective employees to hold a degree (a B.Sc. in information science, a B.Com. or similar). Linux qualifications are also a plus.

Pros

- The technical arena in South Africa continues to grow and expand, as every company begins to rely on IT and automated systems. The sector is booming and IT qualifications are in short supply, so qualified candidates stand a good chance of finding employment.
- South African ICTe is seen as the leader in Africa, and international companies are beginning to realise that the level of technical skills in the country is high, and to outsource work to South African companies. Those in the field therefore have the opportunity for international exposure.
- The ICTe industry is fast-paced and exciting, providing ample opportunities for growth and career advancement.
- Employers are struggling to retain staff and as a result are offering more attractive remuneration packages in an attempt to address this.

Cons

- While communication skills have in the past not been viewed as important in ICTe jobs, this is changing. IT people, especially those working as field technicians or liaising with clients in any way, need to ensure that they harness people skills as well as their technical abilities.
- ICTe is an ever-changing industry. Its fast pace makes it a stressful working environment at times and flexibility is a must.
- Technology skills are less highly remunerated with age. In other words, once 'techies' reach the age of 35 or 40, they need to move into project management or general management to avoid reaching a ceiling.
- It seems to be the trend within the ICTe industry for employees to move on after a relatively short period (18 months to two years), looking for a new challenge or exposure to different technology. If you're looking for a company where you can get comfortable and hang around for years, this is not the right industry for you.

Sollinger again highlights the importance of developing good communication skills, and adds that accuracy and attention to detail are also important qualities to have. Graduates wishing to work

in the ICTe sector will also need to be willing to learn, be able to analyse problems and situations, generate their own ideas, and be enquiring and assertive.

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Beverley Sollinger is director of DataFin Recruitment, a company that covers all aspects of recruitment within the information technology industry with a principal focus on the areas of IT, finance and engineering.