

Techie drought hits South Florida

BY SCOTT ANDRON

Thursday, March 6, 2008 - MiamiHerald.com

Most South Florida technology executives think the state is doing a poor or average job of producing qualified technology workers, says a new survey by a local employee-recruitment firm.

The survey comes after last week's news that Citrix Systems, a prominent software firm based in Fort Lauderdale, is considering moving at least some of its employees out of state, in part because recruiting here has been difficult.

So, does all this mean that South Florida has a shortage of qualified computer specialists? The answer depends on whom you ask and what kinds of jobs they need to fill.

"This is something we hear from small companies, medium companies and larger companies across the state," said Maryann Fiala, executive director of the Florida branch of the American Electronics Association.

She said she knows of three South Florida companies that recently decided to leave the state for lack of qualified workers, although she declined to name them.

Reasons for the local tech-worker shortage include:

- A national shortage. Too few students are studying science, technology, engineering and math.
- Lack of critical mass. Tech workers often feel that they have more job choices if they move to places with larger concentrations of tech companies, such as the Atlanta area or North Carolina's Research Triangle.

"If the job at Citrix or wherever doesn't work out, it's not like they can go up the street and get another job, because there aren't that many companies using those skills," said Jane Teague, executive director of the Enterprise Development Corp. of South Florida, a nonprofit Boca Raton group that helps new technology businesses get started.

- Education. Florida is still widely perceived as a state with a population similar to New York's and an educational system similar in quality to Mississippi's. Not only does the state lack adequate funding to train future computer whizzes, industry advocates say, but its schools also scare off veteran out-of-state tech workers, who tend to think that if they moved here, they would have to send their children to private school.

"When people pick up the paper and see there's a big debate going on about the teaching of evolution, if you're a tech executive and you see that, you think maybe their science standards aren't up to par," said Fiala, of the electronics association. "They don't want to put their children in the Florida school system."

Meanwhile, in an effort to balance this year's budget in a sluggish economy, Florida lawmakers are now preparing to cut more than \$350 million from schools, forcing layoffs in some districts before the end of the school year.

Frank Nero, chief executive officer of Miami-Dade County's economic development agency, the Beacon Council, worries that the Legislature needs to spend more on schools to diversify the economy beyond tourism and agriculture.

"The state can't continue to cut back on spending for education at local, postsecondary and graduate levels and hope to have a skilled workforce in South Florida," Nero said via e-mail from a business-recruiting mission in Spain.

"Education and a skilled workforce go hand-in-hand," he wrote. "Without it, we will be relegated to low-paying jobs because, without the knowledge, we can't recruit and retain knowledge-based industries."

But the extent of the personnel shortage varies from company to company, and governmental, educational and business leaders interviewed did not agree on some details of what's wrong.

M. Lewis Temares, vice president and chief information officer at the University of Miami, said Florida colleges produce plenty of newly minted computer specialists. The problem, he said, is that many companies don't want to hire young workers fresh out of college.

As a result, Temares said, many graduates of UM, Florida International University and the University of Florida have to move to Atlanta or North Carolina to find work, even as local companies complain of a personnel shortage.

Deborah Vazquez, CEO of the recruitment company whose survey found so much dissatisfaction with Florida's production of tech professionals, agreed. "We don't necessarily do a bad job of producing tech talent," said Vazquez, founder of Fort Lauderdale-based ProTech. "We do a bad job keeping them here.

" Temares, a former dean of UM's College of Engineering, said the solution is for Florida companies to take interns from Florida schools, then hire them and train them after college. "I don't know why the people that complain do not offer internships," he said.

"They don't want to spend their time growing their own. You get these kids in there, and they learn fast. But somebody's got to mentor them."

Such an approach has worked well for Terremark Worldwide, a Miami-based company that provides computer-server hosting and related services to businesses and government agencies.

The company has internship programs with area colleges and universities and often hires interns after they graduate, said Diana Montenegro, Terremark's vice president for human resources.

"We are not running into any recruitment issues," Montenegro said.

The state economic development agency, Enterprise Florida, has designated information technology as a targeted industry, making companies eligible for tax rebates if they move here from elsewhere.

Nevertheless, 58 percent of respondents to ProTech's survey characterized state and local governments' commitment to developing the technology sector as "weak."

"Florida started as a beachfront retirement community, and a lot of the mentality is still that way," said ProTech's Vazquez. "I just don't think the government views high tech as a priority. It's something that's discussed quite a bit, but actions speak louder than words."

Fiala, of the electronics association, said she would like to see the state specifically target corporate headquarters, which can have the most impact on the community, and come up with creative ways to keep computer science graduates in state, perhaps by offering student-loan forgiveness if they work here for five years.

"Relying on tourism and agriculture is not a plan for developing a 21st century economy," she said. "You need diversification."