

Only the ones who are left don't do it for the money

I notice that the number of voices commenting on the looming skills crisis in IT is picking up at last. Just under two years ago, I wrote an article in this magazine warning people of what was already obvious then. There has been a dramatic fall in university entrants into IT. It has been going on now for several years and it may only just be flattening out. It is not just IT, other scientific subjects are similarly affected.

Many theories are expounded to explain this. Some suggest that modern students think that these subjects are 'too hard'. I hope I'm not alone in thinking this to be nonsense. Others argue that the dumbing down of science for example as shown by numerous moronic television science programs has caused technology generally to lose its appeal. I have some sympathy with this as far too many seem to feature big rumblings in the background and present disaster scenarios. Regrettably the media consider 'news' to be synonymous with 'interesting'. Others again argue that the academic content is out of phase with the needs of society and yet others feel that we don't make IT and science interesting enough for youngsters and propose all sorts of competitions and initiatives to involve them early. This is all very laudable but ultimately doomed to fail so let me give you a different perspective; money.

Throughout my whole career in the UK, scientists, engineers and IT people have often been underpaid compared to other professions. My first real job was as a scientific civil servant. I was just 25 with a nice shiny Ph.D, a highly trained mathematician and programmer. In spite of this, the scientific civil servants were all paid at one grade less than the administrative civil servants of equivalent academic qualification. It was quite deliberate and impossible to fight so I voted with my feet. Some years later in idle conversation with the chairman of a well-known British company, he told me that their profits were created by "housing scientists in Nissen huts and paying them peanuts." Quite.

Let's consider three other factors. First, university fees may well double again in the near future making the average debt on graduation in the UK around 30,000 pounds. Second, the Orient produces enormous numbers of science and IT graduates currently prepared to work for peanuts. For example, a few years ago, my company was offered an outsourcing package in Pakistan of 10 MSc or PhD engineers, an accountant and a manager including premises for less than 75,000 pounds per year. I was sorely tempted. Third, today's youngsters are just as smart as my generation but I suspect more financially savvy. They are simply not going to work in an area which is habitually undervalued and underpaid however 'exciting' we make it. Even now when an IT person gets really experienced, in order to get paid better they have to move into management where their expensive skills are largely lost, a known destabilising factor in system quality.

It is often stated that they don't do it for the money. It would be far more accurate to state that the ones who are left don't do it for the money. If we are genuinely worried about the shortage, then we are just going to have to pay them more.

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