

The IT training question: degree or not degree?

IT staff are finding it hard to know which skills they need to have and how best to acquire them

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Despite an apparent industry-wide skills shortage, many IT graduates and workers can find it difficult to determine which are the most in-demand technology roles, and whether it is better to gain on-the-job training or industry/vendor certifications rather than follow a broader IT degree course to advance their careers.

Gaining an IT degree might not be the best option for a student interested in a technology career, according to a new study from [IT skills body E-Skills UK](#). It found that over half of IT chiefs do not consider IT degrees to be important for graduate recruits taking up telecoms and technology positions.

Julian Divett, chief operating officer of [IT recruitment specialist FDM](#), said that even the best graduates are finding it increasingly difficult to find employment. "Finding a job is a lot harder than they are led to believe," he explained. "We have spoken to our clients about it, and they say that students just do not have the skills that they are looking for."

One recent graduate struggling to find employment is Shane O'Neill, who is currently studying Java and .Net development with FDM.

"I had a nasty shock when I graduated," O'Neill explained. "I achieved an IT MSc and thought that this would give me the edge over other job-seekers. Despite this, I found it impossible to get a job in IT. I ended up working on a production line in a baby food factory."

O'Neill argued that there is no real substitute for experience. "Universities set you up for a massive fall. IT graduates are in a Catch-22 situation," he warned. "We can't get our first job without experience and we can't get experience unless someone gives us a chance. If I had known what the job market was like, I would have opted for a sandwich course. I also think that the introduction of apprenticeship schemes would be really valuable to the IT sector."

Divett said the easiest graduates to place are those who can perform more than just a "pure techie" role. "Firms don't want someone sitting programming in Cobol with very little communication with their co-workers," he explained.

Divett added that back-office roles, such as coding or maintaining print and server networks, are being outsourced because they are essentially simple functions that do not need to be performed in-house. "What employers want is small developer teams who work alongside the end-users," he argued. "[This means] soft skills that are aligned with techie skills are very much in demand."

A survey carried out by FDM highlighted a lack of business skills in IT candidates, however. Eighty-three percent of HR managers interviewed said that IT candidates needed additional training in communications skills, management ability and general business awareness.

"Unfortunately, IT is not taught very well, so graduates do not have a role model that they can learn from and relate to," Divett argued. "We have hired

people with soft skills training who work with our [jobseekers] to improve their communication and interview skills, and this has helped.”

The shift in employer demands has occurred over the past couple of years, as has an increasing interest in finding staff who have experience of working in particular industries, such as finance or banking.

“[Industry] experience counts for much more than qualifications,” Divett explained. “In IT, you see patterns for investment, and when the brakes come off the budget you have to move quickly, you don’t want to have to skill someone up. As a result, employers will choose to pay for experience, rather than for training.”

Nearly three-quarters of HR managers surveyed by FDM said they preferred to see proven IT work experience on a candidate’s CV rather than a technology degree or similar qualification. Time spent in IT employment was also more important than key programming and technical skills.

Martin Smith, co-founder and joint managing director at [IT recruitment specialist GCS](#), said that graduates with specific industry skills, such as knowledge management, are proving popular.

“Right now anything to do with BI [business intelligence] is hot,” Smith argued. “Companies are still trying to make the best use of the data they have – it is disparate and comes from all sorts of sources. The value that can be gleaned from BI means that it should be a big module in any IT degree. It is a major area that can provide a very big return on investment.”

However, Smith added that IT is simply the “deliverer” of BI. “It is wrong to assume that just because this data is held within IT systems, you need an IT manager to deal with it. Firms will need to use a knowledge management director instead,” he advised.

Web services is another area that IT degrees should focus on, according to Smith. “It is no longer about making the decision of whether to have or not have a web services architecture. Enterprises have them, or know that they need them. This will mean a diminishing use of legacy systems,” he argued.

FDM’s Divett agreed that degrees in computing should be modernised to reflect current business needs. “University qualifications are not very hands-on. It is rare to find a university that offers training in BI,” he said. “They rarely have the best skills at their disposal and most lecturers are out of date with technology, and because of this, courses are five- to 10-years-old in terms of their skillsets.”

However, Divett conceded that IT qualifications are still important. “Entry-level jobs tend to be those in IT support, networking and support roles. But people come to us having done that, and they feel stuck in a rut. A helpdesk role is possibly not the best route of entry into a rewarding career in IT,” he advised.

Vendor skills can also play an important role when it comes to hiring, Divett added. “Some qualifications have more kudos than others, such as those offered by firms with strong accreditation like Sun or Microsoft, but other skills come and go,” he said. “A specific regulatory knowledge can create a mad rush that appears and then disappears overnight.”

Andrew McGettrick, vice-chair for qualifications and standards at the [British Computer Society \(BCS\)](#), pointed students towards schemes such as the BCS’s ISEB exams to boost their skills. He also argued that achieving [Chartered IT Professional \(CITP\)](#) status can help students and workers keep up to date with emerging technologies. “To be truly effective, IT professionals need to have an

understanding of application domains, and often that understanding needs to be deep," he added.

Nevertheless, McGettrick agreed that a selection of soft skills would benefit IT job seekers. "Time management, good work ethic, the ability to network and to make presentations [are all desirable]. Generally, I suspect that all IT skills are in need of constant improvement," he advised.

Meanwhile, Bradley DeSouza, industry development director at software management vendor CA, advised firms to improve the skillsets of their internal staff to ensure they can keep the management of key technology in-house. "Traditional IT departments in enterprises are not well equipped," he said. "You find people who are only good at dealing with common issues, such as servers, emails, printers and routers."

DeSouza said that the use of emerging technologies, such as voice-over-IP (VoIP), should encourage firms to "skill up" so that they can better manage their systems internally. "Voice is a much more mission-critical type of application [than printers], and one that is usually managed by the supplier," he added. "The big trend we see towards managed services is all about cost. You can outsource your basic requirements, but it would be better to look after your mission-critical applications internally, where you can see a better response time and better service levels."

DeSouza predicted a huge demand for VoIP engineers, and a resulting skills gap. "VoIP is tied to a phone system, not your typical PC client-based solutions – if they were, they would be much more straightforward to use. And the tools are vendor-specific, so skills are in short supply," he explained. "If you have problems – your client/PC system fails, or your IPTV goes down – it can have a ripple effect. You need to be able to identify these issues and deal with them. And you need tech support quickly. The turnaround time if you have someone in-house is significantly quicker."

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