

Where the tech jobs are now

The IT job market is rebounding, but where you live matters. Plus: Do you have the hottest skills?

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(FORTUNE) - To look at what's been going on at the fastest-growing tech companies - including Apple (Research), Adobe (Research), eBay (Research), and many lesser-known firms - you'd almost think it's the late '90s all over again.

These employers grew their payrolls by an average of 16% in 2005, hiring more than 70,000 people. Google (Research), meanwhile, has snapped up so much tech talent over the past couple of years that it's pushed salaries higher all over Silicon Valley.

Could it be that the IT job market's long slump is finally over?

Fastest-growing techs: Who's doing the most hiring?

Yes and no. First, if you're a job-hunting techie, where you live matters. Sunil Mehta, CEO of a tech job-tracking service called NimbleCat, observes, "In the past few months we've seen big changes, both in the number of jobs and in where they're located. The tech job market is picking up across the board, but California is creating a somewhat smaller share of new IT jobs, meaning that growth is increasing elsewhere."

According to NimbleCat's latest figures, the top 10 metropolitan areas for new tech jobs are: Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Boston, New York, Seattle, San Francisco, San Jose, Dallas, and Atlanta. Note that only three are in the Golden State, the fewest since NimbleCat began counting seven years ago.

But even if you don't live anywhere near those top 10 cities, plenty of employers want you - if you've got the right skills. Consider Florida, where Dan Rodriguez, CEO of an IT staffing firm called Veredus, is hard-pressed to find enough qualified people for jobs in Tampa and Orlando. That's partly because Florida is booming - its unemployment rate, at 3.1%, is well below the 4.7% national average - and partly because "we've seen a real shift," Rodriguez says. "It's becoming far more of an employee's market."

Why is that? "When things were really bad, in 2001 and 2002, lots of people decided to get out of IT altogether, including some really highly qualified people," says Rodriguez. "They went off and took up whole new careers, so they're not available anymore. At the same time, we saw a lot of good people take on contract work, out of frustration at not being able to find a regular full-time job. Now, many of them have decided to keep working on contract, because they like the freedom and the flexibility. Some of our contract people, for instance, work six months and then take six months off - and they can afford to, because they're paid a premium wage when they are working. They don't want to go back to the year-round daily grind." Who can blame them?

What skills are employers seeking now? The list is a fairly extensive one, according to Rodriguez: "Nationwide, Microsoft .Net is in big demand, as are Oracle and Java developers. We're also seeing openings for portal developers and people with BizTalk and e-commerce experience, along with certain packages like PeopleSoft, Oracle financials, and SAP. And of course certifications like the MCSE [Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer] are always big. The supply of people who have these skills and credentials is not keeping up with demand."

So-called "soft skills" are also being emphasized - a trend too many job seekers overlook. "Companies now want tech people who interact well with the rest of the organization - talking to customers, understanding where tech projects fit into the overall corporate strategy, and so on," says Rodriguez. "The days when IT staffers and managers could just be technical wizards with bad people skills are over."

