

ECHOS.NET : MANAGEMENT

COMPUTER SCIENCE

COMPUTER SCIENCE, LAST HOPE?

In spite of the economic slowdown which has been ravaging the Silicon Valley for the last 18 months, charitable groups offering training in various computer science fields are redoubling their efforts, and candidates looking for a better future are knocking down their doors.

When the printing press which he had founded 17 years ago disappeared in a fire, Dennis Lee decided that the moment had come for a career change. At age 50, he pocketed 2 weeks salary in a kind of severance pay and took off to try his luck in computer science. "My career wasn't going anywhere, and listening to buddies who were working in computers had already begun to tempt me to try my chances there as well," he said.

That was two years ago. Silicon Valley at that time looked paved with gold. To nurse along his slim savings, Dennis Lee went home to live with his mother. Then he set up a year of training at Opportunities Industrialization Center West (OICW). Situated in the heart of Silicon Valley, this organization has since 1965 been offering programs of professional training free to individuals who have been rejected by more traditional kinds of jobs because of their economic, social or educational background. For OICW, that was no reason to give up, quite the contrary.

"Our students are investing in the future, they want to be ready when the economy bounces back," says Amanda Byrd, financial director of OICW. In its technological courses, the Center counts 171 students for the second semester of 2001, which is an increase of 26% over the previous year, related principally to the addition of new certification programs demanded by various companies. At the same time, OICW has increased its budget from \$5 million to \$7.5 million between 1999 and 2002.

In San Pablo, in the industrial northeast of the San Francisco Bay Area, StreetTech has taken on a similar mission. Some 20 students per semester are recruited, after they pass a fourth grade language and mathematics test, plus an interview to determine their motivation. Failure is the recurring theme in their personal histories. After six months, three out of four obtain a diploma as a computer technician. A beginning.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH BUSINESS

StreetTech is in its fourth cycle. The hiring rate for its graduates fell from 90% to 50% since the end of 2000. But its founder, Paul Lamb, affirms that three-quarters of his graduates have received professional experience. Without letting up, he fights the good fight with potential employers. "We have noticed a rise in demands for employment of specialized technicians, and employers are more interested in us than they were last year," he thinks. "Over the long term, technology is going to generate new professions that we can't even imagine today. We have to develop as many

people as possible to participate in the next revolution.”

This year, StreetTech is preparing to open two new centers and to launch new certification programs, hiring a dozen new key teachers. The project is financed in large part by grants of \$3 million from the Department of Labor.

StreetTech and OICW depend heavily on their partnerships with businesses. These make contributions in money or in kind, but, above all, they actively participate in the teaching, offering students an opening to a professional environment and, should the occasion arise, they hire the graduates. OICW was particularly affected by the bankruptcy of Excite@Home and of Exodus. Anchored for a long time in the region, it nevertheless relies on the fidelity of local PME, and on public service organizations like schools and health centers. After 25 years of partnership, ROD-L Electronics, a local builder of testing material for electronic products, counts 70% of OICW graduates among its 35 employees. And, in spite of everything, businesses like Cisco, Sun and Hewlett-Packard keep their doors open in the form of interviews, training and workshops.

Paul Lamb has himself made solid contacts with Chevron Texaco, which runs a refinery located near StreetTech, and with Providian Financial, a financial credit company. Recent graduate Randal Strickland, the father of a family who has just completed a ten year prison term, has been hired by Chevron Texaco for a three month trial period. He makes \$3000 a month, a salary less than that of a regular employee. If his temporary hire turns into full employment, he will doubtless make less than someone else who has similar skills. “Our graduates are very competitive in the employment market,” Paul Lamb insists: on average they make less than \$18 an hour instead of \$25 or \$30. And businesses profit from that. On the other hand, they assume the risk of giving their first experience to individuals who still have to prove themselves from scratch in the work world.

At the end of his year of training, Dennis Lee landed in July 2001 in an employment market which was in crisis. “I was old and I had almost no experience; it was very discouraging,” he said. Six months and 200 job application letters later, he was hired by FriendFinder.com, an on-line meeting network that has 18 million members. His present salary is less than what he made at the printing press, but he is aware that it is only temporary. He has already moved up one grade and looks for a new promotion in two months. Furthermore, he is on the list for employment at Oracle, at a minimum salary of \$70,000.

Translation by Tom Ambrogi, March 21 2002