

# Managers in focus as the skills gap closes

ONE apparent effect of the recession has been to remove a common problem that afflicted computer users throughout the Eighties.

The skills gap has closed. Where previously it was widely agreed that the computer industry in the UK was short of perhaps 50,000 skilled individuals, abruptly the shortfall seems to have disappeared. Recruitment, consistently cited as a key concern by computer managers in years past, is now low on their list of woes, according to the latest quarterly Computing/Price Waterhouse survey.

This could be temporary or even illusory, but there are trends in computing that point to a general reduction in the numbers of skilled practitioners required. The increasing homogeneity of computers will reduce the need for staff with specific experience of different systems; the popularity and increasing flexibility of ready-written program "packages" is a factor whose effect will be to make fewer specialists more productive; a third factor is the growing tendency of large companies to farm out their computer needs to independent third parties who can service a number of such clients, with one system and its attendant professionals effectively doing the work of several.

Instead, the personnel focus in computing has switched to the managers responsible for information systems within companies.

This too is the result of converging concerns: first, that the business climate in the Nineties will place greater demands on information systems, and second, that the role of the IS department within companies has all too often been divorced from the pursuit of business goals.

**The hunt is on for the Renaissance Man of computing.** David Guest reports

"There is a general problem in the UK," said Stephen Arnold, managing director of the systems consultancy Softa. "The decision makers are well-versed in their own areas but they are taking advice on information technology from people who don't understand the business issues."

This is a familiar lament. Computer equipment suppliers report that they are more often having to make their pitch to boards of directors than to IS managers alone, but the individuals who can run a company as well as a computer department are generally

---

*'The scope of technology and the knowledge involved in it is doubling every ten years'*

---

looked on as exceptions that prove the rule.

The hunt for a new breed of computer manager is on. The British Computer Society, in a controversial report published last year, described the quarry as a "hybrid" manager who would combine business expertise with IT skills. The hybrid manager, it said, would be distinguished by his or her ability to relate to "the broad picture" and to people, understanding their motivation and aspirations; he or she would also be energetic, intuitive, a good listener, and (cryptically) would have "an unusual set of interests".

This type of rounded personal-

ity is also sought in other branches of the same theory, which prizes individuals known as T-shaped People. These are a variation on Renaissance Man, equally comfortable with information systems, modern management techniques and the 12-tone scale.

There are doubts over whether it is reasonable to expect to find or train individuals with the appropriate combination of business and technical skills.

Bob Charette, founder of the US consultancy Itabhi, argues that the pace of technical change is too rapid for specialists to split their attention. "The scope of technology and the knowledge involved in it is doubling every ten years, so experience quickly becomes irrelevant.

"Ten years ago, if a system, a financial system, say, failed, you still had your clerks and accountants to step in; if it happened now, a business might be in serious trouble. The stakes are higher and the element of uncertainty is enormous, and it may be that no one person knows all of the system."

Mr Charette's answer is a programme of risk management built into the way companies construct and use their information systems. "People get seduced by the technological imperatives and take on risks they're not aware of," he said.

"The stakes are so high that a mistake can be fatal — in that sense, more computers and telecommunications mean more decisions which mean more opportunities to go out of business."