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10 Dying IT Skills

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Introduction

There are some things in life, like good manners, which never go out of style, and there are other things, like clothing styles that fall in and out of fashion, but when an IT skill falls out of favor, it rarely ever comes back. Here's our list of 10 dying IT skills. If any of these skills are your main expertise, perhaps it's time to think about updating your skill set.

10. COBOL

Is it dead or alive? This 40-year-old programming language often appears in lists of dying IT skills but it also appears in as many articles about organizations with legacy applications written in COBOL having a hard time seeking workers with COBOL skills. IBM cites statistics that 70% of the world's business data is still being processed by COBOL applications. But how many of these applications will remain in COBOL for the long term? Even IBM is pushing its customers to "build bridges" and use service-oriented architecture to "transform legacy applications and make them part of a fast and flexible IT architecture."

9. HTML

We're not suggesting the Internet is dead but with the proliferation of easy to use WYSIWYG HTML editors enabling non-techies to set up blogs and Web pages, Web site development is no longer a black art. Sure, there's still a need for professional Web developers (see the ColdFusion entry above for a discussion about Java and PHP skills) but a good grasp of HTML isn't the only skill required of a Web developer. Professional developers often have expertise in Java, AJAX, C++ and .Net, among other programming languages. HTML as a skill lost more than 40% of its value between 2001 and 2003, according to Foote Partners.

8. SNA

The introduction of IP and other Internet networking technologies into enterprises in the 1990s signaled the demise of IBM's proprietary Systems Network Architecture. According to Wikipedia, the protocol is still used extensively in banks and other financial transaction networks and so SNA skills continue to appear in job ads. But permanent positions seeking SNA skills are few and far between. ITJobsWatch.com noted that there were three opening for permanent jobs between February and April, compared to 43 during the same period last year. Meanwhile, companies such as HP offer consultants with experience in SNA and other legacy skills such as OpenVMS and Tru64 Unix for short-term assignments.

7. Siebel

Siebel is one skill that makes a recurring appearance in the Foote Partners' list of skills that have lost their luster. Siebel was synonymous with customer relationship management in the late '90s and early 2000s, and the company dominated the market with a 45% share in 2002. Founded by Thomas Siebel, a former Oracle executive with no love lost for his past employer, Siebel competed aggressively with Oracle until 2006 when it was ultimately acquired by the database giant. Siebel's complex and expensive CRM software required experts to install and manage. That model lost out to the new breed of software-as-a-service (SaaS) packages from companies such as Salesforce.com that deliver comparable software over the Web. According to the U.K.'s ITJobsWatch.com site, Siebel experts command an average salary of GBP52,684 (\$78,564), but that's a slide from GBP55,122 a year ago. Siebel is ranked 319 in the job research site's list of jobs in demand, compared to 310 in 2008.

6. RAD/Extreme Programming

Back in the late 1990s and early 2000s the rapid application development and extreme programming development philosophies resulted in quicker and more flexible programming that embraced the ever changing needs of customers during the development process. In XP, developers adapted to changing requirements at any point during the project life rather than attempting to define all requirements at the beginning. In RAD, developers embraced interactive use of structured techniques and prototyping to define users' requirements. The result was accelerated software development. Although the skills were consistently the highest paying in Foote Partners survey since 1999, they began to lose ground in 2003 due to the proliferation of offshore outsourcing of applications development.

5. ColdFusion

ColdFusion users rave that this Web programming language is easy to use and quick to jump into, but as many other independent software tools have experienced, it's hard to compete with products backed by expensive marketing campaigns from Microsoft and others. The language was originally released in 1995 by Allaire, which was acquired by Macromedia (which itself was purchased by Adobe). Today, it is superseded by Microsoft .Net, Java, PHP and the language of the moment: open source Ruby on Rails. A quick search of the Indeed.com job aggregator site returned 11,045 jobs seeking PHP skills compared to 2,027 CF jobs. Even Ruby on Rails, which is a much newer technology receiving a major boost when Apple packaged it with OS X v10.5 in 2007, returned 1,550 jobs openings on Indeed.com.

4. Wireless Application Protocol

Yes, people were able to browse the Internet in the late 1990s before Apple's iPhone. Web site operators would rewrite their content to the WAP's Wireless Markup Language, enabling users to access Web services such as email, stock results and news headlines using their cell phones and PDAs. WAP was not well received at the beginning because WAP sites were slow and lacked the richness of the Web. WAP has also seen different levels of uptake worldwide because of the different wireless regulations and standards around the world. WAP has since evolved and is a feature of Multimedia Messaging Service, but there are now a new generation of competing mobile Web browsers, including Opera Mobile and the iPhone's Safari browser.

3. Visual J++

Skills pay for Microsoft's version of Java declined 37.5% last year, according to the Foote Partners' study. The life of J++, which is available with Microsoft Visual Studio 6.0, was not a smooth one. Although Sun Microsystems licensed Java to Microsoft to develop J++, Microsoft failed to implement some features of the official Java standard while implementing other extensions of its own. Sun sued Microsoft for licensing violations in a legal wrangle that lasted three years. Microsoft eventually replaced J++ with Microsoft .Net.

2. Novell NetWare

Novell's network operating system was the de facto standard for LANs in the 1990s, running on more than 70% of enterprise networks. But Novell failed to compete with the marketing might of Microsoft. Novell tried to put up a good fight by acquiring WordPerfect to compete with Windows Office, but that move failed to ignite the market and Novell eventually sold WordPerfect to Corel in 1996. Novell certifications such as Certified Novell Engineer, Master Certified Novell Engineer, Certified Novell Certified Directory Engineer, and Novell Administrator were once hot certs in the industry, but now they are featured in Foote Partners' list of skills that decreased in value in 2008. Hiring managers want Windows Server and Linux skills instead.

1. Asynchronous Transfer Mode

ATM was popular in the late 1990s, particularly among carriers, as the answer to overworked frame relay for wide-area networking. It was considered more scalable than frame relay and offered inherent QoS support. It was also marketed as a LAN platform, but that was its weakness. According to Wikipedia, ATM failed to gain wide acceptance in the LAN where IP makes more sense for unifying voice and data on the network. Wikipedia notes that ATM will continue to be deployed by carriers that have committed to existing ATM deployments, but the technology is increasingly challenged by speed and traffic shaping requirements of converged voice and data networks. A growing number of carriers are now using Multi-Protocol Label Switching (MPLS), which integrates the label-switching capabilities of ATM with the packet orientation of IP. IT skills researcher Foote Partners listed ATM in its IT Skills and Certification Pay Index as a non-certified IT skill that has decreased in value in the last six months of 2008.

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About the Author

Linda Leung is a senior IT journalist with 20 years' experience editing and writing news and features for online and print. She has extensive experience creating and launching news Web sites, including most recently independent communities for customers of Cisco Systems and Microsoft. As an experienced journalist in the U.S. and the U.K., she has led teams of journalists and industry experts to produce compelling content delivered via blogs, news, features and podcasts for all levels of technology executives.