

## High-tech companies in Triad having difficulty hiring

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Open Software Solutions Inc. is trying to do something most technology companies in the Triad haven't had to mess with for the past few years: it's adding workers.

Specifically, the High Point-based company is looking for another 12 software product specialists and sales people -- all jobs paying more than \$35,000 a year -- to go with the 98 employees it already has.

Problem is, OSSI can't find the right people. Even though the Triad job market has hemorrhaged as thousands of positions have been eliminated in the past few years and the area's current unemployment rate is still 6 percent, this small software company can't find a dozen people.

So OSSI is looking elsewhere.

"We've gotten resumes from all over the world for these positions -- from India, from London, and from all over the United States," said Anita Hurley, OSSI's human resources manager.

OSSI is an example of what tech companies in the Triad's evolving economy can expect as they ramp up, said Roger Herman, a Greensboro-based work force consultant.

"Over the past few years, we've been in a buyer's market for the employers. But we are shifting back to a seller's market for the workers," said Herman, chief executive of The Herman Group. "It's a lingering problem, but it's getting bigger as the economy heats back up."

Layoffs among information technology workers have subsided nationally and now the Department of Labor reports that IT hiring is starting to show signs of picking up nationally.

Herman and his wife, Joyce Gioia, who study labor statistics and trends, predict that high-tech employers in the Triad are soon going to have to return to offering high signing bonuses and other incentives to attract workers.

"We're saying that history is going to repeat itself," he said. "Wages are stable, but we're going to see a return to all kinds of creative ways to recruit and pay workers in order to bring them to an area or bring them to a new job."

### **'A mobile group'**

The number of programmers and computer professionals in the Triad has held around 3,900 for the past two years, but that's down from the peak of 5,100 workers in 1997 and 1998, according to the state's Employment Security Commission. One concern is that many qualified high-tech workers moved away when they lost their jobs in the last three years.

"They're a mobile group, and these people will move to a job," said Laura Stroupe, assistant manager of the Employment Security Commission office in Greensboro.

OSSI hopes some will move to the Triad as business picks up.

Finding highly skilled sales people is critical at OSSI, said Cy Cole, the company's vice president of sales and marketing. The company wants employees with work experience in public safety -- most OSSI employees previously worked for police, sheriff, fire and ambulance departments -- but there aren't many people with both software and emergency services backgrounds, he said.

OSSI did roughly \$20 million in sales last year, and expects to grow by about 20 percent this year, Cole said. Sales growth is expected from pent-up demand after three years of municipal governments holding off on computer system investments while riding through a recession and the uncertainty of future domestic security needs.

And Cole isn't the only Triad executive seeing customers now looking to finally seeing customers upgrade their technology systems after years of holding off.

### **In the same boat**

"Everyone put off IT projects for several years and they realize it's time to move forward," said Marilyn Turner, managing partner and co-owner of [TierServe.com](http://TierServe.com), a high-tech consulting firm in Greensboro trying to hire five to 10 computer engineers

-- all positions that pay more than \$100,000 a year. "We need the top-tier employees."

Turner is advertising on the Internet for employees who have experience with .NET software programming, certification in multiple software systems, multiple college degrees, experience working with the medical or legal industries and 10 to 15 years of computer experience.

TierServe focuses on computer consulting services for major health care, legal and insurance industry clients.

"I've put out a few want ads and haven't gotten the kinds of people we want," said Turner.

Like OSSI, she's having to advertise nationally for qualified job candidates.

So far, Turner has collected the resumes of a several local experienced mainframe computer engineers from Burlington Industries, but those candidates still lack the proper experience and skills.

TierServe is probably going to have to hire some experienced computer programmers with industry experience and with a master's degree in business administration, then get those new workers "trained up" early this year, Turner said.

Labor experts like Herman predict that more Triad technology companies will be in the same position in the coming months.