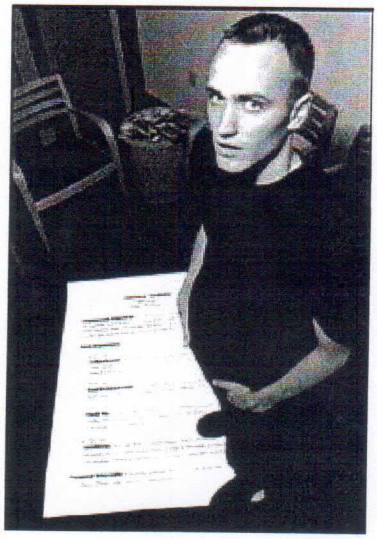
SEATTLE WEEKLY

June 28, 2001
Print Circ. 105,000
Online Circ. 65,000



ROBIN LAANANEN

Help [still] wanted

Seattle's surviving high-tech companies get selective as the pool of employees grows.

BY MARK D. FEFER

Believe it or not, some high-tech companies in and around Seattle are hiring. They have jobs to fill. Really. And your pain is their gain.

"It's gotten significantly easier to hire people," says Usama Fayyad, CEO of digiMine, a year-old Bellevue company that specializes in analyzing e-commerce data. "That's the bright side of the picture."

"We're seeing much more 'candidate flow,' which is great for us," says Julia Pizzi, HR director for The Cobalt Group, a Seattle company that provides online services for the auto industry. A year ago, Pizzi says, Cobalt would only interview one to three people before making a hiring decision. "Now we may have 8 to 10 people in the queue. We can hit the *preferred* list of requirements, not just the *necessary*."

It's a new world order in Seattle's high-tech scene. Employers who were groveling for your services last year can now be plenty picky. "Before it was, 'Can you do e-mail? You get a job,'" says April Goddard, general manager of the Northwest High Tech Career Expo. "Now companies are being a little prudent."

Contrary to the general impression created by the steady headlines about layoffs and shutdowns, there are still a few firms on the local high-tech horizon that are looking to add talent. Most of them are not in the business of selling shoe polish over the Web or delivering pints of ice cream by bicycle. But they may still have an Internet angle.

One of the "spaces" that continues to be hot, for instance, is providing Web connections and data delivery to phones and other mobile devices. At Wireless Services Corporation in Bellevue, CEO Steve Wood says he's already doubled his staff this year to 25 people and is planning to add 15 to 20 more by the end of 2001. "We've been kind of counter to the trend for the last three years," says Wood. "When everyone else was raising a ton of money and hiring like crazy, we just kept our

head down and grew the revenue." Wood's primary customer right now is Nextel, a company controlled by his old boss Craig McCaw; WSC provides the text-messaging service for people using Nextel phones.

Wood says that while really good engineers are still a hot commodity, "it's just not ridiculous like it was 18 months ago. It's easier for a company like us to land them. A lot of people are paying more attention to stability as opposed to 'How much can I make in the stock in the next 12 months?'"

Shannon Maher, VP of engineering and product development at AOL Mobile, agrees. "Almost overnight, both attitudes and the climate have changed," he says. "It's been pretty amazing." AOL Mobile is part of the America Online empire and works to bring AOL service--as well as Time Warner magazines, music, and movies--to phones, Palm Pilots, and other wireless rigs. The company, located on the south end of Lake Union, has 110 people on staff, and Maher says it will bring on 26 more by the end of the year, most of them general-purpose software developers. "It's significantly easier than it was nine months ago," says Maher. "People's predisposition to go to a new startup has changed."

Yet there seems to be no shortage of people looking to take a flyer on a startup either. "My phone rings nonstop," says Rod Hamlin, executive VP of sales at ViAir, a year-and-a-half-old company at the foot of Queen Anne Hill. ViAir, whose software allows wireless phone users to access their e-mail, has signed on several big wireless carriers as customers and last month landed $15 million in venture capital funding to continue the rollout.

That kind of news gets the résumés flowing. "We haven't had to hire headhunters," says Hamlin. "We have basically stopped advertising. People come to us." ViAir plans to add another 20 to 25 people to its 70-person staff by December.

But not everybody's talents are in equal demand, unfortunately. "A lot of those Web site-type developers, tech writers, editors--those people are in deep trouble," says recruiter Dave Bartels of WinSearch. "Companies are looking for specific senior skills."

At RevX.net, a Kirkland company that recently got a $6 million venture capital infusion, chief technology officer Monte Gibbs says, "The dot-com and portal layoffs are not really the timbre of our workforce." RevX.net, which helps companies automate their business via the Net, has a current head count of about 30 and plans to hire 10 more techies--mostly C++ and Java programmers--by year's end. "There are a lot of people out there, but finding people with the specific skill set we need is still difficult," says Cliff Chirls, RevX.net's VP of sales and marketing. Adds Ki Choi, the firm's VP of business development: "They're the ones not being laid off."

Julia Pizzi of The Cobalt Group, who has roughly 50 job openings to fill, finds dot-commers to be a good fit at her firm. But she, like many observers, does not expect today's fat times (for HR managers, that is) to last. "I personally think the market's going to tighten up again by the end of the year," she says. "I think this is a temporary readjustment. People from the dot-coms will flow back in." Indeed, another local executive suggests that some of the recent layoffs were "an opportunity to get rid of some not-as- productive people" and that selective rehiring has already gotten under way at larger companies, such as Infospace.

Fayyad of digiMine takes the long view, offering this bit of advice to Seattle's forlorn tech workforce: "Don't despair. Don't let this noise get to you. You guys are still the engineers of the new universe."

Indeed, judging by the recruitment page of ViAir's Web site--which promises such onsite wackiness as "foosball," "Nerf gun battles," "our own Elvis shrine," and employees "navigating the hallways on scooters"--it may already be the late '90s again.