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Qualifying the professionals

As with many other sectors of the Information Technology industries, GIS is suffering from staff recruitment problems. As the use of GIS increases so does the demand for qualified professionals. Ironically, while universities and colleges have increased the number of students graduating with GIS skills, many of these graduates can still find it difficult to get jobs when they leave. Employers who look to universities to fill positions often find that new graduates may not have the skill sets that are required. In many ways, however, students still hold an ace card because they have had time to invest in understanding new technologies, without the need to justify what they are doing in terms of immediate commercial potential.

The most successful students can be those who pick dissertation projects which combine skills that are required by employers now and in the near future. 1999/2000 will see those people who trained in such technologies as Java and the Internet as being of greatest interest to prospective employers. Recruiting people from universities can mean that an employer does not have to invest so heavily in training to get them up to speed with current technologies.

While this is good news for recent graduates, rapid technological development can mean existing staff are ill equipped to deal with the requirements of the job market. Many professionals are tied to jobs which make limited use of newer technology, using the same product for years on end. These people can find their skills becoming less and less attractive to prospective employers. For all that a degree is worth, and it is often the prerequisite for many jobs, many employers recognise that experience can be more important than letters after one's name. Given the choice of a new graduate or a person with two years' experience, an employer may choose the latter if they have the relevant skills.

Yet even in industry certain qualifications can carry substantial weight in the job market. Certi-

fication is becoming increasingly important for both employers and employees. Employees benefit by proving to themselves and others that they can actually do a particular task to a recognised standard. It also allows people to add qualifications to their CV, which could otherwise become stale. Employers can offer such training as a carrot for current and potential employees. Those employers who offer training packages can often seem the better prospects to potential new staff.

While it may be true that all qualifications prove is that an employee can pass exams, they can also increase knowledge of new technologies beyond the particular jobs employees do. Having skill bases of staff with improved qualifications can have benefits for participating companies beyond those of recruitment and retention. Companies can get accreditation themselves with qualification providers, as is the case with the Novell and Microsoft qualification schemes. Such accreditation can then be used in tender proposals, which often require the inclusion of the CVs of the staff being assigned to do the work.

Where there is less development is in the area of GIS accreditation. A few vendors are now offering professional qualifications and this trend is likely to become more commonplace. There is also a place for independent accreditation, such as that from the British Computer Society, where people who want to increase their understanding of spatial functionality and procedures can go without having to write essays or dissertations. In the current market place, in order to be as attractive to employers as possible, such qualifications will become almost as essential as job experience as GIS moves further and further into the mainstream.



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