



Is there still a “Brain Drain” in the Midwest?

By John W. Stout

For the past several years, if you were anywhere near a technology business, you’ve heard this over and over: there just haven’t seemed to be enough programmers/software developers/computer engineers to fill all of the open jobs.

Of course that situation has changed in the current employment market, but the challenge has a new wrinkle: finding strong technical talent able to efficiently deliver rock-solid results within a narrow budget.

And for the future, when the business environment does recover—perhaps dramatically—the prospects are uncertain at best for having sufficient computer industry engineering talent available.

Because a large part of Stout Systems’ business depends on our ability to quickly staff up development projects, especially those that generate revenue and reduce overhead for our clients, as well as network with and attract programmers for our clients and projects, we are faced with this issue every day.

Are the “techies” really going away? Well, yes *and* no:

1) **Yes, the number of people in the profession has declined.** This has been in part due to a significant decrease in the number of college students choosing computer engineering, indeed choosing any type of engineering, as a major. It’s a national problem that was partly fueled, according to the college representatives with whom I have spoken, by the false idea that “all of the programming jobs were going overseas.” (I was heartened recently in speaking with the chair of a computer science department when he told me that the enrollment for computer science and engineering at his school was actually up for the year.) The problem is inflamed even more in our geographic area—Southeast Michigan—and much of the rest of the Midwest, with the reeling manufacturing economy. Some techies have relocated to areas of the country that may seem to have more promising job prospects—the so-called “Brain Drain”.

2) **No, most of the techies are still there, but not as visible.** Having been through the swings of the economy and changes in the industry over the past thirty years, there is one interesting trend I have observed: when the economy is perceived to be

weak, there is a tendency by computer professionals to hunker down and stay put in their current jobs whenever possible. They do not circulate their resumes as much, so this creates an impression that there are fewer programmers.

Despite the challenges, you *can* find and attract the talent you need to get your projects done and grow your businesses.

To find the talent, you have to put more work into it. From what our HR and management contacts have told us, placing a job description on a job board and expecting hordes of highly qualified, unemployed candidates to flow in is still something of a roll of the dice. First of all, the best qualified candidates *tend* to also be well-connected, adept at using their industry contacts as well as social media such as Twitter or LinkedIn to find the opportunities that do exist. My suggestions to you, based on years of successfully running software projects and recruiting, are below:

1) Connect with and support the software community. This means you have to get more visible to the people you want to attract. No one will have stronger credibility with other programmers than one of your own programmers, so have them attend user group and technical society meetings; one company I know rewards their “spokespeople” with Starbucks cards for attending such meetings.

2) Sponsorship also goes a long way to creating industry credibility. Stout Systems sponsors user groups. We also sponsor industry conferences which gives great exposure and the opportunity to meet hundreds of technical people in person.

3) Improve the quality of your job ads. An ad must be written to promote how great the job is. This is done by talking about how exciting the project and technologies are, how progressive the company is technologically, emphasizing the quality of the work culture and location, and how great the benefits are. The technology and location points are key, by the way, according to our own surveys of employment candidates each year.

4) You have to do everything possible to make your work environment and compensation as attractive as possible. This not only draws new employees and motivates your current employees to recruit for you. Here are suggestions:

- Offer compensation packages that include benefits technical people consider desirable. As a note on compensation, we find salary surveys are too often useless. If you understand that top talent will command more than what you see in a salary survey, then you have a mindset for attracting the best.
- Offer bonuses to your employees if they successfully refer top professionals to you, who are then hired.

- Institute training programs for employees, especially on new technologies. This could be in the form of in-house training or financial support for after-hours training.
- Where applicable, institute better software development processes and migrate off old technologies on to new ones. Programmers do not like to be working on out-dated technologies and they don't like to work in an environment that discourages quality development practices.

5) Hire senior technical personnel with older skills and retrain them. They know most everything there is to know about software development practices, how to develop quality code, how to prevent bugs, etc. Many of them would join a company at a reasonable compensation level if they knew that they would be retrained and then advanced in position.

You may feel that in the current seller's market that you can offer less and still get more talent in exchange. That may well be. With an eye towards the future recovery, which is perhaps closer than it appears, be ready to offer the best talent what it is truly worth to your company.



John W. Stout is the founder and president of Stout Systems (www.stoutsystems.com). John has both a consulting and software development background over a 30-year career, and he is a featured speaker at industry events. Stout Systems is a software development and staffing company that is fueled by the most powerful technology available—Human Intelligence. Stout eliminates the stress, frustration and overwork all too typical of software projects and technical staffing. Founded in 1993, Stout has offices in Ann Arbor and Detroit, with national clients.