Boom means bucks for tech workers

BY MICHAEL CODY

Reginald Daniel's company has enough work to double its staff of computer scientists and network engineers from 50 to 100 before year's end.

But Daniel is grappling with a problem that his firm, Scientific and Engineering Solutions, and others that rely on computer specialists are facing: Where to find qualified employees and how much to pay them?

Maryland's unemployment rate tumbled to 3.7 percent in March,

according to the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation. Howard County's rate of 1.8 percent was the lowest in the state.

Such rates present a challenge in almost any industry, but particularly to employers like Daniel, who soak up computer science specialists as fast as they are produced.

Daniel founded Scientific and Engineering Solutions in 1996. He's president of the company, which has its headquarters in Annapolis Junction and carries out Defense Department contracts at Fort Meade and at a Navy research laboratory in Wash-

ington, D.C.

Colleges and universities in Maryland awarded about 1,250 bachelor's and master's degrees and doctorates in computer science and related fields in 1996, according to the state Department of Business and Economic Development.

Another source, the Maryland Higher Education Commission, projects almost 26,000 openings in computer and math occupations within six years.

In other words, expect fewer can-

Business is booming for Reginald Daniel's Scientific and Engineering Solutions. But Daniels — and other local high-tech employers — are pressed to find qualified people to do the work.

STAFF PHOTO BY JASON LEE

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didates than jobs.

For instance, the information technology division of Columbia-based GTS Duratek has about 50 computer specialists on staff. The division's director, Chris Wruck, said she has 90 positions to fill.

Employers could pay more for computer scientists as the disparity grows. At Scientific and Engineering Solutions, the average salary is up to $75,000 annually, Daniel said, from about $65,000 last year.

Dave Murphy, of Damar Group Ltd., a training firm in Columbia, said computer scientists often earn more than that. Engineers he knows who work at Fort Meade, lately have been offered $120,000 to $130,000 to leave, Murphy said.

Daniel, who had been relying on word of mouth to recruit new staff, recently has begun to consider new approaches. He is motivated by a new government contract worth $7.4 million over three years and a backlog of $25 million in work.

One day, he said, recruiters from Scientific and Engineering Solutions might set up a booth at a music festival in Cancun, Mexico.

"Why not us?" he wondered aloud. People who attend such events tend to make a lot of money. That means the chances are good that they work in the information technology field.

As long as recruiting firms want up to 30 percent of a year's salary in commissions, he reasons, sending a couple of employees to Cancun is money well spent.

Going to the source

More practically, Daniel has been pursuing a relationship with Freeman Hrabowski, who has access to hundreds of qualified job candidates each year.

Hrabowski is president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, which awards more than 300 bachelor's and master's degrees and doctorates annually in computer sciences and related fields.

Among area schools, only Johns Hopkins University comes close, with the University of Maryland, College Park, a distant third.

Daniel said he's negotiating a gift to the University of Maryland-Baltimore County of about $10,000 and hopes for a partnership, including internships and jobs for students in return.

RWD Technologies in Columbia has what Hrabowski describes as a perfect partnership with the university. The company gave the campus $1 million and its chairman, Robert Deutsch, serves on the university's board.

Partnerships with businesses are common at the school, Hrabowski said. Computer science students often take four classes instead of five and work 25 to 30 hours per week, he said — earning $25,000 to $30,000 per year.

Hrabowski said he knows one 24-year-old student who is earning a $70,000 salary while completing

his degree.

That's not difficult to believe, said Roberta Sabin of Ellicott City, who chairs the computer science department at Loyola College in Baltimore. Starting salaries ranged from $40,000 to $50,000 for the 15 students who earned bachelor's degrees from her department this year.

"Someone called the other day asking about our graduates. I said, 'Forget it. They've been taken since December,' " Sabin said.

Starting salaries offered to the 25 to 40 Johns Hopkins undergraduates who are entering the job market range from $39,000 to $65,000, not including bonuses, said Mini Nunna, the university's career center director. Bonuses range from $5,000 to $12,000, not including relocation packages and sometimes stock options, she said.

One effect of the high salaries, at least in the Baltimore area, is that more and more students are picking computer science or related majors.

At UMBC, the number of computer science and information systems majors has increased from 650 to 1,000 each in the past three years, Hrabowski said.

At Loyola, first-year computer science majors outnumber their senior counterparts two-to-one. And 57 students earned master's degrees in engineering or computer science from Loyola's campus in Columbia this year, up from 52 graduate degrees five years ago and three in 1989, spokeswoman Leslie Wilson said.

The outlook isn't necessarily good for everyone in the field.

Employers generally prefer new graduates because they're recently trained and tend to be cheaper, said Chris Currie, spokesman for the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers. Also, employers often are looking for specific skills.

It's no coincidence, Currie said, that unemployment rates among computer scientists 50 or older was 17 percent, according to a Computer World survey last year.

Computer scientists are "highly valued when they're young, when they can work 80-hour weeks," Currie said. "Companies just don't want to talk to someone with 15 to 20 years' experience who doesn't have the latest skill set they're looking for."

Fulton resident Carole Carey, who has a bachelor's in electrical engineering from Johns Hopkins, sharpened her skills by earning a master's in computer science from Loyola last year.

"I'm not really looking hard for a new job, but I've seen a lot of advertisements," said Fulton, a Food and Drug Administration employee. None was appealing, especially for a cut in pay.

The time might come, however, when she responds to the right approach.

"I sometimes get e-mails or people call me, but I don't really follow through," she said. "Maybe one of these days. I don't know."