

IBM boss: skills gap leaves 200 jobs empty

School curriculum blamed for unimaginative approach to IT

By Katherine Rushton

IBM has written to the Government about the need for a new school curriculum after it was unable to fill 200 jobs because of a critical shortage of skilled workers.

The software giant has created about 1,000 new technology, analyst and consulting jobs across the UK over the past year but has only been able to fill 80pc of them because there are too few quality candidates coming through the system.

Stephen Leonard, chief executive of IBM's UK and Ireland operations and a board member of technology sector skills council e-skills, says that a lacklustre GCSE curriculum is partly to blame, and that he has written to the Department of Education to detail proposals for an alternative.

"Our combined ability [as an industry] to identify, recruit and retain skilled candidates is weaker today than it has probably ever been," he said. "We need to do more as a country to develop more IT-capable people and we need a curriculum that is more adaptable to change over time. If we

pioneer new technologies here then we can take them elsewhere, and we have a great reputation as innovators and entrepreneurs, but how do you keep that going when there are not enough people?"

"We are going to have a shortfall of 20pc over the next two or three years and it is potentially going to widen further. Skills, I think, is the biggest challenge we will face in the next five years."

Mr Leonard added that the shortfall threatened Britain's standing as a world leader in all sectors – not just the technology industry. "Economic growth and all the emerging market opportunities for the UK are based around technology. There is danger that we will fall behind in the race to lead the world."

According to e-skills, students who enrol on computer studies degrees are the most likely graduates to face unemployment – making the shortage in good quality technology candidates all the more startling.

Karen Price, the organisation's chief executive, blamed the way IT is taught in schools, saying that the Key Stage 4 (GCSE) syllabus was having

"more negative than positive impact" because it put too much emphasis on IT literacy and not enough on understanding how technology actually works. She said IBM, together with Microsoft and 15 other technology companies, were working with schools on reforming the curriculum so it is better tailored to the industry's needs.

"We need to get a generation of young people who are avidly interested in technology understanding how it works and can be applied to business situations," she said. "I think the issue is that people have a very negative perception of the industry. Students think they're going to be sitting in a darkened room."

Ms Price added there is a particular need for candidates who combine software knowledge with people skills.

IT recruiters say they are also struggling to fill the skills gap. **Interquest**, a niche technology recruitment agency, said it has spent the past three months trying to fill 50 graduate trainee roles but has only filled five because too many young people were taking "Mickey Mouse" degrees.

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