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by HUGO H. OTTOLENGHI

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Burned in tech meltdown, workers desperate but cautious

James Weiss remembers the moment he was dismissed. It was Friday, Jan. 12, at 3 p.m. The software and hardware engineer was leaving the office in Boca Raton for a flight to Maryland. In just a few hours, he would see his wife and two young children for the first time since starting work six weeks earlier.

His boss and other executives pulled him into a room and closed the door. "They said, 'You're the last to be hired and the first to be fired,'" he remembers. "I went home. I was in shock. I didn't believe it. From all indications, everything seemed to be very good."

Weiss flew back to Boynton Beach after the weekend in Maryland and has been casting about for interviews with little success. Now he's worried.

"I'm under a tremendous amount of pressure," he says. "I have no health insurance, no job, and I can't see my family."

Jon Adams also is out of work. The software engineer was laid off with others in the Delray Beach office of a dot-com that pared operations in early January. Last week, he drove from Fort Lauderdale back to his hometown of Jacksonville for a job interview. In case he was hired on the spot, he packed enough clothes so he could start work that day.

Weiss and Adams, who did not want their former employers identified, have lots of company in South Florida and more people joining them. Local technology companies, like those nationwide, are failing or are trimming staff to survive. They are putting an uncounted number, probably in the thousands, of execs and techies on the street.

Those workers' prospects for new jobs depend on how high they sit on the corporate food chain and their skill sets, say recruiting firms. Those who get offers may see lower salaries. And candidates are looking more askance at noncash salary sweeteners and more intently at the potential employer's finances and prospects.

"I've seen more resumes in the past three months than I've seen in the past three years," says **Alex Funkhouser**, vice president of **Computer Careers International**, a recruiting and placement firm in North Miami Beach. "If this continues for the next three months, I'll be nervous about my job."

"My e-mail box is getting hammered with about 500 resumes in the past 45 days," he adds. His address is listed with the South Florida Association of Internet Professionals, of which he is president. The Miami-based chapter is holding its monthly meeting Feb. 21. Topic: How to survive in the current job market.

The market has soured for some, but not all employees. Prospects remain strong for mid- and upper-level managers, high-level executives, and sales and marketing people, according to a national poll of 3,500 executives who recruit and hire for those positions. Management Recruiters International, which conducted the survey, found that 57 percent of executives in the Southeast planned to hire more people than last year. Job prospects were strongest for those in telecommuni-



THE WAVE: Alex Funkhouser, vice president of a North Miami Beach placement firm, says, 'I've seen more resumes in the past three months than I've seen in the past three years.'

cations and information technology fields.

"The tech sector is still very strong," says **Susan Hawkins**, vice president in the Fort Lauderdale office of **Executive Manning Corp.** Companies are looking for sales executives and sales managers that know technology and have a sales record in the industry.

But for programmers and others in line positions, there has to be an exact match between the company's needs and the candidate's skills. "Maybe I don't have the right skills they're looking for," says Weiss, who has programmed databases and in the "C" computer language. "I can do the job, but I don't get the opportunity."

Adams says he got his job interview because he has experience programming Java and C++, and with applications that run over the Internet.

"If you have the right skill set and enough experience, at least two years, they are screaming for you," Adams says. "The recruiters are your buddies, because they can explain your strengths and weaknesses."

Both Weiss and Adams have posted their resumes on job Web sites like **Monster.com** and **Dice.com**. They've gotten hits, often from companies outside South Florida.

When employers do call, candidates want to know about the business and its profitability.

"They're doing their due diligence on these companies," says **James Barr**, president of **OfficeTec.com** in Delray Beach, which recruits employees who work abroad for American companies. "They're going to make sure those companies are going to be around for a while."

Candidates have turned cynical on stock options. Adams received \$2,500 worth of options when he joined his last employer two years ago. "I was so excited because I had never had stock options," he recalls. But the stock price plunged from more than \$1 per share to a low of 5 cents when he was laid off.

"Early last year, a candidate might take a job at \$40,000 with lots and lots of options," says **Sean Mood**, director of recruiting services at **LatPro.com** in Plantation, a placement firm for Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking professionals. Today, "it's hard to find an employee that's enticed by that package. The salary may go up to \$60,000 with some options."

But the salary may also be lower, recruiters say. "The massive escalations over the past several years have ended," says Funkhouser of Computer Careers. "Someone paid \$75,000 a year last March will jump at whatever it takes so that he can pay the mortgage. That could be \$55,000 or \$60,000."

Tech companies are also rethinking their plans, recruiters say. "Companies are looking what they have rather than doing a head count," says **Joseph Mullings**, president of the **Mullings Group**, a Delray Beach recruiting firm affiliated with Management Recruiters International.

Just like job candidates, companies are thinking longer and harder about the hiring process, he says. "It causes the best companies to reflect on the needs and impact, and hire the best people rather than hiring a pulse." ◆