

New college graduates find themselves facing a tough job market

by Mary Ann Milbourn
The Orange County Register

Chris Khacherian didn't select a major casually when he started at California State University-Fullerton, four years ago.

"I was researching different types of majors. (Information technology) and IT services were going to be it in 2000, 2001, 2002," he said.

So Khacherian majored in information systems with an emphasis in software and quality assurance - about as sure a bet as you could make in 1998 for landing a job after graduation.

What the prognosticators didn't know is that the technology bubble - and the economy along with it - would burst along the way.

Just two months from graduation, Khacherian, 23, of Irvine, now faces an uncertain future.

"I'm worried," said Khacherian, whose efforts have only gotten him interviews at a couple of companies - and no offers. "I'm just trying to look at whatever I can."

But it's not just information systems majors that are having a tough time.

The economic downturn is affecting all college graduates this year.

A survey of 457 employers by the National Association of Colleges and Employers showed they expect to hire 20 percent fewer college graduates. And recent layoffs will make new graduates' job search even tougher.

"Competition from laid-off workers alone could extend the job search into the six-month range," said John A. Challenger, chief executive of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, an international outplacement firm.

"College students are also facing the new business realities of increased outsourcing, record downsizing and cautious employers wary of another sudden economic jolt such as that caused by Sept. 11."

Jim Case, Fullerton's director of career planning, said it might not be quite that dire in Orange County, where employment has held up even as the economy has slowed.

In January, the unemployment rate in Orange County

was 3.8 percent - about half the rate in Santa Clara, home of Silicon Valley, where it was 7.5 percent.

"But clearly the market is tighter than it was a year ago," he said. "Anyone who tells you otherwise is living in another world."

One indication is employers' postings on the school's electronic job board, Case said.

"Last year, we averaged 2,300 to 2,400 postings," he said. "This year we're in the 1,400 category."

Still, he noted, that's better than the 700-800 listings they had last fall.

"All the employers are looking a little harder - it's much less of a buyer's market," Case said. "Students are being forced to be more aggressive, more focused and more targeted."

That's certainly been true for Abigail Palisoc, 21, a senior economics major and computer science and management minor at the University of California-Irvine.

"All I've been doing is sending out my resume, but it doesn't seem to be getting any responses," said Palisoc, who has sent out at least 30 job inquiries this quarter.

Like Khacherian, Palisoc was surprised at how difficult the job market is now.

"When I started, the economy was really good and there were so many jobs out there," Palisoc said.

"It sounds funny now, but it's hard to find a job."

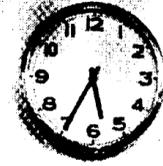
Angie Menendez Martel, a recruiter for Union Bank of California who was recently interviewing job candidates at the University of California-Irvine, said she's seen the desperation among college students this year.

"We've been absolutely inundated," she said. "We post an ad and we get 200 responses."

The bank is hiring about half its usual group of graduates this year, Martel said.

Because of the tight job market, graduate school is an increasingly attractive option for some students.

DeWayne Green, the University of California-Irvine's assistant dean for graduate studies, said applications for next fall's graduate programs have increased 44 percent, compared with 9 percent growth last fall.



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