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Monitoring a changing industry

Computer trainers must keep pace with shifts in demand to remain viable players

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There's no denying that change is a constant in information technology, and the same is true in IT training provided by businesses and educational institutions.

The trainers face ongoing change in software used by business clients and sudden shifts in demand, such as the downturn that followed the dot-com collapse and subsequent recession.

Despite uncertainties over content and demand, providers say their industry remains healthy. The spread of computers at work and home creates a broad market, albeit one that's marked by a digital divide, which shows little sign of closing. The gap between the computer literate and those who struggle with a mouse means computer training will cater to two distinctly different tracks.

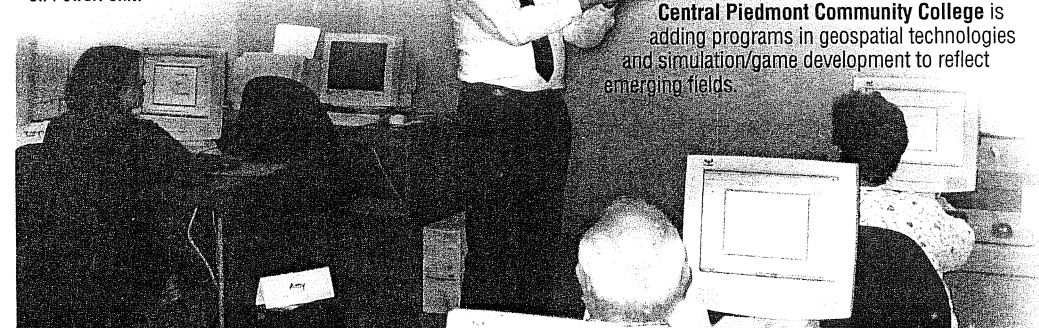
Those with limited skills will continue to need basic classes to learn how to use software applications — also called end-user training — while those looking for information technology jobs will require increasingly sophisticated and specialized education.

One emerging threat is the outsourcing of IT jobs, and technical schools say they're responding.

"It is a reality that people are asking why they should bother to get a job in IT if the jobs are being outsourced, so it is incumbent upon us to offer programs with a higher level of technicality and to escalate programs so our students learn skills that will be difficult to outsource," says Rod Townley, dean of information technology and engineering at Central Piedmont Community College.

"It's also a reality that the U.S. is not producing enough technical people," he adds.

Karl Keefer teaching a course at The Employers Association on PowerPoint.



Farhad Javidi, program chair of information technology at Central Piedmont Community College, oversees a class at the school's new simulation and game-development program.

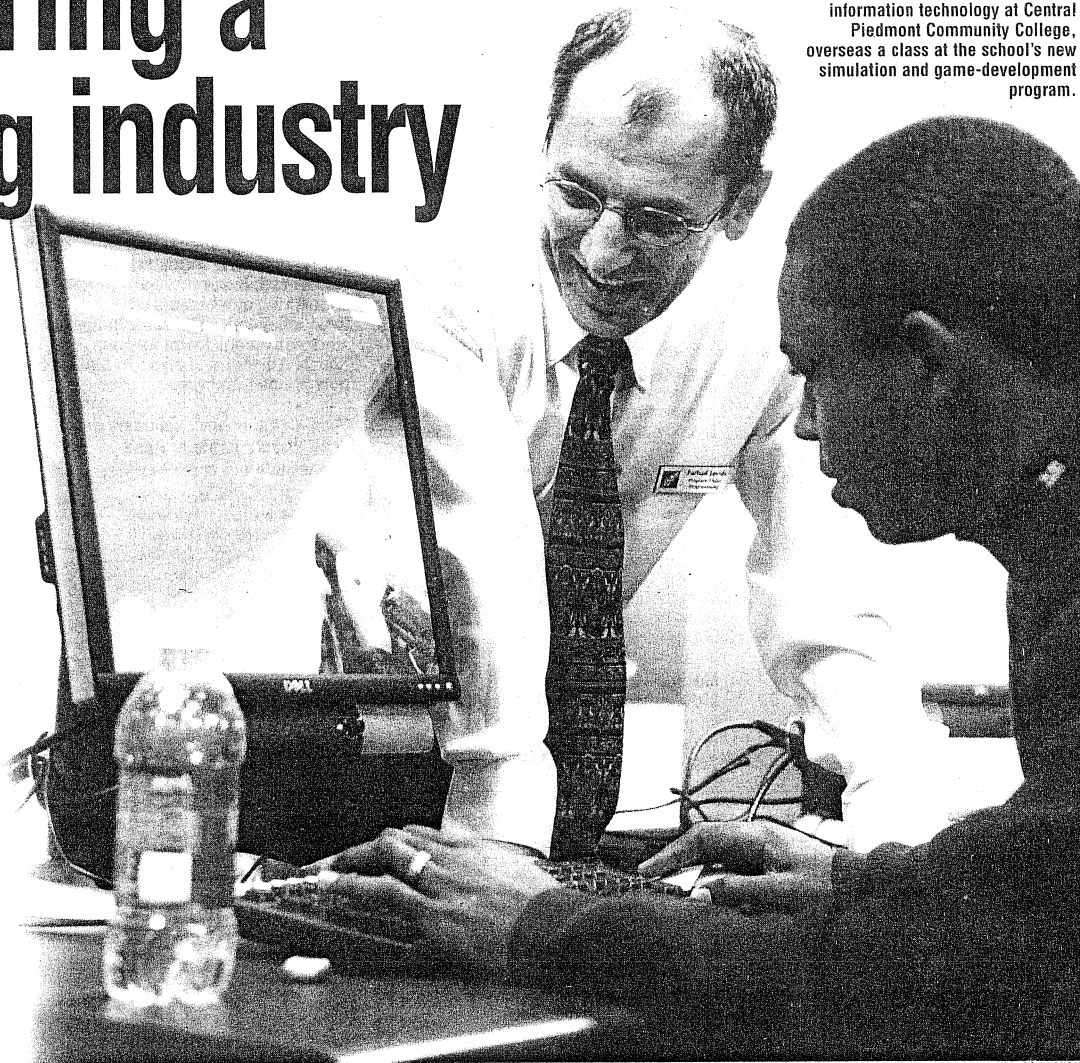


photo TOM COVINGTON

Fluctuating demand has meant some providers that survived the bursting of the technology bubble are still struggling to defend their niche in what remains a competitive field.

Comparing the *Charlotte Business Journal's* lists of the largest computer-training providers shows six of

the top 11 ceased operations between 2000 and 2005. Last year, Computer Education Services Corp., a national company, closed its local office.

"In the dot-com era with the boom in technology, everyone wanted to start a computer school," says Lorraine Blahnik, director of computer training at Central Piedmont.

Roy Brown, who began offering computer-training courses at The Employers Association in 1995, says shifts in demand can occur quickly. From 1995 to 1998, demand was strong for its courses — "Computers were so new that no one knew anything about them," he says. But by 2000, "most people were trained, so there was a pullback."

Then there came the dot-com collapse and the economic response to 9/11, and the boom times were over. "In 2001, the economy tanked, and because training is a discretionary expense, it was the first thing to go," says Brown, The Employers Association's controller. "We saw a large downturn in all our training programs, not just the ones about computers." The Employers Association is an 800-member organization in Charlotte that provides human resources consulting services.

But with the economy back on appar-

Teaching trends

Turnover among computer schools was evident in the last five years — six of the 11 leading schools stopped operations.

The No. 1 school, New Horizons Computer Learning Center, expects a 10% gain in enrollment this year.

Central Piedmont Community College is adding programs in geospatial technologies and simulation/game development to reflect emerging fields.