Yvon Le Roux on How Cisco is helping to plug the Skills Gap in Advanced Networking Technologies

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Western and Eastern Europe needs more IT skills. According to IDC research commissioned by Cisco Systems® and published in September 2005, the continent already needs an extra 230,000 people with networking knowledge. That number is expected to rise to 615,000 by 2008.
The shortage is especially acute in the area of advanced networking technologies such as IP telephony, security, wireless and business skills where IDC estimates 160,000 skilled people are needed now and 500,000 will be required by 2008.

Unsurprisingly, too, information and communication technology (ICT) shortages are more acute in Central Eastern European (CEE) nations, where demand for advanced networking technologies is highest.

The need to boost skills levels is critical if the European Union (EU) is to achieve the goals of i2010, a policy framework aiming to ensure that Europe's businesses, governments and citizens make the best of technology to improve competitiveness, support growth and address societal challenges.

Yvon Le Roux, Vice-President of the Public Sector for Cisco in Europe and Emerging Markets, is a regular speaker on i2010 and skills gap issues. Here he talks about how Cisco is helping to remedy the situation.

Exactly how acute is the technology skills shortage in Europe?

Yvon Le Roux: As a business that relies on a steady supply of skilled engineers, we regularly survey the European market and our latest research, published by IDC in September 2005, shows quite a serious gap in some critical areas.

The survey looked at 31 countries in Western and Eastern Europe and, while shortages were found to be lower than those predicted before the onset of the economic downturn, demand still outstrips supply. This is most notably the case with advanced networking technologies.

Here the skills gap, as a proportion of total demand, is more than eight percent, rising to nearly 16 percent in 2008. This compares to a current overall networking skills gap of six percent, due to go up to almost 12 percent in three years.

CEE countries are in the worst position, where the gap in advanced technology skills is already 11.5 percent, compared to an EU average of just over seven percent.

These are precisely the nations where infrastructure rollout and business process reengineering is likely to be highest over the next few years, although network skills are becoming more important across the board.

What impact could skills shortages have on European competitiveness?

Yvon Le Roux: The EU clearly recognizes the importance of technology in boosting national and regional competitiveness.

The European Commission has articulated its vision for a technology-enhanced future within i2010, a five-year strategy to boost the digital economy and foster growth and jobs in the information society and media industries.

The strategy has three priorities: to create an open and competitive single market for information society and media services within the EU, to increase investment in ICT research by 80 percent and to promote an inclusive European information society, which is why skills are so important.

I2010 identifies a number of critical areas of focus, such as the need for widely-available broadband and electronic delivery of public sector services, but currently fails to address the skills issue in detail.

The implication is that political will may not be matched with on-the-ground support unless steps are taken to ensure that skills gaps are addressed within the EU strategy framework.

There is strong potential for private sector involvement in the development of training programs adapted to industry needs. Indeed, the IDC survey shows that employers often look for training certificates from vendors when recruiting networking professionals.

How specifically is Cisco contributing to closing the skills gap?

Yvon Le Roux: Cisco is actively engaged in helping to reduce skills shortages on three fronts.

First, by sponsoring studies such as this year's IDC research, we are at the forefront of tracking and documenting ICT skills levels and can point to areas where shortages might have a critical impact.

Second, our technologies and process recommendations espouse e-learning as a means of ensuring that informal learning and knowledge sharing is enabled, facilitated and then made widely available to all institutions and enterprises whatever their size.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we contribute directly to the growth of ICT skills through the Cisco Networking Academy Program.

European and Emerging Markets is the largest region for the program.

We have 98 partnership agreements with governments in these countries and are striving for inclusiveness in our student intake, with campaigns and partnerships aimed to encourage more women into the IT sector.

The Cisco Networking Academy Program is particularly important because it leads to a recognized industry certification, which is seen as important by 72 percent of the organizations surveyed by IDC and was especially the case in public sector bodies.

Furthermore, we believe this certification will grow, as 89 percent of respondents to the IDC survey said the importance of the network in their organization would increase in the future.