

# Outlook for Information Chiefs Improves as Demand Picks Up

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Published in *The Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 3, 2002

There's a glimmer of hope for chief information officers who have been unsuccessfully looking for work recently.

Craig Randall, a managing director of DHR, a Chicago search firm, says that companies are once again approaching him about finding chief information officers. Many had been unwilling to spend money on hiring information-technology professionals since early 2001. But "in the last six months, we've booked three great assignments for CIO people," he adds. "We weren't getting these calls 12 months ago."

Some information chiefs can attest to this nascent trend. Two months ago, Lorie Buckingham was named to such a post at Visteon Corp., a Dearborn, MI, auto-parts maker, after her predecessor was lured away by another company. She says she has been approached about "some very good" information chief opportunities since September.

The presence of information chiefs in companies exploded in the 1990s as the Internet and other technology became more central to corporate life. But the downturn, coming after a huge outlay for Y2K preparation, brought tech spending skidding to a halt.

Now spending is being re-evaluated after a several year moratorium, says Renee Arrington, a vice president in the executive search division of management consultants A.T. Kearney, a unit of Electronic Data systems Corp. in Plano, TX. There's also more scrutiny of information technology and information security at the board level, she adds.

However, in the current, belt-tightening environment, companies are looking for information chiefs who know not just technology but also who understand business and what affects the bottom line.

Last month for instance, CompuCredit Corp. named Guido Sacchi as its chief information officer. Before joining the Atlanta credit card company, he had served as a senior manager at Deloitte Consulting. Although there were some "very good technology people" already working at the company, its president, Richard House, was attracted to Mr. Sacchi's consulting background.

“I want someone with a business and a technology background, because sometimes, people want to just buy the newest, coolest thing,” says Mr. House. “But if you’re making big investment decisions, you want to feel comfortable that you’re getting the best solution for the business.”

These people aren’t always easy to find. Although there are lots of qualified information technology professionals looking for jobs these days, there aren’t that many that have the skills that employers are now looking for in an information chief.

Don Mattson recently discovered this. The chief operating officer of InVision Technologies, Inc., Newark, CA, says the company placed an ad in a newspaper a few months ago in search of an information chief. It resulted in a flurry of resumes – but the wide ranging responses made sorting through it all a challenge.

“There are lots of people with great computer and data processing skills, but in terms of finding a good CIO, it’s not that easy,” says Mr. Mattson.

Instead, he turned to InVision’s auditing firm to help him identify candidates. In October, the company named Don Francis its new chief information officer.

Despite the slight uptick in such hires, recruiters are cautious for now. “It’s sort of like the market going up 70 points in a day and then going back down the next,” says Al Borenstine, who runs a Chicago boutique search firm. “It has picked up a little, but it’s still fairly grim out there.”

The cuts of tech workers, whose numbers swelled during the boom, aren’t over either yet. A recent survey of 730 employers on layoff trends by WorldatWork, Scottsdale, AZ, and Center for Workforce Effectiveness, Chicago, supports this notion. It found that cuts in technical areas have increased since last year. And those employers who will conduct layoffs in the next six months say these same areas will be affected.