



Technology

The Best States For Tech Jobs--And The Worst

Brian Wingfield, 04.24.07, 10:00 AM ET
WASHINGTON -

If you've ever thought about quitting your mundane, low-paying office job for a cushy position in the lucrative high-tech sector, now might be a good time to do it.

According to a new report by the American Electronics Association (AEA), the tech industry expanded in 2005 and 2006 for the first consecutive time since the bubble burst in 2001. The study uses Labor Department statistics to show that 150,000 tech jobs were added in 2006, compared with 87,400 in 2005.

Everyone knows that California's tech industry is driven by powerhouses like Google, Intel and Apple. And indeed, that state leads the country in the number of high-tech jobs (919, 322), the most tech jobs added (14,402) and the highest average annual wage for a position in the technology industry (\$95,294), according to the study.

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But where is the job growth? The answers might surprise you: Florida, North Carolina, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Utah are all in the top 10 in terms of numbers of tech jobs added, the most recent data show. Florida's growth is fueled largely by the telecommunications industry there, and North Carolina owes its tech boom to the so-called "Research Triangle" of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill.

In addition, Virginia--home to myriad government contractors, **Time-Warner's** AOL unit and MCI, which later became part of Verizon Communications--has transformed itself into a veritable technology powerhouse. Although almost all of the state's tech industry is located in the Washington, D.C., suburbs of northern Virginia, it leads the nation in concentration of tech workers and ranks near the top in number of tech jobs, average salary and number of jobs added.

"We are pleased to see the rebounding of the tech industry," says AEA Chief Executive William Archey. "Not only do these jobs make critical contributions to the U.S. economy, but they also pay extremely well. The average tech industry wage is 86% more than the average U.S. private sector wage."

In places like California, Massachusetts and New Jersey, the average salary for high-tech positions approaches \$100,000. In fact, the study lists only seven states--Oklahoma, Montana, North Dakota, West Virginia, Mississippi, South Dakota and Wyoming--and Puerto Rico as places where tech workers make less than an average of \$50,000 per year.

AEA's definition of high-tech is fairly loose: It encompasses Internet and telecommunications services as well as semiconductors and electronic manufacturing, among other things. But it does not include the biotech industry.

In spite of the relative rebound in the industry, it's not entirely healthy, AEA's study shows. The communications services sector lost about 13,300 jobs from 2005 to 2006. And at least two factors could further jeopardize the industry: The shortage of high school and college graduates with technical expertise and a post-Sept. 11 visa system that has made it difficult for many engineers to enter the United States.

"I think this country is being quite shortsighted if we do not take seriously the need to have a top-notch educated workforce in the areas of math and science," says Rebecca Arbogast, a lawyer and vice president with the market research firm Stifel Nicolaus. She adds that while the addition of high-tech jobs is a "beacon of hope for the U.S. economy," all of these jobs can be cut in the event of an economic downturn.

One of the most interesting discoveries within AEA's report deals with states that are not experiencing high-tech growth. Among them are Colorado, New York and Georgia. While Colorado's average annual tech wages are among the highest in the country (\$80,225), the state lost more than 1,600 high-tech jobs last year. And New York, which lags only behind California and Texas in total number of high-tech jobs, actually lost 758 of these positions. (These figures represent the net change in the total high-tech industry for each state. For example, in Colorado, there was an expansion in tech research and development and engineering. However, this was offset by a reduction in computer manufacturing and related jobs.) Thus, the data show that while some states might be very good places for the high-tech workers who have jobs, they might not be the best place to look for the sector's expansion.

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