



You're in control!

“It's a good time to be a candidate and a very good time to be a very good candidate,” said one of the experts in this year's look at the employment outlook for electronics engineers. With UK electronics graduates in increasingly short supply, a positive industry outlook and the concentration on certain technologies in the UK – notably, emerging wireless technologies – and you have the conditions for a holy grail type quest for those candidates with the magic four to five years of the right experience.

Our five recruitment experts – Anne Claydon, HR manager at picoChip; Martin Constantinides, director of specialist recruitment consultancy ECM Selection; Richard Traherne, wireless business unit manager for Cambridge Consultants; John Spencer, managing director of STS Recruitment; and Tim Freeman, technology recruitment advisor within Philips Electronics' EMEA recruitment services division – agreed the industry is looking to hire more people this year.

A buoyant economy and a conservatively optimistic industry mean new opportunities abound. By **Vanessa Knivett**.

Both Traherne and Constantinides believe hiring is more buoyant this year. Says Traherne: “We started the year looking for 11 new staff. There are 46 existing staff, so that's a 24% increase due to the growth in our business. We're on track to meet this target, but I'm also looking speculatively for additional recruits when we happen across good talent.”

Constantinides comments: “An indication of the buoyancy of the market can be gleaned by looking at some crude statistics. If you compare the number of vacancies we have this year compared to last year, it's up by 50%.”

Meanwhile, Claydon experienced more HR activity last year, suggesting that wireless is ahead of the curve: “Last year, picoChip

experienced phenomenal expansion. Now, we are going through a period of consolidation and growth in staff numbers is likely to be at a more constant 10% over the next few years.” Freeman also reports a concerted hiring effort last year, when Philips was building its capability in the key areas of technology and healthcare. He says: “2006 sees us focussing on a smaller number of hires as part of our international Talent Management programme. We will also be looking to attract the top research talent to help us achieve our strategic objectives in areas such as biomedical imaging and biosensors.”

Whilst there will always be some staff turnover, it appears that many new positions are being created. Traherne attributes most of the vacancies at Cambridge Consultants' wireless business unit to new positions, saying ‘our order book is growing rapidly.’ Meanwhile, Freeman confirms that an active internal recruitment programme has left Philips seeking replacements – ‘back filling’, rather than staff turnover.

Richard Traherne, (left): “We're finding a shortage of embedded software developers, dsp and rf ic designers, (but) we are definitely looking for almost all disciplines.”

Anne Claydon, (right): “(picoChip's) growth in staff numbers is likely to be at a more constant 10% over the next few years.”





With many companies recruiting actively, are there particular areas of skills shortages? Traherne believes so: "We're finding a shortage of embedded software developers (reflecting the higher proportions of software in electronics products), dsp (required due to the increasing signal processing complexity of modern communications standards) and rf ic designers (always hard to find and we have a fantastic pipeline of work in this area). We are definitely looking, though, for almost all disciplines."

Spencer concurs: "Skills shortages are more noticeable within the design and development phases and rf, analogue, asic/fpga and dsp engineers are always a challenge to find." Claydon says picoChip is always looking for good applications engineers, whilst Freeman remarks: "Evidence from recruitment campaigns this year would seem to indicate an increasing shortage of product development engineers, product quality engineers and electronics designers with an interest in biochemistry."

Skills shortages are compounded by a requirement for people with commercial experience. Notes Freeman: "Recruiting the best electronic engineers and research scientists has always been a challenge. But when you also require a commercial focus, 'outside the box' thinking and innovation, then the challenge becomes even greater."

Constantinides remarks on the perennial problem of companies being unwilling or unable to employ people without a lot of experience. In particular, he cites rf and analogue skills: "Graduate positions are

relatively few and far between – people are looking for a few years of experience when recruiting these skills. Our experience is that, although there are more companies actively looking for people, they are going to hold out for the skills they want, rather than broaden the job specification. It does mean there is competition over the best candidates."

So how are companies expecting to fill their most pressing vacancies?

Constantinides says: "There has been a creep in salaries upwards. Looking back at the crazy days of 2000/2001, share options were seen to be the thing, but they sometimes turned out to be valueless. It's dented people's confidence and it's taken a while for candidates to put their head above the parapet again. But we are beginning to see more share option schemes and candidates willing to take the gamble of joining a small company again."

Are companies widening the age pool from which they recruit? Constantinides noted: "One or two of the bigger companies are looking at signing on bonuses – as graduates come out of university with ever higher debts, that's likely to be a continuing trend."

Meanwhile, age discrimination legislation comes into effect in October, so companies will have a legal obligation to become more flexible than at the moment." Traherne confirmed Cambridge Consultants was recruiting from the younger age ranges: "We are widening the age range by recruiting 'technical scholars', whom we sponsor through university."

Expanding the search

An obvious source of new talent is overseas and Freeman confirms this. "Philips is active in recruiting internationally, although obtaining work visas for these candidates can be more of a challenge. Certainly, we have looked to the international market to assist us in filling clinical applications and


medical engineering vacancies in the UK and Ireland."

Traherne notes Cambridge Consultants has taken a similar approach: "We have taken on foreign nationals and helped them with visa applications."

Constantinides says companies are more willing to consider EU nationals than international workers, although workers qualified for the highly skilled migrant programme (HSMP) are more likely to be considered. "EU enlargement has seen the addition of Poland, which has a good educational system. We are seeing more applicants from Eastern Europe and this has increased the pool of eligible people. We are also seeing more candidates qualified for HSMP and companies are willing to take them on. On the whole, though, there's a reluctance to apply for work permits on behalf of candidates if they haven't already managed to secure one."

Summing up the recruitment situation for electronics engineers in the UK, Spencer says: "With a buoyant jobs market and talented engineers in short supply, candidates are increasingly in control." He suggests companies are now relying on headhunting. "Many candidates who would consider the right opportunity are not active in the job market and can only be located by using search techniques. Having found the candidate, clients must now offer a combination of benefits and career options – the new opportunity must be exciting, as well as financially viable to make the move worthwhile."

Constantinides makes a similar point: "People are not necessarily looking for money, but for new technical challenges." Some very interesting technical challenges are out there. Claydon, for example, cites two senior vp roles that have been created for the first time at picoChip, signalling the company's maturity.

All our experts believe the recruitment market for electronic engineers will remain buoyant. Concludes Constantinides: "The only frustration from our point of view is that very good candidates are going to be offered positions by more than one client. A candidate cloning machine would be the best development as far as we are concerned!" 

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