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Advertising Companies Fret Over a Digital Talent Gap

By **TANZINA VEGA**

When the Ad:tech advertising technology conference hits New York next week, marketers, advertising agencies and recruiters may spend less time listening to the panelists and more time working the floor to find new employees.

A talent gap is growing between the skills that many new advertising jobs require and the number of people who have those skills. The dilemma, one familiar to many industries across the country, is particularly acute for jobs that require hard-core quantitative, mathematical and technical skills.

The talent pool, advertising technology company executives say, is not a deep one. And those who have the skills are in high demand, often fetching annual salaries that can reach \$100,000.

“There is pain for hiring in digital at all levels,” said John Ebbert, managing editor of AdExchanger.com, a Web site dedicated to advertising technology.

“The marketers, the publishers, the ad tech companies, the agencies, data management companies — they’re all going for the same type of employee.”

The job board on AdExchanger, which is updated every 45 days, has postings for positions with titles like “Yield Optimization Manager” and “Director of Platform Marketing.” The number of jobs on the board has nearly doubled in the past year, Mr. Ebbert said, to 80 jobs every 45 days from 40.

The digital talent gap is driven in part by the enormous amount of user data that ad tech companies are collecting for agencies and marketers — data that is instrumental in directing ads to consumers and analyzing trends. New hires are needed for a variety of tasks, including writing code, creating digital advertisements, Web site development and statistical analysis.

“The demand has far outstripped the supply,” said Joe Zawadzki, the chief executive of MediaMath, an ad tech company in New York. “The number of things that you need to know is high and the number of people that have grown up knowing it is low.”

Mr. Zawadzki said that as of last week his company had 13 positions open and had gone to job boards, recruiters and even hosted technology-focused meet-ups to find people. In September, the company hired its first senior vice president for human capital to help with recruitment.

On average, Mr. Zawadzki said, it takes two to three months to find the right person — someone with a combination of pure quantitative skills, applied marketing skills and an understanding of how the advertising technology business works. With a limited talent pool, many ad tech firms are after the same people.

“Half my job is maintaining a mental Rolodex of people that are at various places,” Mr. Zawadzki said.

Edwin Lee, 40, is typical of the candidates that many ad tech companies are competing for. Mr. Lee, an economics major at Stanford who has a master’s degree in business administration from the University of Southern California, was hired as an account director at MediaMath in September. He came to the company after leaving a Silicon Valley start-up and began his new job after entertaining a variety of options, including other small start-ups and Google.

“For me it was like, ‘The world’s my oyster here — what do I want to do?’ ” said Mr. Lee, who describes his new job as “helping companies and clients make sense of something they don’t really understand and they hear a lot about.”

The difficulty in finding qualified candidates is affecting advertising agencies as well, said Jerry Neumann, a venture capitalist from Neu Venture Capital who invests in ad tech companies like 33 Across and YieldBot.

Agencies have not traditionally hired for skills like “number crunching, data visualization, quantitative analysis,” Mr. Neumann said. “They’ve never needed those in the past.” Instead, media buyers and even those on the creative side of agencies need to prepare for a new digital reality.

“The kind of media buying that’s happening now is much more quantitative” Mr. Neumann said. “The agencies are staffed for qualitative.”

Instead of coming up with one grand idea, new digitally adept workers in creative fields should be able to devise multiple ways to execute an idea. For example, a variety of Facebook ads can be devised, then tested on the fly to see which appeal to consumers, Mr. Neumann said.

The increasing ability for marketers to put specific ads in front of specific viewers at specific times, whether on mobile devices or personal computers, also creates a need for employees who can

conceptualize and execute simultaneous concepts. Mr. Zawadzki said the future for creative talent would be “to come up with thousands of ideas, put them out there and see what works.”

Jennifer Seidel, the executive vice president for agency relations and membership at the American Association of Advertising Agencies, said agencies that were more general in their focus were having a harder time attracting talent with deep digital or quantitative skills.

“Part of it is to get people to recognize that it’s a viable career choice,” Ms. Seidel said. To that end, the trade organization hopes to have a Web site soon that will feature the range of people with nontraditional skill sets who work at advertising agencies. They have also formed a committee to address talent gaps at agencies and to offer training seminars for members.

Ms. Seidel and other ad tech executives said outreach to universities was also critical.

“Colleges and universities are not teaching the skills they need to survive in this environment,” said Doug Weaver, the founder and chief executive of the Upstream Group, a company that provides digital training to publishers and agencies. While some universities have advertising and marketing concentrations, “the traditional media sales or ad skill set was not built for this,” Mr. Weaver said. “You need a hybrid.”

Some agencies, like Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, part of the Omnicom Group, have put formal training programs in place. Its program, called Ed, began last July and has offered more than 100 classes on everything from “field trips to Facebook,” said Allison Kent-Smith, director for digital development at Goodby. Ms. Kent-Smith said employees were trained in areas like interactive design, social media, HTML and coding languages like CSS.

“You have to get very close to technology,” Ms. Kent-Smith said. “You have to get your hands in it.”

The Ad:tech conference will be held at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in Manhattan from Nov. 8 to 10, and will include a panel on how marketers can build a digitally skilled “brand dream team.”

But panels and training may not be enough. Erika Weinstein, president of the executive recruitment firm Stephen-Bradford Search, said the bigger issue for agencies trying to fill the talent gap was managing the grand expectations of what these new employees were expected to do.

“Something has gone terribly out of whack in looking for realistic talent,” Ms. Weinstein said. Many companies are looking for “a five-headed monster,” focusing on creative and highly technical skills and a strong business acumen. Agencies, Ms. Weinstein said, needed to “get realistic not only about

what they want from the candidate, but what are they going to offer.”