

The Australian Financial Review
www.afr.com Tuesday 15 May 2007

Work Space

Novel ways to spread the word

Geeks are useful after all, when they're good at promoting new products, writes **Fiona Smith**.

Work takes on a whole new meaning when you are getting paid to have fun.

The hot new jobs are about harnessing your enthusiasm. At Microsoft, you could earn a wage by playing all day with video games or mucking around with a digital camera.

At Apple, the geeks are glorified at the "genius bar", where people can get assistance for all sorts of technical problems from the upmarket help desk.

You could be a buzz marketer, being paid in cash or in kind, for using a company's products and recommending them to admirers. This may mean leaning up against a bar, surrounded by cool people and buying shots of vodka, or just raving about your new jeans.

Some companies, keen to catch new consumer or technological trends, are hiring people with skills for jobs that are yet to be defined.

"Jobs are being created on a regular basis that didn't exist two years ago," says the national retail practice manager for Talent2, Geoff Whytcross. "People are creating their own jobs."

Microsoft Australia's group manager, technical community, Frank Arrigo, has an innocuous-enough title, but had a bit of a struggle with the official description for Nick Hodge's business card when he hired him to be a general evangelist about the use of digital photography.

It took a couple of weeks of convincing the powers that be, but now Hodge's card reads: professional geek.

Arrigo now presides over a team of 15 technical evangelists who play with the gear they love, talk to customers, community groups, blog about their experiences and, generally, "connect at the human level".

Hodge, as part of his mission, travels the country looking for the geekiest households to video for his blog.

"These are technical people who can communicate. Normally, most are not good communicators," Arrigo says.

"Part of this is showing that [information technology] is cool."

They may be evangelising, but in talking to other enthusiasts, Arrigo's team is also picking up information that may be useful to Microsoft about the use and potential of technology.

There are plenty of other great new jobs in IT, he says, and people are building careers around blogging or as professional gamers who sell their avatars — the identities they create — online to others who want to play at a more advanced level.

Brad Pidgeon, 26, says he was a gamer with visions of becoming an actuary when he took up the position of senior digital lifestyle evangelist with Microsoft Australia four years ago.

"My favourite part of the job has to be getting to play with the absolute latest in consumer entertainment technology, often before it is released," he says, by email.

The director of social research firm Heartbeat Trends, Neer Korn, says the hot new jobs for young people are likely to involve working for themselves, setting up niche businesses that may be available for hire as consultants.

"If they want an ideal job, it will be something they create for themselves," he says. "Something they believe in."

"It is the passion and it is something they are willing to devote a lot more of themselves to."

"The majority end up working much harder for less money [than if they worked elsewhere], but they would never give it up."

Consultant on Generation Y, author Peter Sheahan, says that when one of his staff wanted to leave to pursue university studies, he managed to retain him by offering him part-time work surfing the web.



Microsoft's Frank Arrigo hired a professional geek to promote products. Photo: JIM RICE

"This is a dream job," he says. It involves looking through websites and blogs for new trends and conversations that may be useful to the consultancy's clients.

Sometimes, retaining Generation Y means identifying their skills and

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interests and finding out how they can benefit the company. Google in Silicon Valley has a policy of hiring highly intelligent people — "If you are smart, you are hired" — and then working out what to do with them, Sheahan says.

Other times, getting access to skills means broadcasting a problem that needs fixing and offering prize money to the person who can solve it.

A spin-off of drug company Eli Lilly started up the InnoCentive website where companies seek solutions and scientists vie for prizes of up to \$US100,000 (\$120,000).

Talent2's Whytcross says employers will need to be a lot more innovative if they are to identify the talent that will keep them on top of the trends. Many of these people will not respond to job advertisements.

Whytcross offers the position of innovation architect as a hot new job. These are people who investigate whether a product is needed before a company commits to producing it and it might involve some market research and product testing.

Another new area is being filled by "emission sniffers", not a glamorous title perhaps, but an apt description of consultants who gauge the environmental footprints of businesses.