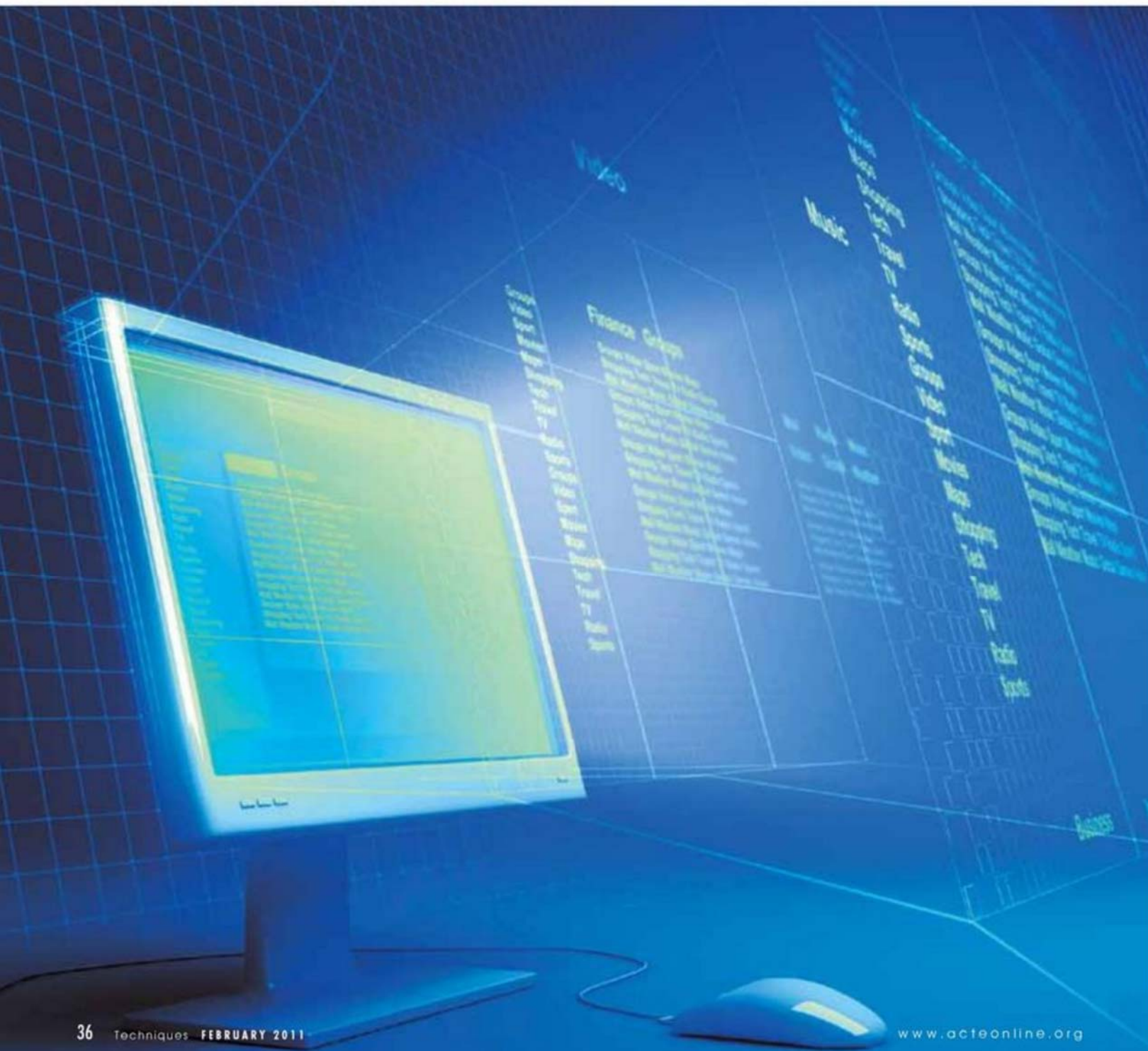


# IT FIELD PROVIDES



# SOME STABILITY

## for Workers Changing Careers

BY PEG ALLEN

**W**hen it comes to curriculum, certifying and training, no industry is more challenged to keep current than the information technology field (IT). IT industry professionals experience constant changes in computer software and hardware. As one of the top fields listed nationally, IT training programs are thriving at the Warren County Career Center (WCCC) in Southwest Ohio, particularly in the economic downturn with more and more displaced workers using federal funds to return to school and retrain for a new career.

WCCC IT coordinator and instructor Larry Smith said he has seen many people coming in who want to switch to careers that will be more sustainable than their previous jobs. While IT may not have been their first career choice when they began in the workforce, they are finding that along with health care, the IT field is surviving and thriving in the economic downturn.

"Some people come in thinking it will be an easy program," Smith said. "Once they get into the training and start to understand there is a lot of work involved,

but it is doable work, they decide they want to continue."

Recently, Microsoft changed the focus of its certification tests and that precipitated the necessity for rewriting curriculum, recertifying instructors and purchasing new textbooks for the new Microsoft Certified Information Technology Professional program at WCCC. The whole process took Smith about six months to redo the course and curriculum, and to also prepare for and earn the new certification himself. Soon, Cisco will be upgrading its certifications, starting the process over again for the Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) program. This means that in addition to the people who are getting into the field for the first time, all current IT professionals have to regularly return to school to update their certifications.

"We meet with local business leaders and other area educational institutions to find out what IT skills employers need," Smith said. "It is a constant task to make sure we are offering the most up-to-date information and preparing our students for certification tests. People have been coming to us at a very desperate time in their lives...their unemployment is

about to run out, they may be losing their house or their car, and they are realizing that the job they used to have will never return. We help them find a new path to success in the IT field."

WCCC provides a 40-hour course to prepare students to pass the Cisco CCNA exam. The course lasts about five weeks with classes taking eight hours per week. But, in order to really prepare for the exam, students must put in many more hours outside the classroom. Since local colleges are offering dual enrollment for the WCCC program, once students earn their certificates in Microsoft and Cisco, they can continue to earn a degree in the field.

### Workers Forge New Career Paths

Traditionally, Smith says, many of his students are already in the industry, so they know what they need and are coming in with some understanding. Lately, he has seen more people coming into that class for a career change, too. When the economy is good, he said, the program gets more students coming from within the industry who need to earn certifications. He has had students who were passed over for a promotion, or didn't



PHOTO COURTESY OF PEO ALLEN

◀ IT student Kevin Gordon practices wiring Cisco routers in the classroom.

kind of training will take time, which is something you don't have a lot of when you are laid off; your unemployment will run out."

Wayne Siebert, who lives in Franklin, said he enrolled in IT courses at WCCC, after he was laid off at General Motors, because he saw opportunity in the field and wanted to change careers.

"The very first thing I did was to look at programs at the career center," he said. "I had taken other courses there while I was at GM—welding and refrigeration—so I knew it was a good school. I worked in the maintenance department at GM, and industry is bottoms up right now, but computers and technology are here to stay."

Siebert has taken every IT course available at WCCC, and was finishing Cisco Certified Network Associate last November. Along with the hands-on

get the raise they thought they should, so they come in to brush up and earn the latest certifications. Many of those students already have bachelor's degrees and higher. But, in the current economic climate, Smith gets more people chang-

ing careers. The job they had last week no longer exists. "If I could do anything to help these people, I would say, 'get into these funding agencies and get some help, don't wait until you are at the end of your unemployment to start the process.' Any

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experience in class, he said the courses involve some intensive reading and are equivalent in difficulty to some engineering courses he has taken at the college level. He adds that he knows technology changes and he will be constantly taking updated courses to stay in the field. "I am getting the basics now that will last a lifetime," he said. "But it seems technology totally changes every three years or so. Larry [Smith] has his hands full keeping up with the curriculum and certification exams. The training here is concise, direct and to-the-point, there is no fluffy stuff. You better be on the ball, because here it comes."

Kevin Gordon from Maineville (near Cincinnati), said he has never worked in the technology field, but it seemed more stable for employment than his last job at DHL in Wilmington, where he was laid off in July 2009. He enrolled in

January last year and was about to finish 11 months later. Gordon said he realizes that now he is entering the technology field, he will be taking refresher courses frequently.

"I have always liked playing with computers," he said. "They are never going to go away, and IT is a field that has always interested me. Going back to school at age 40, you have to retrain your brain to rethink all over again. I have been working to get back in the learning process mode. The hands-on training has really helped. I like to work on the equipment instead of just reading the book, because the book can only get you so far."

Gordon has taken some college courses in the past, and also had some technical training at work for specific job duties. He had earned two of his certifications in 2010 and was planning on taking several

more certification exams. Now that he has gotten into it, he said he enjoys the idea of continuing education, and loves the practical work in the WCCC classroom.

"The typical student in my class is prepared to keep going to school for the rest of his or her career," Smith said. "With IT, you have to love learning because the field is based on constant reinvention of the product." **I**

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