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Top-Secret Security Clearance Is a Ticket to Lots of Job Offers

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

As manager of the Technology Service Corporation's office in Trumbull, Conn., Allan Corbeil also handles the hiring, and it has become his biggest headache.

What he needs most are radar engineers who specialize in signal processing, and if that's not esoteric enough, most of those engineers must also have a government-issued security clearance. That is because the company performs research and development for a variety of government agencies whose projects are classified, and everyone involved must have an appropriate level of clearance.

Mr. Corbeil searches for potential employees from a limited pool of cleared workers, the same pool that hundreds of other companies — from big military contractors like Raytheon and Northrop Grumman to small information technology companies and engineering firms — are also searching.

Steve Brecken, a Raytheon spokesman, said: "It's definitely a challenge to find people with the right skills and the right clearance. We're all fishing from the same pond."

Mr. Corbeil is trying everything. "We are thinking of using technical recruiters to target competitors," he said. "Right now we go to industry conferences, check all the job boards and talk to everyone we can to find out who's unhappy" at work.

As federal military and security budgets rise, secret projects are increasingly being outsourced to the private sector. Those contracts can be lucrative, but staffing can be an enormous challenge. Job seekers with clearance rarely lack employment offers — not just engineers and scientists, but also clerical staff and even janitors, since every person working on a classified project must have clearance.

[IntelligenceJobs.com](http://www.intelligencejobs.com), a job board for military contractors and subcontractors, averages about 4,700 job postings a month. A year ago that number was 3,300.

Kelly FedSecure in Greenbelt, Md., a division of Kelly Services that focuses on placing cleared employees, says the number of its corporate and government clients has doubled every year since the division's founding in 2003.

[ClearanceJobs.com](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/09/jobs/09jmar.html), a job board for those with active security clearances, has hundreds of companies posting available positions on its site and 62,000 registered job candidates; 62 percent of those were added in the last 12 months. "Job candidates are becoming more aware of the value of their security clearance," said Evan Lesser, the site's founder and director.

One computer technology specialist in Washington, who has a top-secret clearance and specializes in data recovery and backup systems, says he gets "hammered" by recruiters. (He insisted on anonymity because he works with classified information.) "I get at least 8 to 10 calls a week, trying to hire me for jobs with clearance," he said.

Security clearances come in three levels: confidential, secret or top secret. The greatest demand, job seekers and employers say, is for top-secret clearance. Bradford Rand, chief executive of Techexpo Top Secret, a New York City firm that organizes job fairs for security-cleared technical professionals, said that most companies that attend its fairs had contract work from the government and jobs to fill immediately. "We can have 50 companies competing for the same candidate," Mr. Rand said. "The higher the clearance, the faster they go."

Troy Mueller, an Air Force veteran recently hired by the Mitre Corporation in Boston as an analyst in its integrated intelligence systems unit, said that at the time of his hiring he had four firm offers on the table from other companies and had been in serious conversations about possible employment with four others.

Mr. Mueller, who did not wish to disclose his clearance level, says it takes more than just the right clearance credentials to elicit that kind of response. "The clearance is worthless without the skills," he said. But for companies that need to fill positions immediately, hiring someone with the right clearance but the wrong skills — and then training them for the job — is sometimes the only option.

The computer technology expert agreed: "Because it's a job seeker's market, I get a lot of calls for technology jobs I'm not qualified for. They just want me because I have the right clearance."

Employers and recruiters say the shortage of cleared workers is a result of large backlogs at the agencies processing applications — the Defense Security Service, which provides clearance services for the Pentagon and its contractors, and the Office of Personnel Management.

In January 2005, the Government Accountability Office put the Defense agency on a list of programs considered at high risk of mismanagement because of the slowness of its processing, and in October 2005 the personnel office reported a backlog of 110,000 cases.

Companies waiting for employee clearances to be processed say it can take from several months to several years. Kathy L. Dillaman, associate director of the personnel office's Center for Federal Investigative Services, said the agency, which receives about 1.5 million new investigative requests a year, now had about 9,000 people handling investigations and was working to shorten the process.

Obtaining a security clearance is not easy. Those who leave military service often take a clearance with them, but the only other way to acquire one is to work for a federal agency or a private-sector company that has been cleared for work on classified projects. The process is particularly intrusive at the top-secret level, with investigators examining an applicant's personal relationships, former employers, financial history and lifestyle.

But if you are willing and have the right background — especially in information technology, engineering or intelligence analysis — finding an opportunity to obtain a high-level clearance can be well worth the effort. Some companies, like Mitre, are large enough to have both classified and nonclassified work and will hire skilled people for nonclassified work while the company waits for a security clearance to come through.

"Getting a clearance requires a two-to-four-year plan, and you have to be willing to travel to where the work is, but if you can get it, it's gold," said William Golden, founder of IntelligenceCareers.com and a former intelligence analyst with the National Security Agency. A salary survey released by ClearanceJobs.com in January showed that someone with a security clearance made 24 percent more than a person without one doing the same job.

Richard A. Piske III, general manager of Kelly FedSecure, puts that advantage as high as 35 percent. "We have a guy in our database that is 22, he's got one year of junior college and a top-secret clearance," he said. "Now he's an intelligence analyst making six figures. If you have the right clearance and the right skills, you are in an enviable position."

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