

Le Monde

American stores, factories and small businesses open their doors to tech workers

As the Silicon Valley giants downsize, more traditional sectors are hiring. Stock options are rarer there, but these bosses promise security and a job in line with the applicants' values.

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The day Nicole Tsai was fired from Google, she put herself on stage on TikTok. Tears in eyes, sipping juice with a straw, she told about the text she received from her bosses. Quickly, she went downstairs, rushed to her computer to know more, but her work email accounts had already been blocked. Tsai had a chat with her colleagues and then decided to go for a walk at Disneyland. "I really believe that when one door closes, another one opens," the former Google employee said.

Indeed, the prospects for Silicon Valley's youth are still bright, provided they are willing to look beyond California and the GAMA (Google, Amazon, Meta and Apple). The "Big Four" are announcing thousands of job cuts, feeding the list of 287,000 job losses tallied by the specialized site Layoffs.fyi in 2022 and 2023.

Alex Ivkovic, director of information systems at plastic packaging manufacturer CDF Corporation, still remembered how hard it was to find a computer programmer with two to three years of experience, one year earlier. "No one was interested. No one wanted to work in the factory with machines. They all want to work remotely," he said. It took the manager six months to find the perfect fit.

'More open' candidates

Paul Toomey is the founder of Geographic Solutions, a Florida-based job search platform with 450 employees. Toomey explained that he's also having trouble attracting candidates for the 50 high-tech positions available at his company. "It's not easy to compete with Silicon Valley," he said. "The big guys are offering a lot of money and, right after the pandemic, they were hiring remotely all over the country! It took us more than three months to find each of our engineers." He concluded, "Luckily, the situation is getting a little better. The big guys are downsizing."

Software engineers, designers and artificial intelligence experts are expanding their horizons beyond California. According to ZipRecruiter economist Sinem Buber, 56% quickly find another job. Their search lasts an average of seven weeks and three-quarters of them choose among several offers, especially in sectors other than Silicon Valley. Six percent go into e-commerce, 5% opt for finance and 2% prefer health care.

"A lot of candidates are more open," said Sherveen Mashayekhi, the founder of Free Agency, a tech staff agent company. "For the first time, I have some looking at Walmart," he added. Walmart superstores employ 20,000 high-tech specialists in their e-commerce

branch and are always on the lookout for workers with proven experience in the field.

"Retail, health care and banking are looking for technical solutions. Professionals want to build their capabilities in-house," said Sam Hocking, creator of the recruiting platform Vertis. Those disappointed by Silicon Valley are attracted to these other industries "because they have interesting problems they can solve. Plus, the base salary is often higher and the career path less chaotic," Hocking added.

The secondary sector is also in high demand. "Every plant has figures that they don't know how to utilize," said Maggie Slowik, director of manufacturing at software company IFS. She added that "they need experts in artificial intelligence and machine learning. Unfortunately, they have an image problem. People think factories are too noisy and too dirty." Richard Wahlquist, president of the American Staffing Association, representing temporary employment agencies, also sees a great need in small and medium-sized businesses.

They certainly don't offer stock options, he said, but "they have a lot of other advantages." He mentioned "better work-life balance and deeper relationships with other employees." Slowik added, "Manufacturers are going to have to offer higher wages. But money isn't everything. Younger generations want to do work that is meaningful."

That is Toomey's key argument. "With us, you help people who have been laid off find good-paying jobs," he said. Elisa Anders, head of talent acquisition at Climeworks, a Swiss company specializing in carbon dioxide capture, said, "We are pioneers. We don't just talk, we act." The firm is looking for 20 employees including engineers, site designers and regulation specialists. They all must have one main motivation: saving the planet.

Vijay Sankaran, CTO of security company JCI Johnson Controls, also emphasized ethical motivations. His company has 350 openings this year in engineering, security and video. "We focus on serious problems," said

Sankaran. "We build smart, decarbonized buildings. We work on encrypted, real-time data. We bridge the gap between the physical and the digital space." He, too, feels like a pioneer.

Certainly, stock options and Silicon Valley perks are becoming rarer. "There are no massage sessions at work anymore," Mashayekhi said. "But flexibility is much more in vogue. Remote work and four-day work weeks are also an option, without having to give up job security."