

T H E **J O B** C E N T E R

COMPUTER SUPPORT SPECIALIST



Nathan Gnau is a 2008 graduate of Celina High School and Tri-Star Career Compact's Interactive Media Tech Prep program. Nathan earned 14 college credit hours while attending Tri-Star as well as a \$1,000 Tech Prep scholarship to Rhodes State College. He will graduate in June with his Associate's Degree in Computer Programming from Rhodes.

Professionals in all industries depend on their computers every day for numerous functions, including word-processing, e-mail, mathematical calculations, and page layout. Computer support specialists provide technical assistance, support, and advice to computer users to ensure the computer and its software functions properly and efficiently.

These troubleshooters interpret problems and provide technical support for hardware, software, and systems. They answer telephone calls, analyze problems using automated diagnostic programs, and resolve recurrent difficulties. They also install, modify, clean, and repair computer hardware and software. In some cases, they may work on monitors, keyboards, printers, and mice. Sometimes, computer support specialists work for help-desk or support services firms, where they provide computer support to clients on a contractual basis.

Some computer support specialists may assist computer users with hardware and software problems not addressed in the product's instruction manual. These specialists field telephone calls and e-mail messages from customers seeking guidance on

technical problems. They must listen carefully to the customer, ask questions to diagnose the nature of the problem, and patiently walk the customer through the problem-solving steps. They deal directly with customer issues, and companies value them as a source of feedback on their products.

Other computer support specialists design, install, and support an organization's LAN (local-area network), WAN (wide-area network), network segment, Internet, or intranet system. They provide day-to-day administrative support for software users in professional offices, small businesses, the government, and large corporations. They maintain network hardware and software, analyze problems, and monitor the network to ensure its availability to system users.

Computer support specialists may also plan, coordinate, and implement the organization's information security. They educate users on computer security, install security software, monitor the network for security breaches, respond to cyber attacks, and gather evidence for prosecuting cyber crime.

firms in all industries are expanding or developing computer systems, creating an immediate need for computer support specialists.

Q. Are there opportunities for advancement in this field?

A. Yes. Beginning computer support specialists usually work for organizations that deal directly with customers or in-house users. For the most part, job promotions depend more on performance than on formal education. Computer support specialists at hardware and software companies often enjoy great upward mobility. In some cases, advancement can come within months of initial employment. Acquiring Information Technology certifications and taking courses to update technology skills, though not required by employers, may lead to more advancement opportunities.

Q&A

Q. Where do computer support specialists work?

A. In a wide variety of places. Some computer support specialists work in professional and business services industries, often in computer systems design and related services. Others work at banks, government agencies, insurance companies, educational institutions. They may also work for wholesale and retail vendors of computers, office equipment, appliances, and home electronic equipment. Many computer support specialists work for manufacturers of computers, semiconductors, and other electronic components.

Employers range in size from startup companies to established industry leaders. With the continued development of the Internet, telecommunications, and e-mail, industries not typically associated with computers, such as construction, increasingly need computer-related workers. Small and large

JOB IN THIS FIELD

Job titles	Place of work	Kind of work	Salary range*
Systems administrator	Private industry, government agency, school	Devises computerized systems to gather and store records. Collects, maintains, and analyzes information.	\$45,000–\$70,000
Technical support specialist	Private industry, government agency, school	Interpret problems and provide technical support for hardware, software, and systems.	\$29,000–\$50,000
Help-desk technician	Private industry, government agency, school	Assist computer users with hardware and software questions not addressed in a product's instruction manual.	\$20,000–\$40,000

*Salaries may vary depending on region, experience, and size of company. Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, Encyclopedia of Careers and Vocational Guidance.

SKILLS REQUIRED

Computer support specialists must have strong problem-solving, analytical, and communication skills. They should be able to communicate effectively on paper, via e-mail, or in person.

WHERE/HOW TO GET TRAINING

Schooling

There are many paths to becoming a computer support specialist. Many employers prefer candidates with some form of college education, usually an associate's degree in computer science or information technology.

High school students interested in a job in computer support should take courses in computer science, information sciences, math, English, and communications.

Without a degree, candidates must have received some type of computer certification and have practical experience demonstrating computer skills. Completion of a certificate training may help some people qualify for entry-level positions. In some cases, both of these may substitute for formal education.

Many employers require computer support specialists to enroll in technology certification courses like those offered at Rhodes State College. These courses keep workers' skills current and help them acquire new skills. Completing these courses often

leads to professional advancement opportunities.

Rhodes State College is a premier training site for IT employees who wish to stay current on the most recent IT developments in Computer programming, Web Programming, Computer Networking, Network security and Digital Media. Rhodes State College is an authorized Microsoft IT Academy, and authorized Cisco Local Network Academy, and Oracle training partner.

Financial Aid

Grants, scholarships, loans, and work/study programs are available for college students. For most of this aid, high school seniors must submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which is available from high school guidance offices and higher education financial aid offices.

For more information on federal financial aid programs, or to apply electronically, visit the U.S. Department of Education's Web site at <http://www.ed.gov>.



For more information on federal financial aid programs, call (800) 4FEDAID

FUTURE JOB OPPORTUNITIES

Jobs for computer support specialists are expected to increase faster than the average for all occupations through 2012, as organizations continue to adopt

and integrate increasingly sophisticated technology. The growing computer system design and related services industry is also creating new opportunities.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Computer support specialists usually work in well-lit, air-conditioned offices or computer laboratories. Most work 40 hours a week, but some have to be

"on call" for evening or weekend work. Computer specialists have to guard against eyestrain, back discomfort, and hand and wrist problems.

RESOURCES - HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

BOOKS:

- *The Best Computer Jobs in America: 20 Minutes from Home* by Carol L. Colvin
- *Opportunities in Computer Careers* by Julie Kling Burns

ONLINE:

- www.acss.org (Association of Computer Support Specialists)
- www.sage.org (System Administrators Guild)

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