Job candidates with security clearances are a hot commodity

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WASHINGTON -

Job candidates with security clearances are hotter-than-ever commodities in the Washington area and elsewhere because of higher demand, tighter security requirements and a wave of baby-boomer retirements, according to recruitment officials.

In this competitive market, those with U.S. government security clearance often juggle multiple job offers, said Bradford Rand, chief executive of New York-based TechExpo, which ran a job fair in the District of Columbia last week that attracted 55 companies.

Among those reaping the rewards: Military personnel who are returning from duty along with their security clearances. "If a soldier has good skill sets in the IT arena, he'll have a job offer in five minutes," Rand said.

Evan Lesser, co-founder and director of the online recruiting site ClearanceJobs.com, believes demand for cleared employees has reached its highest level in the past decade, driven by bourgeoning defense spending and the federal government's stiffer clearance requirements.

At the same time, baby boomers are now retiring, putting more pressure on defense contractors and government employers to fill positions that often require both hard-to-find skills and high levels of clearance, Lesser said.

"That's something else that is driving up salaries," he said. "We see people hoping to retire, and their employers are pleading with them to stay. They say, 'We'll pay you another 30 grand to stay on board.'"

Lesser's company, which provides a secure forum for employers to recruit cleared employees, estimates there are 100,000 unfilled security-clearance jobs, many of them in the Washington area, the largest market for such positions. The hottest positions today are typically high-level software developers and systems engineers.

ClearanceJobs.com, based in Des Moines, Iowa, recently released a survey that found that those with security clearances earn an average 25 percent more than similarly skilled workers who lack them. That gap has been widening, too.

Security-cleared job candidates in Iraq, understandably, topped the list with an average salary of $97,934. But the District of Columbia came in at No. 2, with $78,813. Virginia ranked No. 4 with $76,090, and Maryland was sixth with $74,292.

The Washington area boasted some of the highest average salaries for security-cleared candidates. Within the region, the highest domestic salaries could be found in northern Virginia, with Reston the leader at $87,660.

"It's the hottest ticket in town," Paul Villella, chief executive of the Reston-based recruitment firm HireStrategy, said of the security clearance. "It's in many cases better than having an MBA."