

# **AN ANALYSIS OF UNEMPLOYMENT TRENDS AMONG IEEE U.S. MEMBERS**

Prepared by

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Based on a Survey of  
Unemployed US IEEE Members  
Conducted by the IEEE-USA  
Employment Assistance Committee  
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## **Preface**

In its efforts to assist unemployed US members of IEEE, the IEEE-USA Employment Assistance Committee periodically polls all unemployed US members. The 1998 survey questionnaire (Appendix A) was sent out to 1288 members on September 24, 1998. The survey covered a range of topics, including perceived barriers to reemployment, industry of previous employment, reason for the layoff, and methods being used in the job search, among others.

To help us better understand the survey data and its implications, IEEE-USA retained Dr. Laura Langbein to conduct an analysis. Her report to IEEE-USA on survey results follows. The survey results provide an important look into the demographics of the unemployed and problems that members, and particularly older members, face in finding reemployment.

The conclusions contained in this report are Dr. Langbein's, based on her analysis of the data provided. This report is made available for the information of IEEE U.S. members and as a public service to promote awareness of unemployment issues affecting the electrical and electronics engineering community. References to IEEE-USA, IEEE, or the American University do not constitute an endorsement or approval of the conclusions contained herein.

For additional information regarding this report, the IEEE-USA Unemployment Survey, and/or the employment-related programs or activities of IEEE-USA, contact:

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## 1998 IEEE-USA UNEMPLOYMENT SURVEY: THE RESULTS

By Laura Langbein, Ph.D.

The IEEE-USA Employment Assistance Committee continued its interest in developing a better understanding of the problem of unemployment among engineers revealed in two previous surveys of unemployed engineers, one in 1995 and a replication in 1996. The Committee replicated these surveys again by mailing (on September 24, 1998) virtually the same survey instruments used in 1995 and 1996 to all 1288 U.S. IEEE members who reported being unemployed during the end-of-the-year membership renewal period and who consequently paid 1998 dues at a reduced rate. 335 surveys were returned, resulting in a 26% response rate, comparable to the 28% response rate garnered in 1995, but better than the 14% response rate in 1996.

This report of results is organized in four sections. The first section reports the percentage distribution or mean response for each of the questions in the survey. The second reports the results of selected cross-tabulations that focus on age and various aspects of employment status. The third reports the results of a multivariate analysis that focuses on the impact of age on the duration of unemployment when other factors are held constant. The final section compares some of the current results to those in 1995 and 1996.

### Survey responses

Respondents were asked to describe their current employment status. The modal respondent (45%) responded that he/she was involuntarily unemployed. About 17% had been reemployed full-time as an engineer, but a total of 23% were employed in a non-engineering job (7%), employed part-time (7%), or self-employed (9%). Some 6% reported voluntary unemployment, and 8% said they were retired.

Respondents were next asked to describe their industry of employment in an open ended question. Descriptions in the defense or aerospace industries were easy to classify, but those in electrical/electronic services or manufacturing were sometimes harder to characterize. A total of 19% of respondents worked in the aerospace or defense industry (8% and 11%, respectively). 25% worked in electrical/engineering services or manufacturing; 13% worked in the computer industry (hardware or software), and 11% were employed in the communications industry and the same number were employed by utilities. 8% or fewer worked in other fields (e.g., automotive, R&D consulting, education, medical, metal, petrochemical, transportation). The mean size of respondents' firms was 555, but the distribution is skewed toward smaller firms, since the median response is 75 employees. Firm size ranged from 1 employee to 12000 employees.

The modal respondent is not dependent on government contracts. 40% of jobs are not dependent on government at all, but 25% were somewhat or a little dependent on

government funding. The same proportion were primarily or totally dependent on government appropriations.

Those who were laid-off were asked what reason the company gave for the layoff. The most common response was a business turndown (31%). Ten percent or fewer each listed merger, efficiency improvement, transfer of work, or plant/office obsolescence as the reason given for their layoff. 63% reported that the layoffs were targeted at specific functions or units, rather than being across-the-board.

All respondents were asked whether they wanted to remain in their primary area of technical competence, and two-thirds did. 17% wanted to change their primary area of specialization, and 11% wanted to move out of their primary area; only 6% wanted to be able to move into their primary area of competency.

Most respondents (69%) do not contemplate more schooling, but 28% consider returning to school part-time, and 3% consider returning full-time. Slightly over a quarter (27%) consider leaving engineering entirely.

The duration of unemployment varies widely among the respondents, from a low of 0 weeks to a high of 740 weeks (or about 14 years). The mean is 103 weeks (or 2 years), while the median is considerably less, at 65 weeks (just over 1 year), indicating a highly skewed distribution with about 75% of responses below the mean and 25% above it.

Respondents were asked what services their employer provided when they left. Respondents could check more than one service, and many did. Severance was provided in 48% of cases, and extended benefits in 33% of cases. Outplacement help was provided to 28% of respondents, and retraining was offered to only 6% of respondents.

Respondents were asked to describe their employment search and the results. Nearly three quarters (71%) agreed that it was very difficult to find a new job; only 4% said that it was fairly easy to find a new job. Less than 10% each reported that an offer fell into their lap, that they found a great job, or even an adequate job, or that they anticipated a raise. One-fourth (24%) anticipate a pay cut.

Fewer than half (45%) would recommend engineering to their son or daughter; 29% are not sure, and 26% would not recommend it at all.

About half (51%) report being aware of IEEE-USA's employment assistance services.

Respondents were asked to rank the job search techniques that worked best for them. Most respondents merely checked what worked, without any ranking; others ranked only three or four of the eight techniques that were list. Only a minority ranked the entire list. The responses were coded using the least common denominator: whether the response was checked or ranked in the top four. Nearly 60% of respondents rated networking as especially helpful; 41% said that ads were helpful, and 38% found that sending out resumes was useful. Nearly 30% found headhunters useful, and found internet job

listings beneficial. Some 20% found that going to job fairs worked well. Only 8% listed outplacement services, and only 3% listed private consultants as job search techniques that worked well for them.

Respondents were asked what they saw as major personal barriers to their employment or re-employment. Age was by far the most common response: 76% of respondents listed this as a barrier. Area of technical competence was listed by 31% of respondents, and geographic preferences were noted as a personal barrier by 27% of the respondents. 20% cited the downturn in government spending as a personal barrier. Ethnicity was noted by 17% of respondents. Education and national economic conditions were each cited by 12-13% of the respondents, and sex and disability were each listed by 9% of the respondents.

Respondents were asked their view of the long-term demand for engineers. Their responses could be readily coded into 3 categories: good, fair, or poor. Using these categories, the modal respondent was an optimist: 47% saw the outlook as good. About a third (32%) saw the outlook as mixed, and 21% saw it as poor.

As a follow-up to this question, respondents were asked the following open-ended question: what should IEEE be doing to help (if anything)? Slightly more than half of the respondents (53%) answered this question; of the 177 who responded, many gave more than one suggestion. The total number of suggestions was 286. These were coded into the same 14 categories that were used in the previous (1995) survey, so that comparisons (discussed below) could be made. The largest percentage of responses (17%) requested that IEEE provide some special benefit for unemployed engineers. A common suggestion was that IEEE provide health insurance, but an equally common suggestion, not made in the 1995 survey, was that IEEE provide or become a union. The next largest proportion of responses was that IEEE provide some sort of continuing education or training (14%), or that IEEE help in networking between unemployed engineers and prospective employers (also 14%). Nearly as many (12%) wanted IEEE to take action to stop or reduce the immigration of foreign-born engineers. Between 5 and 10 percent of responses fell into the following categories: improve the image of engineers (or otherwise do something to increase the demand for engineers) (9%); help with networking at the local level (7%); fight age discrimination (7%); and, keep doing what you are currently doing (6%). Less than 5% each gave suggestions such as: protect U.S. engineering jobs; make it harder to be qualified as an engineer; an explicit mention that IEEE should do nothing; a complaint about the government being too large, and a complaint about affirmative action.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their personal characteristics and circumstances. Specifically, they were asked about their age, their years of professional and managerial experience, and about their education. They were also asked about the nature of the e-mail access they had via the Internet.

The mean respondent is 53 years old, and the median respondent is 54; the youngest is 28 and the oldest is 68. The mean years of experience among the respondents is 26, and the median is 28. The range is from 0 years of experience to 50 years.

The modal respondent has a BS in electrical engineering, or other BS (46%). Less than 5% have an Associate degree, and less than 5% have a BA. About 11% have an MA or MBA or similar non-science Master's degree; 21% have an MS, usually in EE; and 17% have a Ph.D. In other words, the proportion with more than a BS degree equals that with the BS only.

About 12% of respondents report having no email access at all. For those with access, multiple responses were possible, so percentages will add to more than 100. Among these unemployed engineers, most have access at home (73%); 28% have access at work. Nearly 60% have full access; 18% have partial access, and 6% have email access alone.

Of the 335 respondents, 51% provided their name and address so that IEEE could send them its packet of information for unemployed member.

### Age and the Survey Responses

A key concern of both the 1995 and the 1998 survey of unemployed engineers is the link between age and employment opportunities. It appeared in 1995 that older engineers have significantly fewer reemployment opportunities than younger engineers. Similar patterns appear in 1998, in the cross-tabulation results below.

Consider the relation between age and employment status. The mean age of respondents who were reemployed as an engineer at the time they responded to the survey was the youngest among the respondents: 48 years. The next youngest group was voluntarily unemployed (49 years). The next older group was composed of engineers who were employed, but not as an engineer (mean of 50 years old), or employed part-time (mean of 51 years old), or self-employed (mean of just under 54 years old). The two oldest groups were involuntarily unemployed (mean of 54 years old), and retirees (mean of 59 years). These differences are significant overall at less than the .0001 level.

For the fully re-employed engineers, the average number of weeks unemployed was long (mean of 49 weeks for those reemployed full time as an engineer); but, compared to the other groups, this was the shortest duration of unemployment. Those employed part time report an average of 63 weeks of unemployment, while those re-employed in non-engineering jobs report a mean of 65 weeks of unemployment, and the self-employed have a mean of 90 weeks unemployment. Among the unemployed, those who are voluntarily unemployed have an average of 137 weeks unemployment, while the involuntarily unemployed have nearly as many--128 weeks of unemployment; retirees report an average of 175 unemployment weeks. These differences are also significant overall at less than the .0001 level.

Respondents reported the industry in which they were last employed; however, there are no statistically significant age differences among these industry groups. The oldest engineers worked in the defense industry (mean=57 years), and the youngest worked in

utilities (mean=50 years), but the within group variance in age for each industry group is very large, and exceeds the between-group differences in mean age.

Even though age does not vary significantly between industry groups, weeks of unemployment do, at less than the .03 level. Specifically, the longest duration of unemployment is among those who were employed in the defense industry, where the mean was 172 weeks of unemployment. The next longest duration was in the aerospace industry (mean = 130 weeks), closely followed by those who report former employment in consulting/R&D (mean = 127 weeks). Among other industries with more than 20 respondents, the results in descending order were electrical/electronic manufacturing (mean = 88 weeks); computers (mean = 85 weeks); communications (mean = 82 weeks); and electrical/electronic services (mean = 76 weeks).

Older engineers are significantly more likely to report that their job search is very difficult than younger engineers ( $p < .005$ ). Specifically, the mean age of respondents who report a very difficult search is 53, compared to a mean of 50 for engineers who did not choose that response. Similarly, the mean age of those who said that it was fairly easy to find a new job was significantly lower than the mean age of those who did not select that response ( $p < .002$ ); those who said that it was fairly easy averaged 45, compared to an average of 53 years for those who did not check that response option. Unsurprisingly, it follows that the weeks of unemployment reported by those who report that their job search is very difficult is somewhat longer than those who did not check this option. The difference, however, is only marginally significant ( $p < .09$ ) using a 2-tailed test, but it is significant by conventional standards ( $p < .05$ ) using a 1-tailed test, which would be acceptable since the expected direction is what we observe. The mean weeks of unemployment for those who report a very difficult search is 110; the mean for those who did not select this response option is 84 weeks.

Respondents were asked to check whether or not they perceived various factors as barriers to their re-employment. We have already seen that age was the most frequently selected among the nine possible barriers listed. More importantly, older engineers were significantly more likely to cite age as a barrier than younger engineers. Those who cited age as a barrier averaged 55 years, compared to a mean of 46 years for those who did not regard age as a barrier ( $p < .0001$ ). However, those who cited age as a barrier did not have significantly more weeks of unemployment: those who cited such a barrier reported a mean of 104 weeks of unemployed, compared to 101 weeks for those who did not mention age as a barrier to re-employment, but this small difference is not statistically significant ( $p < .87$ ).

Older respondents are slightly more likely to be glum about the long-term outlook for engineers than younger ones, but the difference is small and not significant. Those who see the outlook as good average 51 years; those who see the outlook as fair average 53 years; and those see the long-term outlook as poor average 54 years. Although the difference is not significant statistically, the pattern is consistent.

In general, these patterns are consistent with the next finding: older respondents report significantly more weeks of unemployment than younger respondent. Specifically, for each additional year of age, unemployment goes up by 2 weeks ( $p \leq .007$ ).

It is also interesting to note that older engineers are less likely to have access to email via the Internet, although the difference is not statistically significant. Those who report no access average 54 years, compared to 52 years for those who have some sort of access to email via the Internet, but the difference is not statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p < .17$ ).

### Multivariate Analysis of Age and the Survey Responses

We have shown that age may contribute to the duration of unemployment. But correlation, which we have just seen, is not the same as causation. To make the possible causal connection more conclusive, we need to eliminate alternative explanations that rival age as a reason for unemployment. For example, we have just seen that older respondents are less likely to have access to email via the Internet; maybe email access, and not age, accounts for the observed correlation between age and unemployment. Or perhaps the observed correlation between age and unemployment reflects the industry in which older engineers may be concentrated. Specifically, we showed that older engineers tend to work in aerospace and defense. These industries are more likely than other industries to rely on government funding. These two industries also show more weeks of unemployment. Perhaps, then, it is industry of former employment, and not age, that accounts for the relation between age and unemployment.

Multiple regression allows us to test whether the observed correlation between age and unemployment holds up when tested against these, and other, rival explanations, and the results show that it does. Using two different types of multiple regression estimates, and with 7 control variables, the impact of age on unemployment emerges even more strongly than it does with no controls. Now, for each additional year of age, unemployment rises by 3 weeks, and the estimate is consistently significant at conventional levels.

The regression results also show that years of experience help to reduce unemployment by 2 weeks, but the impact is only marginally significant. In other words, if we were to compare 2 engineers of the same age (say, 55) and one had 30 years of experience while another had 25 years of experience (and they were comparable in all other respects, including education), then the engineer with 5 more years of experience would have  $2 * 5 = 10$  fewer weeks of unemployment than his 55 year old peer. On the other hand, if we were to compare two other engineers, both with 30 years of experience, and comparable in other respects such as education, except that one is 55 and the other is 60, then the older engineer can be expected to endure  $3 * 5 = 15$  more weeks of unemployment than his younger, but otherwise comparable peer.

The multiple regression also shows that having additional degrees appears to increase unemployment: each additional degree adds 10 weeks to the duration of unemployment. This may indicate that, when other factors are held constant, additional degrees signify a

higher price to employers. When prices are higher (especially among already unemployed engineers, so that high price may not clearly signify quality to employers), demand is less, and hence unemployment may be longer.

Not surprisingly, retired and voluntarily unemployed engineers experience a 75 weeks longer duration of unemployment than those who are in the active labor market ( $p < .000$ ).

Further, holding the other variables constant, respondents who report no email access at all to the Internet experience 50 weeks more unemployment than statistically comparable respondents who have some form of access to email. This may mean that access to the Internet is a critical job search technique; it also may mean that those without access are technologically less up-to-date than their peers. This survey, however, provides no data with which to test this speculation.

Having been employed in industries dependent on government funding (defense and aerospace) adds 11 weeks to the duration of unemployment, even when other factors are held constant ( $p < .006$ ).

Attending job fairs appears to add 29 weeks to the duration of unemployment ( $p < .05$ ). Job fairs may reduce search activity, as prospective employees wait to hear from the employers they spoke with at the fair; or only those with especially long unemployment attend job fairs. Networking, however appears to reduce the duration of unemployment by some 36 weeks ( $p < .003$ ).

Taken together, while each of these 8 factors significantly affects the duration of unemployment, they explain little of its variation (only 18%). Clearly, there is a lot more to be learned about the causes of long unemployment spells among electrical and electronic engineers in U.S. labor market, and about whether age, or other factors, including technical skills that are not up-to-date in the external labor market, given prevailing salaries, contribute to long spells of unemployment.

#### Selected comparisons to 1995 and 1996 survey responses

There are some striking differences, and some striking similarities, among the 1995, 1996 and 1998 survey responses. Further, there is evidence that the situation for unemployed engineers has gotten both better and worse. (Testing the differences for statistical significance is beyond the scope of this basically descriptive exercise.) First, there is little difference in the employment status of respondents to the three surveys: in 1995, 20% reported being re-employed full time as an engineer; in 1996, 19% so reported; the same statistic in 1998 was 17%. In 1995, 15% were employed part-time or self-employed; in 1996, 13% were employed part-time or self employed; in 1998, the corresponding percent was 16%. In 1995, 48% were involuntarily unemployed; in 1996, 49% were involuntarily unemployed; in 1998, 46% were.

A clear trend, however, emerges in the industry of former employment, as well as in characteristics related to the industry of employment. In 1995, 20% reported employment in defense, and 16% reported employment in aerospace; these industries were (and are) relatively dependent on government funds. In 1996, 11% were employed in defense, and 15% in aerospace. By 1998, with further cut-backs in aerospace, 11% report former employment in defense, but only 8% in aerospace. Further, in 1995, 33% report that their former jobs did not depend at all on government funding; in 1996, 42% so report; and in 1998, 40% reported no dependence on government funding. In a similar vein, in 1995, 30% reported jobs that were totally dependent on government funding; in 1996, 23% so report; and in 1998, 24% reported these as former jobs. In 1995, 58% cited business turndown as the reason for their layoff; in 1996, the corresponding statistic was 46%; in 1998, only 31% cite this as a reason. There is also a clear trend in firm size. In 1995, respondents reported an average of 1002 engineers worked where they did; in 1996, the corresponding response was 815 engineers; by 1998, the response was an average of 556 engineers.

Despite the growing economy in 1998, the duration of unemployment in 1998 is longer than that reported in 1995 or 1996: the mean duration is 103 weeks in 1998, compared to a mean of 84 weeks in 1995 and 92 weeks in 1996. The median shows no similar trend: the 1998 median weeks of unemployment is 65 weeks, compared to the median of 57 weeks in 1995, and a median reported as between 52-78 in 1996. Oddly, however, the percentage who report that it is “very difficult” to find a new job is somewhat less in 1998 (71%) than in 1996 (76%) or 1995 (85%). The long term outlook for engineers is also viewed more positively in 1998 than it was in 1995 or 1996: 47% view the outlook as “good” in 1998, compared to 23% in 1995 and 25% in 1996; and 21% view the outlook as poor in 1998, compared to 35% in 1995 and 37% in 1996. The rosier long-term outlook may account for the absence of any increased intent to return to school, despite increased duration of unemployment: in 1995, 27% expressed intent to return to school part-time, and 3% full-time; in 1996, the corresponding percentages are 29% and 3%, respectively; and, in 1998, there is no change: 28% intend to return to school part-time, and 3% full-time.

A small part of the increased unemployment duration in 1998 may be attributable to the small increase in the mean age of the respondent among the three surveys: the 1995 mean age was 51, compared to 52 in 1996 and 53 in 1998.

Email access has become increasingly available. In 1995, 43% reported having email; in 1996, 60% had Internet access; by 1998, only 12% reported no access to email, which means that 88% did have some form of email.

The regression results show little change among the surveys: the same variables are significant, but some of the values of the regression coefficients change. The impact of age on the duration of unemployment remains important, and appears not to have changed much: in 1998, each additional year results in 3 additional weeks of unemployment, compared to 7 weeks in 1996 and 5 weeks in 1995. Having no email

access adds 17 weeks to the duration of unemployment in 1995, 10 weeks in 1996, but 50 weeks in 1998. Networking appears more effective in 1998 than in 1995 or 1996.

Overall, age appears to have a persistent effect on the duration of unemployment, but it cannot be determined from these surveys whether that is attributable to productivity differences, price differences, age discrimination, or some other factor.

Submitted by Laura Langbein, Ph.D.  
18 December 1998

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## Appendix A

### IEEE-USA EMPLOYMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Check the response that best describes your current employment situation:  
 Re-employed full time as an engineer  
 Employed as other than an engineer  
 Employed part time  
 Self-employed  
 Unemployed, voluntarily  
 Unemployed, involuntarily  
 Retired
2. In what industry were you employed?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Estimate the number of engineers at that location. \_\_\_\_\_
4. To what extent was your position dependent on government grants, contracts, or funds?  
(Check one)  
Totally\_\_\_\_ Primarily\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat\_\_\_\_ Very little\_\_\_\_ None\_\_\_\_
5. If you were laid off, what reason did the company give?  
 Business downturn (actual or anticipated)  
 Merger or acquisition  
 Efficiency or productivity improvements  
 Transfer of work  
 Plant or office obsolescence  
 Other
6. Were the layoffs (Check one)  
 Across the board?  
 Targeted at specific functions or \_\_\_\_\_ units?
7. Do you want to move into, stay in, change or move out of your primary area of technical competence? (Check one)  
Move into\_\_\_\_ Stay in\_\_\_\_  
Change\_\_\_\_ Move out\_\_\_\_
8. Do you contemplate returning to school full or part time? (Check one)  
Full Time\_\_\_\_ Part Time \_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_
9. Do you contemplate moving out of the engineering profession entirely?  
Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_
10. How many weeks have you been (or were you) unemployed?\_\_\_\_\_
11. When you left, did your previous employer provide: (Check all that apply)  
 Outplacement services  
 Retraining opportunities  
 Severance  
 Extended benefits
12. Describe your employment search and the results (check all that apply):  
 Very difficult to find new job  
 Fairly easy to find a new job  
 Offer fell into my lap  
 Found a great job  
 Found an adequate job  
 Anticipate a raise  
 Will have to take a cut in pay  
 Other (please describe)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. If you have/had a child, would you recommend to your son/daughter to become an engineer?)

Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_ Not sure\_\_\_\_\_

14. Were you aware of any of IEEE-USA's employment assistance services?  
Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_

15. Please rank which job search techniques work for you? (1 is highest)

- \_\_\_\_ Sending out resumes
  - \_\_\_\_ Answering ads
  - \_\_\_\_ Using a headhunter
  - \_\_\_\_ Using outplacement services
  - \_\_\_\_ Hiring private consultant
  - \_\_\_\_ Going to job fairs
  - \_\_\_\_ Networking
  - \_\_\_\_ Internet job listings
  - \_\_\_\_ Other (please describe)
- 

16. Do you see any of the following as personal major barriers to employment or re-employment?

- \_\_\_\_ Age
  - \_\_\_\_ Sex
  - \_\_\_\_ Ethnic background
  - \_\_\_\_ Disability
  - \_\_\_\_ Educational background
  - \_\_\_\_ Area of technical competence
  - \_\_\_\_ Geographic preferences
  - \_\_\_\_ National economic conditions
  - \_\_\_\_ Decrease in government spending
  - \_\_\_\_ Other (Please describe)
- 
- 

17. How do you see the long term demand for engineers?

18. What should IEEE be doing to help (if anything)?

19. What is your age?\_\_\_\_\_

20. How many years of professional and managerial experience do you have?  
\_\_\_\_\_ years

21. What degrees do you hold?  
\_\_\_\_\_

22. Do you have access to the Internet? (Check all that apply)

- \_\_\_\_ Home
- \_\_\_\_ Work
- \_\_\_\_ Full Access
- \_\_\_\_ Partial (e.g., AOL, Compuserve, etc)
- \_\_\_\_ E-mail only
- \_\_\_\_ None

If you would like to receive the packet of information for unemployed members, provide your name and address below and we will forward the packet to you.

Good Luck!

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[www.ieee.org/jobs.html](http://www.ieee.org/jobs.html)  
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