

# Former computer employees cite work conditions as problem

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Peter Beckman, a talented man known in his industry for being a wizard in the development of Linux clusters, came to Los Alamos National Laboratory to work in its prestigious Advanced Computing Laboratory four years ago.

"It was an outstanding opportunity," he said of doing research on LANL's world-renowned supercomputers. "It was a fantastic job and a great place to work. I loved it. I use to wake up every morning and think I had the best job in the world."

In April, Beckman, now the director of a start-up in Santa Fe, TurboLabs, a division of TurboLinux, a company based in the San Francisco Bay Area, left the lab. (TurboLabs in Santa Fe now serves as the cluster research and development arm of TurboLinux.) He and five others, four from his LANL group and another person from Sandia National Laboratories, started their own company because they felt the work environment at the laboratory had changed.

They are not the only ones, said Beckman. He said he believes six other ACL scientists left around the same time he did. This might not seem significant alone, about a dozen or so employees leaving the laboratory from the approximately 187 who have left since October 1999, but there is more here than first meets the eye.

According to laboratory spokesperson, Kay Roybal, for example, the laboratory's attrition rate has been similar to last year's numbers.

"We are not seeing anything usually high or skewed," Roybal said, adding that she was not aware of numbers



of employees leaving within the Computing Division (CIC) being equal either. At the same time, approximately 40 people have been brought aboard as "strategic hires," throughout LANL, despite a current lab-wide moratorium on hiring.

The laboratory confirmed that 31 people had left CIC since January; although they were not able to give a detailed breakdown of which groups had lost people.

However, Beckman and other sources paint a different picture on the outlook of the lab's computing groups. There are only about 15 to 20 individuals with Ph.D.s in computing science at the lab, he said, and many of those who have left the ACL, for example, were top-notch, something that he said should be a wake-up call to management.

In an exiting memo to the laboratory, Beckman and his colleagues stated what they saw as the problems and gave suggestions for how to improve the environment again. They made it clear that for the time being, working for the government no longer made it sense for them and they are making much better salaries now in private industry.

"When I got there, it was an extremely exciting, vibrant place to work, very well-respected as a computer science research organization in the community," he explained.

It was a place where people like Beckman, who received his Ph.D. in computer science from Indiana University, could continue to expand their work as scientists, working among the best of the best from their

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field from around the world in cooperative efforts. They also had ample funding and state-of-the-art equipment at their disposal, he explained. The supercomputing researchers, who were focused on unclassified but vital work in Linux work and applications, for example, were able to bring in students to add to the research, regardless of foreign national status. They were able to bring in speakers and travel to conferences. It was cutting-edge and Beckman said he and the others enjoyed it.

He and his colleagues did not make as much money as computer scientists in private industry, but all those perks, in a sense, made up for that, Beckman explained.

What changed this?

"It lasted until Wen Ho (Lee). Then all collaborations, almost all contracts, with the university and the lab, came to a standstill," he said. Beckman said he longer could bring in his student talent, many of whom came from China or

India because of the restrictions placed on contact with all foreign nationals.

"When you think about it, one-third of the world's population comes from China and India," he explained. "Now one-third of the world's talent is ineligible to work with the lab."

Foreign nationals were pulled off the computer systems and travel was curtailed. Research funding also came under the budgetary ax, he said. The end result was that many of those advantages that made the laboratory more appealing to individuals like Beckman were no longer there.

"You can't do good research under those circumstances," he said. "It's about working with the top people in the field, and if you can't do that, you can't produce good science."

Some of the top people are still there and a reorganization is in the works, he noted, but many are leaving.

"The best and brightest are the ones who leave first," he said. It is a shame, he said, because, when that happens, scientists can either no longer get the solutions or the best solutions to the problems.

Beckman stressed that he has spoken out, not because of any grudge he personally holds against the laboratory or any individuals, but because he would like to see things improve.

"I loved working for the laboratory," Beckman said. "I would work for them again (if things changed)."

The problem is not isolated to the ACL either, according to Betty Gunther, a current lab employee. Gunther is also the organizer for a new University of California-based labor union for LANL employees — the University Professional and Technical Employees (UPTE)/Communication Workers of America (CWA).

Laboratory directed research and development (LDRD) funding, which often aids the computing projects, has been down, said Gunther. The situation with foreign nationals "has been a terrible disaster for LANL."

"A lot of bright foreign nationals have left and a lot of bright non-foreign nationals have also left as a result of that," she said.

Issues like travel restrictions and polygraph testing have also taken a toll on computer personnel.

"Scientific research has shown that polygraph testing isn't reliable," she explained. Questions arise around the number of false positives the tests produce or the way in which they are administered, she added. "They are very subjective. People don't want to study for years, then build a career, then suddenly find themselves out of job because they might have flunked a polygraph."

In another lab computing group, CIC-15, several sources indicated that approximately 10 to 15 individuals have left. Several cited reasons similar to Beckman's and added that various versions of internal politicking had also discouraged them.

But among the top reasons for the exodus were the issues of compensation and the inability to do top research and science.

Thierry Thelliez is one of those who left CIC-15 and now works for a start-up in Santa Fe, Bios Group.

"If the laboratory does not focus on cutting-edge work, it cannot keep young scientists," he said, particularly with computer science, where being the leader of the pack is essentially the name of the game.

Another powerful draw is kind of money that is offered to technical people outside of the laboratory, Thelliez said, where not only are salaries higher, but benefits include stock options and other mighty perks.

Technical people, particularly in computer science, can make as much as 30 to 70 percent more in private industry, said J. Terry, president and owner of MRI sales, a con-

sulting franchise of MRI Recruitment, Inc., in Albuquerque.

Terry's firm specializes in recruiting many types of professionals, including computer programmers and developers, for companies across the country.

Someone making \$58,000 at the laboratory, for example, could make \$80,000 or better, she said. People who have Internet or web experience developing portals, who know the ins and outs of e-business or database mining, for example, are in high demand right now. Many options are open to technical and computer staff, especially if they are willing to make the change in jobs or relocate.

However, the concept that people have to leave New Mexico, to go to Silicon Valley or the Research Triangle, for example, to get better jobs in their field and improve their salary, is slowly falling away, several sources indicated. Many of those who have left the lab have joined start-ups in Santa Fe.

According to Roberto Salazar, director of the office of science and technology within the state's Economic Development Department, biotechnology and biomedicine, along with many start-ups, are booming in northern New Mexico.

"It certainly is emerging in the state," he said, adding that his office has 90-plus biotech or biomed companies in its records. Many of these companies are springing up in Santa Fe or Los Alamos.

Finally, there is the overall perception of LANL from the outside. Employees have also felt the direct sting from security mishandlings, from Congressional reactions to jokes on the Jay Leno Show.

"Quite often things are as they are perceived, not as they really are," Terry said. Morale is something that is "perceived" by people, it is not necessarily reality, she added. "In my opinion, yes, I do think these perceptions are hurting the lab and probably affecting recruitment," she said. The only way to counter this is by having answers and measures ready to reassure the public of its credibility, she said.

In the past, "it's been perceived as glamorous to work in these highly secured areas. The lab no longer has that glamour because security has been breached not just once, but several times, and that's not just perception, that is reality."