

High demand in high-tech

Software designers are vital in a world run by computers

By MARGARET SCHMITZ RIZZO
Special to The Star

More, more, more. People expect more great things from their computers.

Combing aisles of computer stores, they look for products to customize their high-tech systems. Software designers can't create software packages fast enough.

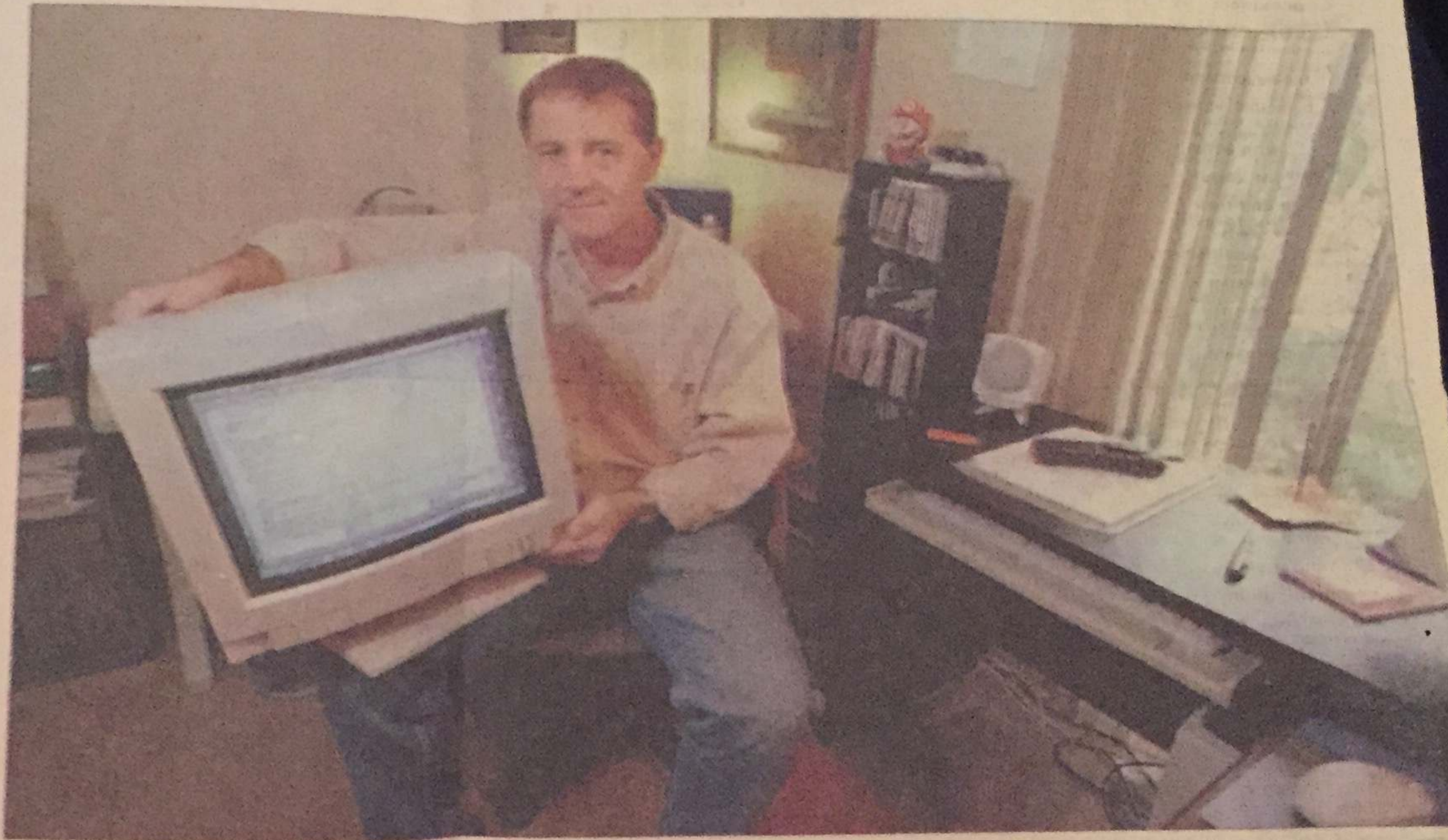
"There's always more work than whatever I could possibly handle in the software arena," said Howard Sander, owner of Softrak Data Systems Inc. "It's really a good career choice for anyone today. I never feel threatened with competition, because there just isn't enough."

HOT JOBS

Into the 21st century, employment of computer professionals as a whole is expected to increase much faster than average as technology continues to thrive, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook. Computer science is projected to be one of the three fastest-growing occupations and among the top 20 in number of new jobs as computer applications expand throughout the economy.

Software designers develop packaged or customized software applications that are incorporated into a company's computer system or sold in retail stores.

"A lot of stuff you see that is on shelves at computer stores comes from people in small offices — one or two people designing and writing a program and hiring a market-firm to package and sell it," said Sander, a self-employed software designer. "People are surprised to find out that it doesn't take Microsoft to write a package."



KEVIN ANDERSON/The Kansas City

Howard Sander is a software engineer and owner of Softrak Data Systems Inc.

Sander develops legal software for prosecutors. He creates programs to handle their cases and manage their campaigns so they can track finances.

"You can't just write a software package without getting intimately involved in how the business works that you're writing the software for," Sander said.

Sander's interest in computers was sparked after a career in the Army. He went into a Radio Shack, bought a computer and pretty soon realized he had found a new career. He has been developing software for about 15 years.

"It was eyeopening. This is what I was meant to do," Sander said. "There are a lot of people like that."

Because of the complexity of today's computers, it is more difficult than it once was to become a self-taught software designer. Even though Sander learned on the job

while working as an information director at the Jackson County prosecuting attorney's office, he prefers to hire applicants with college degrees or at least some college courses in computer science.

"Everything is more complicated now," said Randy Seba, sole proprietor of Sebacom Inc. for six years. "One program like Word, Excel or Access has so many features built into it, and there are so many possibilities, you really need to get some training, especially if you are going to be developing. Otherwise it would be overwhelming."

Training depends on the work. A bachelor's degree, typically in computer science, is necessary to enter the field. Continuing-education courses keep software designers abreast of rapid changes.

The average starting salary for those with a bachelor's degree was \$39,190 a year in 1997, according to

the National Association of Leges and Employers.

Seba primarily tailors software to the specific needs of individual companies. Many of his clients source software design projects rather than incur the cost of another full-time employee. "They don't want to use software that's off the shelf," Seba said. "They have their own way of doing things and they don't want to be changed the way they operate the way software off the shelf works."

"I have a number of clients who are repeat clients from year to year. Once they see what they can do with a computer, they develop a list of what they want their software to do for them. Over two years, you may revise and add more features that the software can do for them."