EU seals pact with firms in bid to fill 700,000 tech jobs

Foo Yun Chee and Claire Davenport, Reuters

(Reuters) - The European Commission unveiled a deal on Friday with Hewlett-Packard, Telefonica and eight other telecoms and technology firms aimed at filling up to 700,000 high tech job vacancies.

Calling it a grand coalition, EU Telecoms Commissioner Neelie Kroes said the companies pledged to offer training, free online university courses or provide start-up funding.

The European Commission is seeking to spur economic growth, boost competitiveness and tackle a record jobless total of 26.1 million in the 27-country European Union, or 10.7 percent of the working population.

High tech vacancies have proven hard to fill because job seekers either do not have the right qualifications, have qualifications not recognized throughout the European Union or do not speak English.

"The digital skills gap is growing, like our unemployment queues," Kroes, who was in Davos [1] for the World Economic Forum, said in a statement on Friday. "We need joint action between governments and companies to bridge that gap."

Other companies which signed up to the pact included German business [2] software [3] group SAP, U.S. networking equipment maker Cisco Systems, world No. 2 staffing agency Randstad and Italian oil group Eni.

Norwegian telecoms provider Telenor, Finnish mobile phone maker Nokia, Alcatel-Lucent and ARM also offered pledges to Kroes.

"The ICT (information and communications technology) sector is the new backbone of Europe's economy [4], and together we can prevent a lost generation and an uncompetitive Europe," Kroes said in a statement.

(Reporting by Foo Yun Chee; Editing by Mark Potter)

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