

## Nurturing the U.S. high-tech workforce

Ron Hira's analysis of America's changing high-tech workforce ("U.S. Workers in a Global Job Market," [\*Issues\*, Spring 2009](#)) makes several timely and important points. As he quotes IBM CEO Sam Palmisano, "businesses are changing in fundamental ways—structurally, operationally, culturally—in response to the imperatives of globalization and new technology." Companies can pick and choose where to locate based on proximity to markets; the quality of local infrastructure; and the cost of labor, facilities, and capital. When historically U.S.-centered companies diversify globally and integrate their operations, the interests of the companies and their shareholders may diverge from the interests of their U.S. employees.

The first loyalty of a company is to its shareholders. Rather than pitting employees against shareholders (some will be both), we should make it more advantageous, economically and operationally, for companies to invest in and create high-value jobs in the United States. We need to make domestic sourcing more attractive than off-shoring.

Hira offers some good suggestions. The most important is that we should work harder to build and maintain our high-technology workforce. Brainpower is the most important raw material for any technology company, yet today we squander a lot of it. Many of our high-school graduates are not academically prepared to pursue college degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. We need to improve the quality of STEM education and we need to make it accessible to a much broader spectrum of our young people. We should encourage the best and brightest young technologists from around the world to build their careers here, contribute to our economy, and become Americans. And we should discourage foreign companies from temporarily bringing employees to the United States to learn our business practices and then sending them home to compete with us.

Several things he did not mention could also encourage domestic sourcing. The digital communications technology that makes it possible to outsource many high-tech jobs to India can do the same for low-cost regions of America. We need to extend affordable and effective broadband service to all parts of the country.

We also need to distribute our research investments more widely. University research creates jobs, many of them in small companies near campuses. So we need to increase investments in universities in areas with low living costs.

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CITIZENS

Adjustments in the Small Business Innovative Research Grant Program could also help stimulate development in low-cost areas.

And we need to restore and maintain a healthy banking and investment community, and make sure it extends to low-cost regions. Given risk-tolerant capital, technologists strengthen companies and start new ones, creating jobs and ratcheting the economy upward.

The best way for the United States to be competitive in the 21st century is to build on its strengths. We must empower talented citizens throughout our country and encourage others attracted to our culture and values to join us and pursue their careers here. And we must encourage and stimulate development in low-cost regions, as both a competitive tactic and an initiative to spread prosperity more widely.

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THROUGHOUT  
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