



## If Massachusetts work force dries up, its edge is lost

Mass High Tech: The Journal of New England Technology - March 16, 2007

by [Christopher R. Anderson](#)

Mass High Tech

Earlier this month, I had the opportunity to moderate a Mass High Tech forum on attracting and retaining technology talent in Massachusetts. The expert panel concluded that developing a state talent strategy is one of the most important economic policy challenges the state faces.

In my role as chairman of the state Board of Education and in my day job as president of the Massachusetts High Technology Council, I constantly see the need to improve the entire spectrum of the talent pipeline. Connecting the preparation of students with the state's work force needs will require a coordinated effort of teachers, employers and policy-makers.

The state must develop a global economic strategy that at its core addresses the talent situation in Massachusetts. Here are four components of a talent strategy:

Create world-class teachers. Massachusetts must become the global center for math and science teacher development while creating incentives for the next generation of teachers to stay in Massachusetts. By filling the Bay State's classrooms with the world's best math and science teachers, we will help ensure a more powerful pipeline of technology stars graduating from our public schools.

Support UMass. Why is the University of Massachusetts so important, since we have all of these other world-class private universities here? Under Jack Wilson, the five-campus university system has made great strides as a research university. But UMass is also key to our future work force because 60 percent of its graduates stay in Massachusetts -- a much higher rate than the privates. We need to improve the caliber of students entering the system as well as the instruction they receive on campus. But to meet that goal Massachusetts needs to invest in UMass and empower it to control its own financial destiny.

Change the immigration debate. One of the lost issues in the contentious national immigration debate is on how to change the system to enable skilled foreign workers -- engineers, researchers -- to live and work in the United States. Potential reforms for the

green-card process and H1-B visas will largely play out in Washington, but the state needs to improve recruitment and retention of talented foreign students. We trail California, New Jersey and Georgia in the percentage of foreign-born entrepreneurs.

Blow up the current work force training system. An interesting dichotomy currently exists in the Massachusetts economy: Tens of thousands of people are looking for work -- and at the same time, we have tens of thousands of jobs going unfilled. For many key occupations, there is a real disconnect between worker training programs and the needs of employers. This is despite a \$2 billion budget for the state's labor and work-force development apparatus. The state needs to undertake rigorous evaluation of the current system to determine best practices and eliminate the programs that aren't working, as well as look for new ideas.

The **Global Mass 2015** campaign has called for a Talent Development Bank that will bring together industry and academia to create a future work force. The main inspiration for this bank was last year's Defense Workforce Project, a joint effort of the state and the Massachusetts Defense Technology Initiative to identify and create programs to meet the needs of defense employers. A Talent Development Bank would institutionalize and expand the program for other sectors.

Whenever a new technology company relocates to Massachusetts, its executives cite the proximity to a talented work force as a chief reason for the decision. But with fierce global and worldwide competition for talent, unless we act soon Massachusetts will lose its defining economic advantage.

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