

## The Genie Is Out of the Bottle

Starting in the late 1960s, data networks were created to connect supercomputers and, later, other intelligent devices. A revolution in communications was in the making. By the late 1970s, computing and communications technologies were leading us from a world of local markets trading in capital goods to one of global markets trading in capital anytime, anyplace. Some of us involved in information technology saw ourselves as midwives to a world of 24x7 information and services available at lower costs on a global basis.

Of course, no matter how farsighted our vision, information technologies guided by human imagination and ingenuity (and yes, profit motives) always remind us of the limits of our crystal balls. In the United States today, a debate is emerging in the wake of one unintended or unexpected (or simply unwelcome) consequence of this revolution: the off-shoring, near-shoring, outsourcing of IT and call-center jobs.

For me, the off-shoring debate invokes profound ambivalence. As a (sort of) technologist and one who cares deeply about and is charged with maintaining the health of a professional cadre, I am dead set against anything that would threaten to undermine the careers of my friends and colleagues. As someone also charged with “promoting the intelligent use of information technology” in higher education, I take a somewhat less protectionist view of the higher education IT labor market. Finally, as someone who unabashedly believes in the power of computers and networks to create a truly global community in which work that

needs to get done can flow seamlessly to the talent that wants to do it (unregulated by anything except the market), I take yet another step, I suppose to the right.

It seems to me that information technology is really, *really* now starting to realize its promise. Today, we can provide our students with access to unimaginable library holdings, not through the construction of magnificent warehouses but through a carefully crafted complex of licenses and consortial agreements. Access to expert medical advice is not bounded by geographic service areas but by the availability of experts and expertise—on the Internet. So why should labor—specifically, the very skills that we have developed to build this global village—be confined within geographic borders?

Let’s face it: the global computing and communications infrastructure that we have built is redefining the very nature of competition in every facet of human experience. Information—and now services—cannot be bounded by political jurisdictions, walls in Berlin, or trade restrictions. Surely, if elite labor markets like U.S. professional sports can welcome the recent entry of Chan Ho Park, Hideki Irabu, or Yao Ming, we can concede that talent is mobile and labor markets are global. The revolution that we fostered means that not only can my wife, who lives in Colorado, telecommute to her office at the University of California, but so can a colleague in Bangalore. In fact, many of our institutions have worked hard and well to prepare international students for participation in the global economy!

The national debate and the IT community’s debate need to evolve. The im-

portant question now is, how do we educate and train ourselves and our children for lifetimes of rich employability within an increasingly competitive global market for professional labor? Like the large-scale entrance of women into the U.S. professional labor market in the past three decades, the global enlarging of the labor pool will enlarge the talent pool. The emergence of women in every niche of the U.S. labor market has been among the most important and beneficial happenings in the history of the nation. Now the opportunity expands. Although this prospect is legitimately threatening for many, hasn’t it been our hope that our networks might unleash human talent wherever this talent could be found?

University of California–Berkeley Emeritus Professor Martin Trow once advised that information technology would cut its own channel through our institutions. He was right. And now networks are conspiring with rising global literacy and the emergence of English as a global second language to spell what Frances Cairncross called the death of distance. Let’s stop worrying and start competing. Let’s begin a dialogue about what it means to be a knowledge worker in a global labor market. Let’s learn how to become—and to raise our children to become—indispensable professionals (i.e., those who cannot be “off-shored”) and how to exploit the proliferation of global talent to everyone’s advantage, including our institutions. Our faculty have done this for a long time. It’s our turn.

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