

U.S. losing top talent to the rest of the world

By Cheryl Hall Knight-Ridder News Service

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SUMMARY: Brain drain | The outflow of skill could hurt the economy in the long run

DALLAS --Worried about global outsourcing? Chances are you're focused on the wrong end of the job equation.

Every day, hundreds of trained workers leave the United States for opportunities abroad.

This talent outflow poses more long-term dangers to the U.S. economy than the migration of low-skill jobs to cheaper foreign labor markets.

Many are going home --lured by improving homeland economies and highly targeted recruiting programs aimed at poaching America's brainpower.

"The United States used to have a monopoly on skilled immigration," said David Heenan, a former senior executive with Citigroup and author of the newly published "Flight Capital: The Alarming Exodus of America's Best and Brightest."

"Whether it was Alfred Hitchcock, I.M. Pei, Peter Drucker or Albert Einstein, this was the place where everyone wanted to be. Few other countries were even in the game. That's no longer the case."

Now we have people like Hong Kong-born Edison Lui, former director of clinical sciences at the U.S. National Cancer Institute.

He is moving to Singapore to head that country's impressive genome institute. When Heenan asked him why, Lui said, "It's a small city-state of 4.5 million people where I can get decisions out of the government in a week, not three months."

Heenan estimates that as many as 1,000 legal immigrants --many in leading-edge industries such as science, engineering and medicine --make U-turns back to their home countries each day.

He gets that admittedly squishy number by taking the figures of returning expatriates in such countries as India, China, Singapore and Ireland and then working backward.

Ireland? Yes, Ireland.

The Emerald Isle has zeroed in on more than 1,000 Irish immigrants here working in life sciences and technology. It's holding massive recruiting fairs and pursuing them with gusto, he said.

The United States can blame terrorism for part of the problem.

"For perfectly understandable reasons, we've tightened the borders and heightened constraints on potential recruits to the United States and also those who recently arrived," said Heenan. "The atmosphere for newcomers here post-9/11 is chilling and has renewed their sense of national roots."

The United States has removed the welcome mat while the Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders and Singaporeans are rolling out the red carpet. For example, in the past year, Australia hosted skilled labor expos in London, Berlin, Amsterdam and various Indian cities, Heenan said.

David Daniel, president of the University of Texas at Dallas, agrees that the talent flight poses a serious threat to the nation's economic vitality. But he's even more troubled that many brilliant minds aren't coming here to begin with.

"They now have almost equal opportunities to attend world-class universities in their home countries that weren't even on the radar screen 20 years ago," Daniel said. "They don't perceive America as hospitable and welcoming."

Adding insult to injury: The rest of the world is using America's success as a blueprint, Daniel said.

"Ireland, Singapore, Beijing, Shanghai and Bangalore are white-hot and the five most interesting places on the planet," he said. "Remember when we used to say Palo Alto and Austin were white-hot?"

"Of those, Singapore is the most dynamic. It's clearly on a path to create a science, technology and university magnet that will make them the high ground of Asia."