

Vizulis: Lack of skilled workers threaten technology growth in MetroWest

By Andris Vizulis / Guest Columnist
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MetroWest's technology companies -- those in the region between Rte. 128 and Interstate 495 -- are rapidly heading toward a crisis of significant proportions. A lack of skilled workers is starting to challenge their growth, and if not made an immediate priority at state level, the problem is certain to become far worse before it gets any better.

Consider the fact that almost 30 percent of our Commonwealth's technology jobs are in the MetroWest area. Demand for scientists, engineers and technical workers is consequently high. However, supply is not keeping up with demand, for a number of reasons: (1) retirements, (2) fewer foreign-born additions to our workforce due to global economic forces and new U.S. visa policies, and (3) increasingly fewer students motivated toward science and engineering.

Consequently, the technology supply pipeline is rapidly drying up. The Metro South/West Regional Employment Board (one of 16 workforce investment boards in our state) projects a shortfall of 24,000 in the state by 2009.

What can we do to deflect this problem? The single most important step is to establish it as a priority in the state budget by expanding and fully funding workforce education and training through the Workforce Solutions Act and the Economic Stimulus Bill, now under discussion by the state legislature.

Thankfully, Representative Lida Harkins and Senator Thomas McGee got the message early and took the lead by sponsoring the Act. Other legislators who support workforce development provisions of the Economic Stimulus Bill are State Senators Karen Spilka, Pamela Resor, Susan Fargo, and Cynthia Stone Creem; and State Representatives Stephen LeDuc, Susan Pope, David Linsky, Peter Koutoujian, Deborah Blumer, Kay Khan, Thomas Stanley, Frank Smizik, Jay Kaufman, William Galvin, Ruth Balsler, Alice Peisch, and Cory Atkins.

The Economic Stimulus Bill would make almost \$33 million available to address the Commonwealth's need for a skilled and sustained workforce. It would (1) increase the number of science, technology, engineering and math graduates, (2) establish a Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund to support programs targeted to the needs of employers in industries feeling the effects of a skills gap (in-plant education programs, among others), (3) increase funding for adult basic education and English language instruction, (4) provide a scholarship program for low-income students enrolled in part-time accredited programs, but not qualifying for aid (aid is currently restricted to only full-time students), and (5) increase funding for high school internship programs, to connect them with real-world work experiences in MetroWest's technology companies.







Can we delay action for another budget season, since the Commonwealth has so many other problems to deal with? Absolutely not. The consequence of delayed action will be a stifling of the productivity potential of our region's technology industry, to which our state and region owe so much of its standard of living. Increased economic hardship, especially of MetroWest's residents, would be sure to follow.

Andris Vizulis is chair of Metro South/West Regional Employment Board and is also CEO of Mindspark, Inc (Newton).

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