



Return of the snow geeks Brain gain

Jill Vardy
Financial Post

OTTAWA - Tomorrow night, a group of technology workers in Santa Clara, Calif., will be subject to some aggressive wooing. Recruitment is nothing new in Silicon Valley, but the recruiter is. It's a Canadian provincial government on a five-day road show to lure technology workers to Alberta.

The Alberta job fair is the most recent example of brain gain, the latest recruiting concept in the cross-border war for talent. Brain gain occurs when Canadian companies aggressively pursue expatriates living in the United States to return to Canada.

Governments are in on the act, too. The Canadian Consulate in Los Angeles has a hot button on its Web site for people who are looking for high-tech employment in Canada. And this is the second foray by Alberta's government into Silicon Valley to lure workers north. The first one last June attracted 70 people, seven of whom took jobs with Alberta technology companies.

Doug Cameron, director of investment attraction for the province's economic development department, said this trip will involve four Alberta companies and a large recruiting firm. The province will hold a party Friday night with the Digital Moose Lounge, a social group for expat Canadian technology workers. The job fair will go to Los Angeles on Saturday, with a final presentation for UCLA students on Monday night. More than 200 people are registered for the events.

Brain gain is a concept catching on at companies across Canada, which see Silicon Valley as good hunting ground for technology whiz-kid Canucks ready to come home. Canada is becoming more attractive to U.S. technology workers, these companies say. The technology meltdown -- which has had less impact in Canada than the United States -- has shaken the confidence of those who planned to spend their lives in Silicon Valley. The tax environment has improved in this country. And the technology sector has matured here, with more job opportunities, more leading-edge companies and more venture capital to fuel the growth.

"I think we've got a better story to tell now, so we're being more aggressive," said Frank Clegg, a Canadian who is now president of Microsoft Canada.

On March 22, Edgeflow Photonics, an Ottawa optical networking company, sponsored a hockey night social when the San Jose Sharks played the Ottawa Senators. Edgeflow human resources manager Margo Crawford did a brief presentation to 86 Digital Moose Lounge members who attended the game.

Companies such as Edgeflow, and the governments who support them, are starting to get the message out that Canadian technology job opportunities no longer need to play second fiddle to those in Silicon Valley.

The message has found some receptive listeners. Solinet Systems Inc. of Ottawa lured back as its CEO Scott

Return of the snow geeks

Marshall, a former executive at Newbridge Networks Corp. who spent two years in California as a vice-president of Cisco Systems Inc.

"We're focusing on building world class technology companies here in Canada and that's a real draw," said Susan Read, vice-president of "techno brain gain" at TechnoCap, a Montreal venture capital firm. "We know the brightest minds are drawn by the opportunity to work with the brightest minds and build some hot technology that nobody else on the planet is doing. And they can do that here in Canada."

TechnoCap sponsored a meeting in San Jose last year to boost recruitment for its affiliate companies, and attends events for Canadians in Silicon Valley. It also holds parties at major U.S. conferences and trade shows to make contact with Canadians who may be considering a move home.

"We were at a cocktail party in California about three months ago and people were really feeling the impact of the slowdown," Ms. Read said. "It's been quite a shock for Canadians living in the valley and I believe in the next few months people are going to be more open to coming back."

Often, it's career opportunities, not just salaries, that lure Canadians to the United States in the first place. And a good career move -- coupled with the promise of a better life for his family -- will lure a worker back.

The TechnicallyHip Web site, created for Canadians working in Silicon Valley, conducted a poll in April asking why technology workers left Canada. More than 47% of respondents said it was for a better job opportunity. Higher pay was cited by 18%, and just 7.5% said they went for lower taxes. Almost 13% of respondents said they had resisted the lure south, or had gone to the United States and returned to Canada.

When asked what they would do to enhance Canada's technology industry if they were Canada's prime minister, 34% said luring big technology companies north would be their priority.

jvardy@nationalpost.com