

Innovation: The Key To Shaping America's Future

By John Engler
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This week's National Summit on Competitiveness in Washington hosted by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and the Commerce Department brought together leaders from corporate America, academia, government and especially the small and mid-size manufacturing sector to accelerate action on an innovation agenda that will allow America to compete successfully in the 21st century.

As I emphasized in opening the summit, this nation cannot thrive without the technological advantages that we as Americans have enjoyed over the decades. That is why we are calling for an increase in federal monies for research and development, a greater emphasis on science and math education in our schools and immigration reform as a means to keep as many of the brightest minds that study in American universities in our great nation.

The story is told best in the 2005 Skills Gap Report recently released by the NAM, the Manufacturing Institute and Deloitte Consulting. It shows that increasingly, U.S. companies are unable to find the skills and talent they need while some developing nations now turn out more engineers than we do each year. China graduated 600,000 engineers last year; India graduated 350,000; the United States graduated 70,000.

China and India are racing to climb the technology ladder. We must recognize that we're in that race, too, and we have to run smarter if we are to maintain our high standard of living and our global leadership.

Our failure to keep pace in research funding and workforce preparedness has been well documented in recent years with a series of reports on innovation and competitiveness. But, the purpose of the summit is not to produce another report; it's to draw from those existing reports and focus on an action program.

Credit is due to leaders in Washington who have understood this problem for some time. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA) should be applauded for initiating the summit with help from Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, (R-NY), chair of the House Science Committee, and Rep. Vernon Ehlers, (R-MI), chair of the House Environment, Technology and Standards Subcommittee.

Commerce Sec. Carlos Gutierrez, Energy Sec. Samuel Bodman, Labor Sec. Elaine Chao, Education Sec. Margaret Spellings and Deputy Commerce Sec. David Sampson all met with summit participants to discuss policy prescriptions for future economic success.

Smaller manufacturers told their stories as well. Della Williams, owner of Williams-Pyro Inc. in Texas, said when she went looking for engineers for her company she could find no American candidates. Instead, she hired foreign-born workers educated at Texas universities, but has had trouble retaining them and cannot even get "green cards" because of outdated immigration rules.



Kellie Johnson of ACE Clearwater Enterprises in California said 10 openings in her company have gone unfilled because of the lack of skilled candidates. She has not sat idly by however. Instead she has thought ahead by hosting plant tours for children in elementary school to show them how exciting work can be in a manufacturing company. Johnson also hires high school interns for summer work and seeks out graduate students from local schools like the University of Southern California.

The Innovation Summit was a giant step to bring the attention of the nation's leaders on the bottom-line impacts of standing still in a rapidly-changing world. The focus is now on moving the debate along swiftly to keep America the world's leading innovator.

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