

Opinion: Ramsey: U.S. must get its innovation mojo back

By Rey Ramsey

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Is America slipping? Have we lost a quality that made us the innovation center of the world? Does invention matter to us anymore?

Let's be clear: America is still top dog when it comes to innovation. The United States accounts for nearly a third of the \$1.1 trillion spent globally on research and development. We graduate more science and engineering doctorates than any other country and lead the world in patents.

We're not innovating just for innovation's sake. Being the best at creating what's new provides jobs, tax revenue and a lift for many out of poverty.

We still have the innovation magic, but the questions above are becoming more real every day as other nations aren't sitting still. The National Science Board's annual report on innovation found that for the 10 years ending in 2007, U.S. spending on R&D grew between 5 percent and 6 percent annually. Similar spending in India, South Korea and Taiwan grew more than 9 percent. In China, it averaged a whopping 20 percent.

It's as if the United States is walking up a set of stairs while other nations are running up an escalator. Clearly, our global competitors are paying more attention to what it takes to nurture innovation.

We've all witnessed firsthand the transformative power of technological tools. Access to computers, information and broadband grows our economy and improves lives. For example, federal stimulus targeted at greater adoption of broadband will help create jobs and entirely new industries. One study found that a 7 percent increase in adoption could grow more than 1 million jobs.

President Barack Obama understood the issue when he said: "The United States led the world's economies in the 20th century because we led the world in innovation. Today, the competition is keener; the challenge is tougher; and that is why innovation is more important than ever. It is the key to good, new jobs for the 21st century."

The administration has taken some positive steps in that direction. The Educate to Innovate campaign to improve math and science education, the Energy Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy effort and commitments to support green technologies, along with investments to deliver ubiquitous broadband, are a good start.

But more needs to be done, and Congress needs to take up the baton. Innovation isn't a partisan cause, but rather something that needs to permeate all strata of American society.

Three Americans took home a Nobel Prize in 2009 thanks to research on telomeres, which play a role in aging and cellular life spans. The scientists attributed the prize to basic research and to America's ability to attract brainpower. Two of the winners are immigrants. One, Dr. Elizabeth Blackburn, was born in Australia but moved here because the U.S. is a "notably attractive" place to pursue science, something she warned "one shouldn't take for granted."

She's right. Since I became president and CEO of TechNet, I've been thinking a lot about that. We're still a destination for scientists, engineers and innovators of all stripes, but being on top of the mountain may give us a false sense of well-being. It's easy to look down and forget what we did to get here, or to get careless and fall off. To win this race, our policies must encourage everyone to contribute to innovation — urban, rural, immigrant, minority, young and old.

Are we slipping? Maybe. But we should view any stumble as an opportunity to shake off the cobwebs and get our innovation mojo back.

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