




---

 THE HBR LIST
 

---

*Our annual snapshot of the emerging shape of business.*

## Breakthrough Ideas for 2009

---

### A Looming American Diaspora

by Paul Saffo

*Silicon Valley expatriates have been moving to China in a small but steady stream.*

While U.S. companies are worrying about how to recruit talent from abroad in the face of increasingly stringent immigration rules, a different and far more significant challenge is quietly building. When young knowledge workers look for a job today, they seriously consider companies half a world away. Homegrown American talent is moving abroad, in what could become a huge shift in the world economic order.

Early warning signs abound. Look at Singapore's success in recruiting top U.S. academics to its universities and research centers: It lured the world's leading seismologist away from Cal Tech and the number two scientist at the National Institutes of Health away from that organization. Silicon Valley expatriates have been moving to China in a small but steady stream. Farmers from the Midwest are using their high-tech methods to make a new start in Brazil, where real estate is cheap.

The United States' current economic woes are accelerating this trend. The trickle that has started at the top will become a flood as mid-career executives look for new opportunities abroad. Of course, even the best manager will struggle if he or she doesn't speak the local language. But one can get by in India with English only, and Spanish is relatively easy to learn.

Moreover, when the children of today's expats enter the workforce, they'll reap a huge advantage from knowing the second language—Chinese, Portuguese, Hindustani—they learned to speak at home as youngsters. More and more parents are discovering that a multilingual education can help in guaranteeing lifelong employability for their offspring.

Government policy will be crucial in determining how well U.S. companies respond to the increasing diaspora of American talent. Lawmakers must not resort to knowledge protectionism—for instance, by requiring people who attend state-funded universities to spend a certain amount of their working life in the United States. Rather, they must ensure that America remains the most congenial place for high-tech enterprises and continues to attract foreign students to its universities and foreign workers to its companies.

The U.S. monopoly on leading-edge opportunities is at an end. The world's best and brightest no longer assume that their future lies exclusively in the United States, and America's best are coming to agree: Their path to a dream career may well lead them overseas.

---

*Paul Saffo is a technology forecaster based in Silicon Valley. You can read more of his essays at [www.saffo.com](http://www.saffo.com).*

---