

Global outlook for IT, jobs in difficult times

April 1 2009, By Benjamin J. Romano

Craig Mundie, Microsoft chief research and strategy officer, took a break from the company's Government Leaders Forum -- Americas on Wednesday to discuss global competitiveness, technology and government IT spending.

Earlier, Mundie talked to the gathering of Latin American governors and ministerial-level leaders about using technology to improve health care and education.

Here are edited excerpts of Mundie's conversation with The Seattle Times.

Question: You remarked on the idea that technology has been a great global leveler, contributing to developing nations' transition from industrial and agricultural economies to knowledge-based economies. What's available for people in this country who are facing [layoffs](#) now and want to compete on that global playing field that technology creates?

A: To some extent, the globalization horse is out of the barn. ... In some sense, people have to recognize ... these technologies are available to everyone. Arguably, people in the [United States](#) have more uniform access to it yet than people in most other countries -- albeit not all.

I think they have to recognize that there are many avenues open to them to gain access to technology, to gain training in the technology and to basically use it to change their lives and change their own marketability in our own society and [economy](#), which is the world's leading knowledge

economy and hopefully will remain so.

For that to happen we need a steady supply of trained people. And, frankly, for people who may suddenly have time on their hands or find there's a decline in their more traditional [employment](#), they can, through community colleges in particular, I think, go and get some training quickly in some of these advanced technical skills.

Many people who are coming out of high school and who don't necessarily want to go into four-year college program, but who want to be prepared to work in the technical community, are finding that the community colleges in the United States have become the training ground for IT professionals.

Q: Are government leaders willing or even able to invest in IT right now given huge government deficits and tight credit markets?

A: (Mundie expects leaders at the conference) to be looking at many of these IT investments relative to how quick their payback is. It's not that they aren't buying things, it's just that they want to ensure that, particularly from a cash-management point of view, that the capital expense has a rapid payback cycle. So a lot of Microsoft's focus since September has been on showing people which technologies tend to have the highest payback just from a financial analysis point of view, and yet help them solve problems.

Q: How open are governments to cloud computing and software as service models for government information and applications hosted in third-party data centers, much like what Microsoft is working on with Windows Azure?

A: Many of these governments are saddled with incredible legacy data-center expenses. They're just some of the world's largest enterprises, and

they accrue a lot of legacy, often custom systems that are hard for them to maintain and also hard for them to replace. So the people I talk to in the United States and elsewhere are quite intrigued with the idea that some of these data-center capabilities that we have in the cloud services could be a more economical host or provide the impetus for them to move off their legacy data centers and line-of-business applications and put them in the cloud in the future.

There is a persistent question with respect to the data security for some classes of government information and, at least at Microsoft, I think we're looking at creative ways that we can solve those problems. I'm fairly optimistic that we'll find a variety of solutions that balance the needs and risks that governments have regarding their data, which range from just privacy questions to national security questions, over time.

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