

Reversing brain drain

October 8 2009

A battered U.S. economy has sent many of the country's leading minds packing for "greener" shores. America is losing thousands of top scientists, academics and biotech executives to cities like Singapore, which offer more lucrative salaries. Now, an Israeli specialist is sharing a proven formula for wooing the expatriates back home. It worked in Israel, and he says it could rebuild America's innovation edge as well.

"Brain drain is something that Israel has been dealing with for the last decade," says Dr. Noam Shomron of Tel Aviv University. "Even though most scientists, physicians, biotech and high-tech professionals want to return home from their posts abroad, there is often little promise for them. We've developed a plan and package that they can't resist. And it's not only about financial incentives."

To turn Israeli brain drain into "brain gain," Dr. Shomron assisted three other Israeli scientists in founding BioAbroad, which has successfully placed dozens of post-doctoral researchers in tenure-track positions at Israel's competitive universities. The Israeli project is very much a model that U.S. states, universities and top corporations can use to keep their talent on American soil.

Back into the loop

"Countries like Singapore are investing billions of dollars to become the world leader in biotech," says Dr. Shomron. "We now see top American scientists starting labs in Singapore, and it's understandable. With huge benefits like multi-million dollar labs, private school for the kids, hard-

to-beat salaries and perks like free rent, it's obvious why many would choose the Far East."

But money, as Dr. Shomron discovered through working with American and international teams, isn't everything. And while many Americans are now stationed in places like the Far East, eventually they'll want to return home. But by then it will be harder for them to come back, the researcher notes, likening the experience of repatriation to immigration. The biggest problem after heading abroad for a few years is that people get out of the loop. "It's especially difficult in academia," explains Dr. Shomron, who, returning home to Israel after a four-year stay at MIT, speaks from personal experience.

Without a fresh network of friends, work colleagues and neighbors, small things like finding daycare for your children can be a major task. "We've built a resource that governments, universities and companies in Israel can use, too, and American ones can learn from our model," says Dr. Shomron. "We think it will work well for biotech firms and schools in large cities like New York."

No place like home

To put an effective package together, the researcher says, an institution needs to define its target group and hiring goals. Attractive incentives should be offered, such as a website with useful tools, like local job openings, and information on how to prepare for interviews. Such a virtual community can help create traffic and camaraderie, he says. A business can invite chambers of commerce, universities and government agencies to help the matchmaking process further along.

Small gifts like a free plane ticket back to the U.S. and a hotel room can ease the interviewing process. A free car for a month, subsidized daycare and housing, and small gestures like a "Welcome Back" sign at the

airport can help ease the return once a decision has been made, says Dr. Shomron. He also suggests that the appointment of a special company executive in charge of such an enterprise is useful. The executive can help prospective repatriates define their niche and goals a year in advance, minimizing any surprises back home.

Transparency, Dr. Shomron adds, is key. "People, after knowing what they're searching for, have to know what positions are available — the salaries, perks and support they'll receive on their return. It's a real upheaval to change your life and return to your country of origin, but little things make people feel welcome."

Some American universities have already caught on. "Columbia University has created a mini-cosmos, after realizing it was losing its best researchers due to high rents and cost of living in Manhattan. Now they offer researchers subsidized rent, good schools for the kids, and small benefits that ease peoples' lives," Dr. Shomron explains. "According to what we've found, that's the best strategy."

Source: Tel Aviv University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Reversing brain drain (2009, October 8) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-10-reversing-brain.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--