

## Technology firms still fear skills shortage

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Although employment in Ottawa's depressed technology industry is stuck at a five-year-low, technology companies are worried they could face skill shortages in the near future.

"Our members tell us that in five years they are concerned they won't have the right people with the right skills," Chris Henderson, chairman of the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation, told a Greater Ottawa Chamber of Commerce meeting yesterday.

He said the combination of baby-boom workers retiring and strong federal government hiring will heighten competition for available talent.

"We have to make sure the workforce skills continue to grow so we don't get future bottlenecks," Mr. Henderson added.

"We have learned in the past that you can deal with shortages of capital fairly quickly, but it takes much longer to deal with shortages of skilled people."

Mr. Henderson said OCRI is trying to create the conditions that will help five to 10 successful companies emerge "like another Cognos."

He said the number of potential candidates has shrunk from 100 to 200 budding companies with promising sales and new products during the technology boom to about half that number today.

OCRI is working to commercialize the research work of research institutions, strengthen quality of life through good planning, and raise the profile of Ottawa in United States and world markets and with venture capitalists

One of the biggest challenges is getting individual Ottawa businesses to participate in business lobby groups such as OCRI and the chamber of commerce.

While business groups rallied around when Ottawa lost 15,000 public-service jobs in the early 1990s, there has not been a similar response to the loss of 30,000 technology groups in the last three years.

Membership, participation and attendance at meetings such as yesterday's chamber gathering are sparse.

"We have to create the civic integration and team work that we had in the '90s," said Mr. Henderson.

He said there are 30,000 businesses in Ottawa but that only 1,200 to 1,300 are members of business organizations -- a proportion he said is much lower than in many other communities.

"If they are not involved in the economy of their community, then they are either a freeloader or a free rider."

Ken Lawless of the Ottawa Life Sciences Council compared Abbott Laboratories' recent takeover of I-STAT Corp. to Cisco System's takeover of Skystone in 1989 as a trigger for driving growth of the Ottawa biotechnology sector.

He said Ottawa life sciences companies will need to find \$700 million to \$800 million in venture capital in the next five years.

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