

E-Inclusion: It's Not A Choice

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A little more than a year ago I was fortunate enough to address all 50 governors at the annual meeting of the National Governors Association. I was fortunate not just because it's an honor to address these leaders, but because leading high-tech CEOs shared their thoughts and ideas with the governors as well.

Carly Fiorina, the dynamic CEO of Hewlett-Packard, told the governors that the key to competitiveness is talent. The key to our nation's future is closing the digital divide, she said. She nudged the governors toward "E-inclusion," as she put it, so our country can effectively harness the full capabilities and talents of all its people.

I couldn't agree more. The digital divide isn't just a pressing issue of social equity and race. It's fundamental to our ability to innovate, stay competitive, and generate economic wealth. The just-released census figures make this concern even plainer. The United States is truly a multinational, multicultural, and multiracial melting pot. In an age where talent is the key factor of production, it's folly to underutilize our vast and diverse human resources.

But many people are being left behind as the move to a high-tech knowledge economy reinforces long-standing social and economic cleavages: Just a third of African-American and Hispanic households own computers, compared with more than half of all American households. Less than a quarter of African-American and Hispanic households have Internet access, compared with more than 40% of white Americans. In the heavily wired San Francisco Bay area, 81% of households with incomes of more than \$80,000 are online, compared with just 46% of households with incomes of less than \$40,000.

My research points to similar trends. Regions of the country that generate the most innovations and support dynamic high-tech industries are those with an openness and positive attitude toward

diversity--whether measured as the percentage of the labor force that's foreign-born or gay. Yet many regions with significant minority populations still have less high-tech industry than the average.

The bottom line is clear: African-Americans and other groups are being left out in the shift to a high-tech knowledge economy. This is a trend that our nation can't tolerate. Not only does it challenge our democratic ethos, it poses serious long-run challenges in our ability to generate and utilize talent--our most precious economic resource.

There's a ton of talent in these communities, as I well know. The neighborhood where I grew up, outside of Newark, N.J., is almost completely composed of new Hispanic-Americans working toward the American dream. The energy and talent there is incredible.

We need to work toward the notion of inclusion, as Fiorina says. We have to introduce people of all ages and backgrounds to technology in ways that interest and motivate them. Many software developers write code not just to make money but because they love it. For example, open-source developers may create software for free because they're passionate and satisfied in just sharing their knowledge and doing what they love.

Here in Pittsburgh, we have a program called InfoLink run by two of my Carnegie Mellon University colleagues, Tom Cullen and Kristen Kurland. The program works with young African-Americans, including gang kids, and uses cutting-edge geographic information system technology to stop crime and make neighborhoods safer and better. When they complete the program, some students go on to college; others take jobs at technology companies.

Why not extend this model to businesses that can work with young people who want to program electronic music or use computers in dance and theatrical performances? What about those who want to learn about the economy, medicine, or even sports online? As we like to say at Carnegie Mellon, the whole world will be permeated with information technology--any place, any time, anywhere. No dimension of life will be untouched.

Closing the divide will take more than just putting computers in the classroom and invoking kids to use them, of course. Information technology and associated careers have to be made relevant to kids' world and interests if we hope to include them in this new age of technology.

And here's the rub: We really have no choice. The new realities of a talent-driven economy mean we, as managers and executives, have to do this if we want to truly remain a strong, inclusive, and economically competitive nation.