

High tech in South Florida? No, not really

By JAY S. MENDELL And
HENRY SARKIS JR.

South Florida will not become a center of high technology until our business and government leaders acknowledge that high technology is different from any other business.

High tech pushes change to the limit. It favors and enriches people who value change for its own sake, people who are driven by creativity and innovation; and most especially it favors revolutionaries. It wrecks the businesses and careers of those who cannot manage and benefit by change. High tech creates an economic revolution by wiping out slow-to-innovate businesses and replacing them with fast-to-change businesses and by stamping out whatever and whoever is wasteful and overpriced.

According to statistics, South Florida is seventh nationally as a home for high-tech companies. Yet much of our high tech constitutes the manufacture of electronics for resale outside Florida, as opposed to the leading edge research that will lead to new generations of innovation.

We would rather see research and development centers settling here, because they are not likely to be automated out of existence or moved to a developing country. And they would probably inspire low tech businesses in Florida to incorporate computers, robotics and telecommunications more fully into their operations.

Lacks history

Unfortunately, as a region, Florida lacks the history of nurturing California-style, Massachusetts-style, blockbuster innovation. It is not the home of leading edge research and development, so it is disadvantaged in attracting high-tech

We need top-notch universities with industry supported research facilities. We need a guiding vision, a strategy. And we need entrepreneurs to create magic, not business plans.

entrepreneurs.

Change-makers gravitate naturally to change-makers, to people who understand the difference between making no changes, making small changes and creating something dramatically new. That's one reason that high-tech companies have clustered around Boston's Route 128 and California's Silicon Valley.

If South Florida were a creative intellectual center, if it had one or more universities full of energetic, renowned scholars and scientists who were truly trying to work with and create revolutions in their fields, and if several leading edge companies (e.g. Apple Computers) had already sprung up here, we would feel that this part of the country is fertile ground for more innovation.

But in South Florida the frontier economy, rather than radical innovation, has created wealth and opportunity. Economic progress has not been the result of purposeful innovation, and, unfortunately, some have become leaders by being in the right place at the right time, which requires brains, but not always creativity.

Our experience has proven again and again that successful innovation is achieved despite the lawyers, bankers, accountants, financial analysts and other advice givers. Today, here in South

Florida, we see swarms of accountants, bankers, lawyers and professors wherever entrepreneurs gather, and we feel it is ironic that these professionals, who are trained to avoid risk, are offering advice to the people who need to take risks, the entrepreneurs.

Top-notch universities

O.K., what can we do?

We believe that top-notch universities are desirable. But we realize that 10 or 15 years will be required to turn the University of Miami, Florida International University and Florida Atlantic University into world renowned institutions. And things are changing too fast to wait.

An industry-supported research facility affiliated with local universities would help promote Florida, while the local universities develop their engineering schools as rapidly as possible, concentrate their business curricula on the management of change and expand funding in the humanities for studies of the human impact of continual change.

The University of Miami and FAU have established entrepreneurship forums, in which the problems of start-up high-tech companies are discussed by a panel of experts and by audience members. Many

fine lawyers, accountants, financial analysts and consultants have explained how to draw up a business plan and serve the interests of investors. But we would like to hear more advice from successful entrepreneurs who know how to survive when funds are scarce; how to motivate employees to come up with new ideas every day; how to locate investors who enjoy creating change as well as profit; how to avoid giving the company away to investors looking for a fast killing; and how to discover markets and opportunities that no one else can see.

In other words, we want to hear more about how entrepreneurs create magic, not business plans.

Superior resources

In *Maxims for Revolutionists*, George Bernard Shaw said: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

Other states have superior intellectual resources for attracting leading edge high-tech companies, so South Florida needs a strategy, or at least a guiding vision. We should hold ourselves out as the region that has overcome the illusion that high tech is just a reasonable new way to make money.

In many ways, high-tech entrepreneurship is unreasonable because it insists that the world adapt to it. Our academic and business leaders should adjust to the difference and create a fast track for revolutionaries.

Dr. Jay S. Mendell is a professor at Florida Atlantic University, and Henry Sarkis Jr. is an advisor to the Silicon Beach Consultancy Inc. of Boca Raton.