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Tech execs tout Utah as key growth state

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SALT LAKE CITY — It's one thing to have local business leaders hype Utah as a state primed for job creation and potential growth, but when outside movers and shakers espouse the Beehive State's virtues, there must be something to it.

"Our strategy these days is to consider "distributed development" and go where the people are, and where the talent is, and the IQ is — and there is a lot of it here (in Utah)," said Dan'l Lewin, corporate vice president, strategic and emerging business development for Microsoft Corp.

Lewin was among the panelists involved in a daylong event organized by U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, Friday that included two round-table discussions at the Huntsman Cancer Institute.

The event brought together business executives and investors from high-profile companies from the technology and life sciences industries to offer insights on networking and establishing successful businesses.

Lewin said Utah is uniquely prepared to grow, particularly in the high-tech fields.

"We don't go to place where we expect to retreat from," he said. "We go places we expect to grow over time."

He noted that in the recent past, Microsoft has put "a toe in the water" by opening a research and development facility in Utah County and would consider further expansion in the near future.

Citing Utah's reputation for successful and innovative entrepreneurship in technology, he said Utah has positioned itself as a state where new companies would like to launch from and where established firms would want to expand their operations.

"We'll continue to (increase) our investments over time," Lewin explained. "It will be slowly and suddenly ... but we are here because of the great quality of life, (good educational) institutions and a very talented workforce."

The Utah Department of Workforce Services projected the state will add 17,000 new jobs this year and 28,000 next year — a significant portion of which will be in the high-tech arena. Economists have also been optimistic — predicting slow, steady improvement on the employment front during 2011.

Not to mention the various recent accolades heaped on the Beehive State from national media like Forbes magazine and Moody's Economy.com, which listed Salt Lake City and Utah among the best places to do business and best job markets in America.

That kind of positive notoriety has not gone unnoticed by the outside business community.

Kate Mitchell, co-founder and managing partner of Scale Venture Partners — a venture capital fund based in Silicon Valley, Calif., said Utah has the core infrastructure that makes it attractive to potential job creators.

"(You) have great research and universities, great innovation and a very friendly business environment," she said.

She reiterated that the Beehive State as the "core elements for success" that could help offer opportunity to innovators willing to take a chance to become a "dominant" player in the technology or life sciences sectors.

"I really encourage people to 'go for it,'" Mitchell said. "You have a lot of what it takes (here for companies to be successful)."

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