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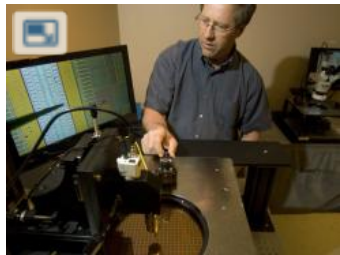
Bad economy may be mother of invention

By Dan D'Ambrosio and Adam Silverman, USA TODAY Updated 7/19/2011 11:07 PM

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Five years ago, electrical engineer Denis Place and two partners left Suss MicroTec, in Waterbury, Vt., a German-owned manufacturer of machines, to make microchips, and formed their own company based on an idea they had for testing those chips.



By Ryan Mercer, Free Press

Denis Place, President and CEO of SemiProbe, in Winooski, Vt.,

Today, Suss MicroTec is gone, and Place and his partners, patent in hand for their testing process, have a new company in Winooski, Vt., called SemiProbe. It has eight employees and big plans for the future.

"In terms of employees, over the next five years, our expectation is to be at 60 to 75 people," says Steve Mank, SemiProbe's chief operating officer.

If Mank is right, SemiProbe will come close to replacing the 80 jobs Vermont lost last year when Suss MicroTec closed up shop after 20 years in the state and moved its manufacturing back to Germany and its marketing to California.

SemiProbe is one example of how innovation and invention are critical to America's economy, especially in hard times, when jobs are scarce.

"The whole engine that drives any economy is inventing, innovation," says Stephen Gnass, a Los Angeles-based invention consultant and advocate for more than 30 years.

"What made America great is innovation."

I'll buy one hotel ...

One of his favorite examples: the board game *Monopoly*, the invention of which gaming company Hasbro, on its website, traces to 1935 — the heart of the [Great Depression](#).

"What we're in right now is pretty bad, and it doesn't look like it's getting better," says Gnass, founder of InventionConnection.com and executive director of The National Congress of Inventor Organizations, a non-profit for inventors and inventor groups.

"We're going to have to invent ourselves out of the doldrums we've gotten ourselves into." Americans are driven to invent during tough times, he and other experts agree, because

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many have lost comfortable jobs that once made it easy to let an idea sit on a shelf. But now, Gnass says, the latest widget or improvement on an existing product can generate a steady stream of perhaps \$10,000 to \$20,000 per year in income.

"A poor economy pushes people to be much bigger risk takers," Mank says. "They say to themselves, 'It can't get worse in Corporate America; I've had this idea in my head for a long time; I need to go do it.'"

Being a successful inventor can be akin to being a landlord, Gnass says.

"If you own intellectual property, it's like you collect rent out of the air," he says. "If somebody has the passion and the stick-to-itiveness, you can make a good living."

An overflow of paperwork

One downside of increased innovation, Mank says, is a three-year backlog of more than 700,000 patent applications currently clogging up the U.S. Patent Office.

Patent-reform legislation is pending in Congress that is intended to simplify the process of who deserves a patent by giving it to the first to file rather than to the first inventor.

As of last week, the House had passed the bill and sent it back to the Senate.

Louis Foreman, founder and chief executive of Enventys, a product design and engineering firm in Charlotte, who has 10 patents, says the difference is important.

"Someone files for a patent, and all of a sudden, someone else jumps out and says, 'Aha, I invented it before you!'" Foreman says.

"That leads to complex litigation, bogs down the courts and costs lots of money."

The patent process is also expensive, says Place, who said his small company spent the national average of between \$20,000 and \$40,000 to get its patent. SemiProbe received the patent last year, after filing for it in 2006.

Four years is not that long to wait, says Place, who said it can take twice that long to get a patent.

"The patent system is really due for an overhaul," Mank says.

A new day?

The Patent Office has shown signs of improvement since the appointment in August 2009 of David Kappos, a former intellectual property attorney for IBM, as its new director, says Tom Ference, who is on the board of directors of InventVermont, a non-profit formed to help Vermont residents benefit from their inventions.

In 2010, the Patent Office granted 244,358 patents, up 27.3% from 2009, when 191,933 patents were granted.

"He's very much a business guy, and he knows the importance of intellectual property to business," Ference says.

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Posted 7/19/2011 9:20:35 PM | Updated 7/19/2011 11:07 PM



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	<p>crpppll 3:33 AM on July 20, 2011 Score: 9</p> <p>Fairy tales will come true if you're young at heart. I've been involved with inventors since the 70's and stories like these are few and far between.</p>	
	<p>TripleEagle 5:08 AM on July 20, 2011 Score: -2</p> <p>Your Nikola Tesla image says it all....</p> <p>Of course you are right. It is just a good story to sell newspapers.. It is like the Microsofts and Googles of the world...simply black swans. Does anyone really think that Bill Gates and the Google guys are genius?? Of course not! They were extremely lucky being presented with opportunities others were not. I can assure you there were thousands upon thousands of others more intelligent and creative than Bill Gate (some may even have had the same name!!) with even better ideas who were not presented with similar opportunities and did not succeed as he did.</p> <p>In short this story, plus many appearing in business books are the very exception...they all imply that if you have a good idea and you are smart you will become another Bill Gates. The reality is that for that to succeed like him you need about 70% of luck...which you will rarely read about in business journals or books..</p>	
	<p>C.A.R 5:32 AM on July 20, 2011 Score: 3</p> <p>"Patent-reform legislation is pending in Congress that is intended to simplify the process of who deserves a patent by giving it to the first to file rather than to the first inventor."</p> <p>That's how Bill Gates was successful. Gates didn't invent anything. He stole someone else's idea and patented it first.</p>	
	<p>buckeyedebbie 6:01 AM on July 20, 2011 Score: 2</p> <p>Lots of non-business folks out here.....all technology that we use came from someone or some private sector company through invention and innovation.</p> <p>Most negative posts remind me of people very jealous of anyone who took the chance to start a company and invent something!!</p>	
	<p>TripleEagle 6:09 AM on July 20, 2011 Score: -5</p> <p>buckeyedebbie 6:01 AM on July 20, 2011</p>	

Lots of non-business folks out here.....all technology that we use came from someone or some private sector company through invention and innovation.

Of course! Who said otherwise? (Did you hit the bottle too hard last night???)

1 reply



buckeyedebbie

6:26 AM on July 20, 2011

Score: 6

Thank you USA Today!!

Since January of 2009:

-Congress/White House has had plenty of time to pass patent reform legislation to help stimulate our economy and job creation!! Dereliction of job responsibilities!!

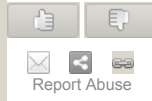
-Patent Reform Legislation should cut the fee of \$20-40K to \$5K or less...stop gouging inventors/innovaters!!

-Kind of amazing that President Obama talks about invention, innovation & job creation ON THE CAMPAGIGN CIRCUIT and has let THE USA have a THREE YEAR 700,000 backlog OF AMERICAN PATENT APPLICATIONS!!

-SUSS MICRO TECH WENT BACK TO GERMANY CAUSE GERMANY HAS A VERY BUSINESS PRIVATE SECTOR BUSINESS CLIMATE!!

-A real CEO in the private sector would look at one of his/her departments with a 700,000 backlog that is majorly impacting their bottom line and say bye bye to all executives in that department and require all workers to work weekends, nights, 3 shifts to clear out the backlog! Not this CEO nor Congress!!

1 reply



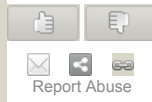
czubek

6:41 AM on July 20, 2011

Score: -2

Invention and innovation will enable America to automate even more jobs. If we're going to be a third rate country shouldn't we make some attempt to keep what minimum wage jobs we have left?

4 replies



PeggyOne

7:31 AM on July 20, 2011

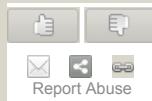
Score: -2

Is there any point in trying to get ahead with Obama in the White House?

What a joke!

All one is doing by earning more is setting himself up to pay more in taxes to fund Obama's spending habits.

If you create something, lay low until the IDIOT is out of office.



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