

Industry + teachers = better workforce

FELLOWSHIPS PUT EDUCATORS ON THE JOB FOR THE SUMMER

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Cupertino High teacher Megumi Shibamiya has an answer for the go-to question posed by generations of math students: When are we *ever* going to need to know this stuff?

How about when you're designing the next-generation search engine or figuring out how to run a bigger server farm on less electricity. Or how about when you're calculating how rich you are when your company's initial public offering closes the day at \$100.34.

Shibamiya, who teaches math and Japanese, has roamed the halls of high tech to improve the experience of students who roam the halls of high school.

She's one of hundreds of educators who've landed corporate fellowships over the past 23 years from a little-known Santa Clara non-profit with a big name: Industry Initiatives for Science and Math Education, or IISME.

"To be able to spend a summer doing this and to get so much time to really develop curriculum like that is really amazing," says Shibamiya, 32, who spent last summer at Cassatt, a San Jose company that develops software to run data centers more efficiently.

Now IISME, www.iisme.org, is scrambling to find companies to host - and pay - fellows for the coming summer. The truth is there are never enough spots.

"We have hundreds of teachers that we turn away every year," says Jennifer Bruckner, the non-profit's executive director.

IISME's mission is simple: Place teachers in Silicon Valley companies. Give them meaningful projects to work on and require them to spend 10 percent of their work time thinking about how to be even better teachers. The hoped-for payoff? Energized teachers who feel valued and who return to school ready to train the next generation of Silicon Valley workers.

If you're among those counting on a competent talent pool to make your business go, you might want to step up now. IISME placed 188 fellows last year. This year Bruckner says she'd like to make that 200 - a goal the outfit has never reached.

So why? Why would a company agree to pay for the privilege of hosting a teacher? Companies usually put up \$13,000, \$7,200 of which is a teacher stipend. The rest goes to teacher grants and to run IISME.

Bill Coleman, chief executive of Cassatt, says the fellowship program is a good way for local companies to give back. And, he says, valley executives have a vested interest in ensuring that future graduates are armed for the accelerating technological revolution.

"I think that's one of the top two or three concerns about what's going on in this country among CEOs," says Coleman, a valley veteran who founded BEA Systems and has been a key player with companies such as VisiCorp, Sun Microsystems, Palm and Symantec. "Especially companies that rely on being able to hire people with technical competence."

The program is no charity project. Host companies get some hard work out of the deal. Shibamiya spent about eight weeks designing a Web-based tool to track the progress of a Cassatt product team's project.

"You'll never find anybody more enthusiastic," Coleman says of the IISME fellows. "They really earn their money. And it's contagious around the company."

The benefit to Silicon Valley schools is just as positive, Bruckner says. In a place with high housing costs and lucrative business opportunities, it can be hard to keep good teachers teaching. Bruckner says IISME's surveys indicate fellowships have encouraged teachers to stick with it.

And what's that worth?

Coleman has a pretty good idea. He says he struggled in elementary school, even failing some classes. Then came sixth grade and that one teacher - Mr. Ford.

"I had a teacher who got me so interested in science," he says, "I just couldn't stop."

Couldn't stop. To this day.