



Atlanta Could Become IT, Indian Investment Hub of South

May 05, 2009

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Atlanta has most of the right ingredients to become the South's hub for information technology companies and Indian investment, said NIIT Technologies Inc. President Lalit Dhingra.

"I'm a firm believer that this is a great place for the IT hub of the South," Mr. Dhingra told GlobalAtlanta in a broad-ranging interview.

Mr. Dhingra's company is an Atlanta-based branch of NIIT Ltd., an Indian company that started off in IT education and workforce training before it began creating software solutions in the late 1990s.

The software operation broke off into its own subsidiary in 2004. Now, NIIT Technologies takes in \$100 million in yearly revenues.

Since Mr. Dhingra came to Atlanta to oversee the establishment of NIIT's technology arm, he's seen tremendous growth in the city.

"When I came here 14 years back, we had an office in Dunwoody, and there were not that many buildings," he said. Now, looking out the window, offices have risen all around.

"If you look at the growth, it was extremely high in Atlanta for the last five or six years," Mr. Dhingra said.

Mr. Dhingra listed a few of the attributes that give Atlanta its economic vitality and make it a good place for IT companies, especially from India.

The weather is warm, which makes Indian people feel at home, he said.

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport connects Georgia with the rest of the world. Atlanta's cost of living is relatively low, and with a broad pool of quality universities, its talent levels are very high.

In addition, Atlanta has many Fortune 500 companies that make good clients for IT companies.

NIIT has worked with Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines Inc., banks, logistics and retail companies, among others, Mr. Dhingra said.

Another Indian IT company, Wipro Technologies Ltd., also noticed the city's advantages and announced in 2007 that it would open a software development center here.

Wipro has stalled the opening to weather the economic downturn, but company officials say they remain committed to the center, which officials have said is set to employ up to 500.



Mr. Dhingra said NIIT has done relatively well in the current recession.

"The business is a little slow in the last couple of quarters, but not too much," he said. "This is the first quarter where we have had flat growth, absolutely zero growth, but we are looking at growth in the (second) quarter."

He said Atlanta has some obstacles to overcome if it wants to become the South's central point for information technology companies. The venture capital scene here needs work, as people still think of the main hubs in Boston and California as the places where technology companies can most easily raise money, he said.

The other hurdle is marketing, getting the word out about the advantages Atlanta does have, he said.

The Georgia Institute of Technology is one of the top biotechnology schools in the country, and the state should focus on that sector.

"I think the investments of the VCs and the private equity funds have to make sure that the state becomes a hub for biomedical engineering and biotechnology companies," he said.

Doing so could help Atlanta attract many Indian firms that are "dying to start biotech or biomedical engineering operations in the U.S."

Mr. Dhingra has been working with the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and tech-focused organizations like the Technology Association of Georgia, or TAG, to make sure a clear case is presented for Atlanta on the world stage.

"The environment is there; it just has to get everyone together and say, 'Let's create this,'" he said.

Hans Gant, senior vice president of economic development for the metro chamber, said at a recent event at the Wipro headquarters that Atlanta is focused on attracting Indian investment.

"We want to make sure that Atlanta and Georgia are one of their primary areas for investment," Mr. Gant said.

India has announced that it will open a consulate general in Atlanta this year.

Mr. Dhingra said that will help with "community and immigration" issues for Indian workers.

On a different note, Mr. Dhingra mentioned how NIIT's technology solutions helped inspire the Oscar-winning film "Slumdog Millionaire." The movie portrays a poor Indian boy's rise to fortune when he wins the Indian version of the game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?"

He knows the answers to the questions through life experience, the same principle NIIT used when building its "Hole in the Wall" initiative. As an experiment to help kids learn technology, the company put computers programmed with education software in kiosks around slums in New Delhi.



Without any supervision, the children began learning how to use the technology.

The program inspired Vikas Swarup, the author of the book "Q&A," upon which the movie was based.

Its success helped Mr. Swarup realize "that there's an innate ability in everyone to do something extraordinary, provided they are given an opportunity," an NIIT press release quotes him as saying.

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