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Wanted: Homegrown Scientists

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Dr. Ajay Malshe with members of his diverse scientific team.

There's a young company in Fayetteville called Nanomech that specializes in nanotechnology, the science of the very small. Working with materials not much bigger than atoms, it is producing a coating material almost as hard as diamonds that makes machine cutting tools much more durable. Its early customers are some of the world's best-known manufacturers, including General Electric and Black and Decker.

Other products are equally revolutionary. They will reduce friction in wind turbines, keep food fresher, and make bulletproof vests lighter and stronger, all by using microscopic materials. The military is another deep-pocketed customer.

I had a chance to tour the factory for a story I wrote for another publication. It is incredibly high-tech. It employs about 30 but hopes soon to have a much bigger workforce that will be well educated and well compensated. Nanomech's trademarked motto is "ThinkSmall," and it is at the forefront of a nanotechnology revolution that is changing the way we live.

But there was something else about Nanomech that I couldn't help noticing: Most of the really smart people working there are not from the United States. The four principal scientists are from China, the Ukraine, Scotland and India, and many of its other employees also are from overseas.

This is hardly the first time I have been struck by this reality. I write for a lot of publications covering a lot of different areas. If the story is about business or politics or sports, I'm probably interviewing an American. But if the story is about some major scientific advancement, then often the only American-born person I'm talking to is the nice public relations professional who greets me at the door and then escorts me back to the lab, where someone from another country tries to explain to me what he or she is doing in my own language (and his or her second) using words only he or she understands.

Having brilliant scientists from around the world arriving on our doorstep is a testament to our country's freedoms and opportunities, and always has been. The poem at the base of the Statue of Liberty may read, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" — but it's nice to attract the world's best and brightest as well. Immigrants have helped America win its wars and fly to the moon. They have changed our country's culture and made it a more diverse and interesting place. If they are here legally, they are welcome guests, and if they have taken the oath of citizenship, they are as American as I am. Arguably more.

But the United States must also grow its own scientific and technical geniuses, and new generations of innovators must arise lest it become a nation where native public relations professionals and reporters trumpet only the achievements of those born and raised elsewhere. As other societies become more prosperous (and hopefully more free), the United States can't count on being able to import its best scientists, professors, doctors and engineers forever.

In the meantime, I'll be keeping an eye on Nanomech and seeing how big a difference it makes in the world by thinking about small things. And I'll be proud that some of its greatest minds consider themselves Arkansans, even if they haven't always been Americans.