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Experts: Amazon will compete with and invigorate LI tech scene

Amazon's Long Island City facility will initially make hiring tech talent on Long Island harder and more competitive, but experts think it will boost the region's competitiveness in the long run.

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Updated November 13, 2018 8:00 PM

Amazon's proposed "HQ2" facility in Long Island City may make hiring tech talent on Long Island harder and more competitive initially, but will create an expanded job ecosystem that could make the region — including Long Island — a technology powerhouse, business leaders said.

"It makes Long Island and New York City a player against Silicon Valley," said Peter Goldsmith, chairman of the Long Island Software & Technology Network, a regional advocacy group known as LISTnet.

The Stony Brook School of Engineering on Aug. 16 in Stony Brook. Photo Credit: Daniel Goodrich

Goldsmith likened the technology ecosystem that will grow around Amazon to the one that developed around Grumman Corp., when that aerospace company spearheaded Long Island's economy.

"A lot of companies fed off Grumman," he said. "Now other companies will feed off Amazon."

Christopher Hughes, president and chief executive of TSR Inc., a Hauppauge-based IT staffing company with operations on Long Island and in New York City, said Amazon's move will benefit "the greater New York IT ecosystem" in coming years and attract talent to the region from "around the country and the rest of the world."

But even with an influx of workers, Hughes said, Amazon's move will "create a lot of competition in the marketplace" for highly sought workers.

On Tuesday, Seattle-based Amazon, an online retailer and provider of cloud services, announced that it would build new second-headquarters facilities in Long Island City and in northern Virginia, creating 25,000 jobs at each.

"One of the main reasons behind Amazon's decision is labor-market-related," said Basak Horowitz, assistant professor of economics at St. Joseph's College Long Island. "Amazon will have access to NYC's highly educated

workforce and abundant tech talent. Secondly, Amazon will be able to offer their workers the benefits of urban life and the diversity that NYC provides. This way Amazon can attract better talent."

Dr. Samuel L. Stanley Jr., president of Stony Brook University, which grants more degrees in engineering and applied sciences than any other university in New York State, said Amazon's move is a step toward realizing the vision of a technology corridor from Brookhaven National Laboratory to New York City.

Stony Brook University's College of Engineering and Applied Sciences had a 2017-18 enrollment of 4,136 undergraduates and 1,649 graduate students, most in computer science, computer engineering or other fields related to information technology.

The school includes the nation's largest program in applied mathematics and statistics in terms of granting degrees, and those graduates also could be attractive to companies like Amazon.

"They want programmers, but they also want people who can work with big data," Stanley said.

SUNY Chancellor Kristina M. Johnson said Amazon's move will have a huge impact statewide, particularly for the 64-campus state university system.

More than 25,000 SUNY students are enrolled in computer-related degree programs across the system, more than 5,600 of whom are based on Long Island, she said. SUNY plans to work with Amazon to create new programs, training workers that fit the company's specific needs, Johnson said. "We are not only a willing, but an excited partner."

Nada Marie Anid, New York Institute of Technology's vice president for strategic communications and external affairs, said Amazon's presence will help prevent the "brain drain" that has seen talented graduates leave Long Island to seek jobs elsewhere.

It also will give those already in the workforce the chance to vie for higher-paying jobs, said Sina Rabbany, dean of Hofstra University's Fred DeMatteis School of Engineering and Applied Science.

Local universities will need to increase certificate programs, for example in coding, cloud computing, digital design and cyber security, to allow community members to continue their education and "be able to participate in this vibrant technology ecosystem, which is being created by Amazon," he said.

Educators say they are preparing even younger Long Island students for careers in technology.

"We're ready for them," Mineola schools Superintendent Michael Nagler said of the Amazon decision.

The district has been working on curriculum for kindergarten through 12th grade that focuses on computational thinking and computer science, he said. The goal is to have all students taking the Advanced Placement Computer Science Principles exam by 2020.

Maria Zeitlin, science research coordinator at Smithtown High School East, said Amazon's brand can inspire students.

"Career motivation and career access for young interns can be daunting for Long Island students, so it's exciting to see a company like Amazon coming more locally to us," she said.

Some Long Island graduates already have found their way to Amazon. Fotis Sotiropoulos, dean of Stony Brook's College of Engineering and Applied Sciences, said that about 20 students a year, especially those with computer science degrees, go across country to work at Amazon's original headquarters in Seattle.