

AT&T CEO says hard to find skilled U.S. workers



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SAN ANTONIO, Texas (Reuters) - The head of the top U.S. phone company AT&T Inc (T.N) said on Wednesday it was having trouble finding enough skilled workers to fill all the 5,000 customer service jobs it promised to return to the United States from India.

"We're having trouble finding the numbers that we need with the skills that are required to do these jobs," AT&T Chief Executive Randall Stephenson told a business group in San Antonio, where the company's headquarters is located.

So far, only around 1,400 jobs have been returned to the United States of 5,000, a target it set in 2006, the company said, adding that it maintains the target.

Stephenson said he is especially distressed that in some U.S. communities and among certain groups, the high school dropout rate is as high as 50 percent.

"If I had a business that half the product we turned out was defective or you couldn't put into the marketplace, I would shut that business down," he said.

Gone are the days when AT&T and other U.S. companies had to hire locally, he said.

"We're able to do new product engineering in Bangalore as easily as we're able to do it in Austin, Texas," he said, referring to the Indian city where many international companies have "outsourced" technical and customer support workers.

"I know you don't like hearing that, but that's the way it is," he said.

Stephenson said neither he nor most Americans liked the situation, and the solution was a stronger U.S. focus on education and keeping jobs. Business needed to help, such as AT&T's repatriation of service positions and education grants, he added.