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Tech Leaders of Tomorrow

Some former winners such as Google helped give a leg up to the crop of 2009 Technology Pioneers chosen by the World Economic Forum

By [Jennifer L. Schenker](#)

The group of 20 young, fresh-faced computer programmers in jeans and polo shirts embossed with the company logo could have been with any Silicon Valley startup. But the team, lined up in New Delhi in July 2007 for a portrait taken by a news photographer, work for a Swiss company called [Nivio](#), which employs more than 85% of its engineers and designers in India. The headline over the photo crows: "Indians invented world's first Windows-based online desktop."

Nivio is one of 34 companies chosen this year by the Geneva-based [World Economic Forum](#) to be among its 2009 Technology Pioneers—companies offering new technologies or business models that could advance the global economy and positively affect peoples' lives. It's a perfect example of how the technology business is evolving.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the forum's Tech Pioneers program. All the winners to date have made their mark in areas such as information technology, biotech, and energy. Some of them even had a hand in the success of this year's crop.

A GEOGRAPHICALLY DIVERSE CLASS

Max Levchin, a co-founder of PayPal ([EBAY](#)), a Tech Pioneer in 2001, is the founder of one of this year's winners, [Slide](#), the inventor of a number of popular social networking applications, including "sheep throwing," a way that Facebook users get attention from one another. And search engine giant Google ([GOOG](#)), a winner in 2001, is an investor in three of the 2009 Tech Pioneers: a solar thermal energy company called [BrightSource Energy](#), a wireless technology company called [Ubiquisys](#), and [CURRENT Group](#), which makes software that lets utilities manage their grids in real time.

But what really distinguishes this year's class is the number of companies based in new and different places. "We have never had such a geographically diverse class as this year, with more than 10% of our companies coming from emerging markets," says Rodolfo Lara, head of the forum's Tech Pioneers program. "We believe in five years' time we will probably have as many Tech Pioneers from emerging markets as we will have from Europe."

Indeed, innovative approaches to some of the world's thorniest problems are expected increasingly to come from emerging economies. These will be the biggest markets going forward, and with some of the biggest challenges. The argument goes, those who live there are the best placed to design the products and services this part of the world needs. Industry observers believe that many of those innovations also will end up being embraced by the developed world, so the next Google—or the next PayPal—could come from India or China.

CROSS-FERTILIZATION

This year, two of the Tech Pioneers hailed from Africa, one from China, one from India, and one from Latin America. But those figures are somewhat deceiving. Other companies in this year's class have their roots in the developing world. BioMedica Diagnostics, for example, a biotech based in Nova Scotia, Canada, was founded by Abdullah Kirumira, a Uganda native and trained chemist. He is using the proceeds from a lab test he developed for affluent countries, called QuikCoag, to help fund development of desperately needed lab tests to help save the lives of some of the world's poorest people—what he calls "cross-fertilization."

Switzerland-based Nivio was founded by 25-year-old Sacchin Duggal, whose parents emigrated from India to England. Duggal, who was trained as an information systems engineer at Imperial College in England, says he was drawn to his parent's homeland. So when he and his college friend, Saurabh Dhoot, had their "lightbulb moment" and decided to form Nivio, they turned to programmers in India to help them realize their dream.

Nivio provides access, via any standard Internet browser, to a full-featured personal Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) Windows desktop. That means people with old or cheap PCs can use sophisticated, state-of-the-art programs, running remotely, as well as store data and share files with other users. It also allows individuals and small businesses to temporarily "rent" the use of an expensive program such as Word or Excel without having to buy it.

ROLLING OUT KIOSKS

The company also has launched a low-cost computing device called the Nivio Companion, a \$100 box that plugs into a computer monitor or TV and can gain access to Nivio's Windows desktop. Nivio doesn't plan on staying in the hardware business, says Duggal. The company would prefer that its software services be bundled with established manufacturers' computing devices. It hopes to strike deals to get a "Nivio Inside" sticker on machines made by others.

The company is headquartered in Switzerland because of data security. Since users store all of their data with Nivio, rather than on their own computers, they need reassurances, says Duggal. The company already has customers in places stretching from China to Brazil and is about to launch, in partnership with mobile-service provider [Bharti Airtel](#), the rollout of Internet kiosks across India that will be powered by Nivio.

Nivio has some stiff competition, including Google Apps. But Duggal says Nivio's approach is superior because it comes closer to giving users a familiar desktop and applications. In any case, he says his goal isn't merely to beat the Silicon Valley-based search engine giant. "If we make it to Google's size, I would be happy but I wouldn't be satisfied," he says. "If we do this right, we should be the world's biggest software company." Spoken like a true tech pioneer. It's that kind of moxie that helped previous Tech Pioneers to get where they are today.

To meet the rest of this year's Tech Pioneers, see our [slide show](#) and [special report](#).

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