

U.S. Senators Urge Utility To Keep IT Jobs Onshore

By: Patrick Thibodeau

January 7, 2010 ([Computerworld](#)) New York's two U.S. senators say that National Grid, a major Northeast utility, is considering [outsourcing](#) as many as 1,200 jobs -- including many in IT -- to an offshore vendor, and they're urging the company to keep those jobs in the U.S.

This is a political push that may have broader implications in the H-1B and offshore outsourcing debate because of the involvement of U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.). He is [spearheading comprehensive immigration reform](#) via his role as head of the Senate Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees and Border Security. The legislation, still being written, is expected to address the H-1B visa.

The other senator urging National Grid not to outsource high-paying jobs is Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, (D-N.Y.), who [released a letter](#) this week to Tom King, president of the National Grid USA, urging him to keep the jobs in the U.S. In her letter, Gillibrand cited reports that the company "may outsource as many as 1,200 of its Northeast jobs," including those in New York, to "overseas vendors." Many of the jobs are IT related, including software programming and computer networking, she wrote.

"Considering the current economic climate, it is very disconcerting to hear that any company would consider outsourcing its jobs overseas," wrote Gillibrand, "It is even more upsetting to know that a company who made \$1.43 billion in profits last year would look for ways to increase profits even further at the expense of its employees and quality of service," she said. Schumer followed up Gillibrand's letter with news conference today in front of a National Grid office in Syracuse.

A National Grid spokeswoman said there has been no decision to outsource. "We are very early in the process of a prudent review of our information systems organization and have made no decisions regarding our workforce," and any claims concerning jobs impact "are premature and speculative at this point," she said.

As for Schumer's news conference, the company said it will continue working with the senator "because we have a lot more to contribute to the economic vitality of the areas we serve." National Grid said it delivers electricity to about 3.3 million customers in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Rhode Island, and natural gas to 3.4 million customers in those areas.

Schumer, in a speech in June, summarized his position on foreign labor this way: "We must encourage the world's best and brightest individuals to come to the United States and create new technologies and business that will employ countless American workers, but must discourage businesses from using our immigration laws as a means to obtain temporary and less-expensive foreign labor to replace capable American workers," he said.

Indian offshore firms are major users of H-1B visa, which is critical to their business model of moving and supporting IT work overseas. One proposal that Schumer will have to deal with is legislation from Sens. Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) and Charles Grassley (R-Iowa): the H-1B and L-1 Visa Reform Act of 2009. That bill would limit H-1B visa use by offshore vendors to 50% of their U.S. workforce.

Ron Hira, an associate professor of public policy at the Rochester institute of Public Policy in New York, said it's good news that Schumer and Gillibrand are encouraging National Grid to keep the jobs in the US. "But we need more than speeches and pressure on firms. We need significant policy change, change that hasn't been forthcoming, even though the Democrats control Congress and the presidency."

Schumer, said Hira, "has a prime opportunity to close the loopholes in the H-1B and L-1 visa programs that speed offshore outsourcing. But he hasn't revealed his position on offshore outsourcing firms' exploitation of those loopholes."

London-based parent, National Grid PLC, uses India-based Tata Consultancy Services Ltd for some work.