

TECHNOLOGY Information technology

A small sector with big potential

Staff Reports

Monday, August 26, 2013

By Richard Westlund

For Progress & Innovation

Jeff Leslie believes the Treasure Coast's information technology (IT) sector has excellent potential for growth.

"In today's digital era, we have the infrastructure to support connectivity and collaboration among IT firms and professionals," said Leslie, president and CEO, ITS Telecom a communication services provider in Martin County. "Our warm weather and high quality of life also make the Treasure Coast attractive to technology companies."

But with dozens of IT companies scattered across three counties, the region lacks the critical mass or ready access to venture capital that provided the foundation for Silicon Valley, Boston and other major technology centers. On the plus side, the region's colleges and universities offer a wide range of technology programs to increase the pool of skilled workers for positions like system developers, programmers and software engineers.

Different mixes

"Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River Counties each have a little different mix of tech businesses, including software, hardware and networking companies," said Michael Corbit, the director for the talent acquisition unit of Workforce Solutions.

Most IT companies focus on serving their local markets, but others like SpectorSoft and NetBoss Technologies Inc. have built a base of national or international customers (see related article).

Training and education firms

"There are more than 30 software companies and 35 hardware companies in Port St. Lucie alone," said Jean-Claude Norman, dean of academic affairs at Keiser University's Port St. Lucie campus, which offers software development and engineering programs. "Our students also get hands-on

experience by working directly with clients who need help in setting up a wireless network or computer system.”

Because most of the Treasure Coast’s IT firms have only a handful of employees, Corbit points to the importance of entrepreneurial skills in building for the future. A solo website designer or a mid-size software development company, for instance, needs to understand its market niche and reach out to attract new customers.

“We hold small business workshops several times a year to help IT companies and other small businesses,” Corbit said. “The owner may have started the company with a great technology idea, but an accountant, insurance agent, attorney and HR specialist may need to be brought into the team for the business to thrive over the long-term.”

Corbit notes that the first Research Coast Business Plan Competition, sponsored by Research Coast Principium Foundation, attracted 34 applicants this spring. “The companies were very diverse, from start-ups to mid-size firms,” he said. “Our second-place winner this year, Azzly, a medical software company, was able to attract venture capital funding, so our efforts to help local businesses grow and prosper is paying off.”

Coletta Dorado, who is founder, president and CEO of Vero Beach-based Azzly, added, “Indian River County and the entire Treasure Coast are very supportive of high-growth, high-technology companies.” (See related article.)

Looking to the future, Norman points to two potential avenues of growth for the region’s IT sector. “On a global basis, there is great demand for smartphone applications,” he said. “Creating those apps requires creative software developers and engineers, and our area should be attractive to them as a place to live and work.”

Another opportunity lies in the life sciences sector where Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies and Oregon Health & Science University’s Vaccine and Gene Therapy Institute are attracting private biomedical investment to the region.

“All these companies will need IT support, and there will be growing opportunities in the biomedical IT field as well,” said Norman.

Development of the Treasure Coast Research Park in Fort Pierce – which will support agricultural-related research – may become another driver in biology-related IT specialties, added Corbit. “Other opportunities exist to the south, as Treasure Coast firms can collaborate with companies in South Florida that serve international markets.”

Summing up the IT sector, Corbit said, “The right elements are falling into place for tech companies to grow here.”



© 2013 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online