

THE PHOENIX

Geek power

Techies and digital innovators are injecting fresh life into the Rhode Island economy

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GOT CODE? Providence Geeks co-founders Templin and Jepson [second and third from left] are joined by Soren Ryherd, Matt Obert, Sam Killay, and Jef Nickerson.

Like a lot of people, Soren Ryherd and Vida Jakabhazy were drawn to Providence by their fondness for the city. Yet unlike earlier transplants that may have started restaurants or art collectives, the couple brought some heavy-duty scientific credentials when they moved here in 2001. Backed by their expertise in processing algorithms and developing quantitative models, they launched a company, Working Planet Marketing Group, which manages Google ads and devises pay-for-click campaigns for an array of customers in North America and Europe.

In the time since, East Side-based Working Planet has expanded to employ 12 people. All of its clients (ranging from small concerns to name-brand firms like Iron Mountain and Belmont Springs) are based out of state, meaning that more money is coming to Rhode Island, and the four-year-old privately held company has consistently enjoyed annual growth of about 100 percent.

While there are those who routinely describe the state's business climate in bleak tones, Ryherd says, "It turned out that Providence has actually been a great place to start a business and to grow a business."

Working Planet and its founders represent a small, but important and growing sector of the local economy — information-technology and digital media start-ups — that offer a welcome source of energy and innovation for a state in serious need of stepped-up economic development. And though it doesn't yet come close to rivaling the tech concentrations of places like New York's Silicon Alley or San Francisco's Multimedia Gulch, Rhode Island has its own swelling geek movement.

"I think there's probably more going on than people realize," says Ryherd, a one-time NASA graduate research fellow. "This has very much been a behind-the-scenes activity that people really are not that aware of, but there's really a lot of stuff going on."

So much has been going on, in fact, that two tech enthusiasts, Jack Templin of Providence and Brian Jepson of Kingston, last year launched the [Providence Geeks](#), which — like similar efforts in larger cities — offers a communal focal point through monthly dinners at the downtown arts bastion AS220.

Getting Rhode Island's geeks out of their solitary fluorescent-lit dens was a natural, says Templin, his tongue partly in cheek, since,

like artists and entrepreneurs, they are marked by a passion for their work and a strong interest in sharing ideas. While the dinners are decidedly casual — the chance to grab a taco and a beer from AS220's in-house Taqueria Pacifica — a different Rhode Island start-up is highlighted at each dinner, and more than 100 geeks, their admirers, and the simply curious cycle through in the course of a night.

As simple as it sounds, Templin says, there's no replacement for making the creative entrepreneurs at these get-togethers aware of one another, and their work and needs: "Who's doing what down the street? How is it complimentary? Who has money to invest? Who has needs for my talent? We're seeing hiring, collaboration, investment. We're seeing all that stuff," he says, "and that stuff adds up."

Challenging RI's brain drain

Given the lack of wider public attention about the fledgling geek scene, it's not surprising that most Rhode Islanders have little sense of the wave of new IT and digital media companies taking root locally.

The hidden nature of this boomlet can be seen in how one company, Andera, which helps banks and credit unions to open online accounts, has grown to employ 30 people from a Westminster Street office since Charlie Kroll, now 29, founded it while still an undergraduate at Brown in 2000. Andera has 129 clients around the US, including BankRI, and with 16,000 banks in the US, there's a lot of room for growth.

Kroll, a New York City native who launched his business in Rhode Island simply since he was living here, says the main obstacle facing his company's expansion is a relatively limited local talent pool. "People ask me if we're going to stay in Rhode Island," he says. "I say the answer to that is clearly yes, unless we run out of people to hire."

Examples of a few other local geek sector startups include Public Display, which collects and organizes unstructured data from the Web; FarSounder, which gives mariners the ability to "see-ahead," underwater, in true 3-D; Traction Software, which helps businesses communicate, share and find critical information via wikis and other media; and DIGI[cation], a Web-based learning community, created by two Rhode Island School of Design educators, now used by more than 1000 schools across the US.

(A typically geeky combination of dry humor and impressive accomplishment can be seen, for example, in the "Management" part of Public Display's Web site, www.pubdisplay.com: "Management? We don't need management. This is an autonomous collective . . . Actually, Bill O'Farrell said he was the only guy who could pull a PowerPoint presentation out of stone, so he got to be CEO. He claims to have done it before — he was co-founder and CEO of SpeechWorks, OpenAir.com, and the company that developed Adobe's AfterEffects, albeit that's all ancient history now . . .")

These efforts, some of them started by graduates of local colleges, represent a positive flip side of the oft-cited outward migration in which young college graduates leave Rhode Island because of a lack of good job opportunities (see "[The brain drain](#)," February 15, 2007).

Saul Kaplan, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, a self-described geek wannabe, puts the number of jobs in the state's information-technology and digital media sector at 15,379. And since these jobs offer an average \$65,281 salary, they've become a focus of the EDC's ongoing economic development efforts.

While Rhode Island faces its share of economic challenges, including projected structural budget deficits for the next few years, Kaplan believes that employment in the local geek sector — which is concentrated in Providence, but represented around the state — can double in the next five years.

Geek startups are less costly, and take less time, than those in the biotech and nanotech fields. And in a state where economic development has sometimes resembled an all-or-nothing game, the geeks offer the promises of a more organic and sustainable form of growth.

If we're lucky, one of the related startups may prove as successful as Facebook, the social networking site whose 23-year-old CEO spurned a \$900 million acquisition offer from Yahoo earlier this year.

The emergence of geek chic

Jack Templin, a native of Burlington, Vermont, had completed a stint with the Peace Corps on an island in the South Pacific in 1994 when he began hearing the hype about something called the information superhighway.

Like countless others, Templin, who went on to study interactive communications during grad school at New York University, was drawn to the new possibilities of technology. And if *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) offered a fanciful tale of dork empowerment, our current cultural moment — marked by the centrality of computers; hip accessories like the iPod and iPhone; the rise of open code software; the spectacular success of companies like Google and YouTube (not to mention the presence of tech-service outfits called Geek Squad and Dial a Geek) — signal a full-fledged era of geek chic.

Providence Geeks co-founder Brian Jepson, 39, the technical editor for *Make*, which is published by O'Reilly Media, an influential name in Web circles, recalls how when he was growing up near the University of Rhode Island, "If you were a geek, you were definitely considered odd." Now, though, when it comes to the monthly Providence Geek dinners at AS220, people often tell him, "I'm not a geek, but I'd like to come," which is fine. I think we're all geeks about something."

Jepson, who went to school at URI, says, "Fundamentally, we reached a turning point when it was clear that geeks were building things for everyone to use, not just geeks." He notes how current technology enables just about anyone to easily record a video,

post it on the Internet, and, "You don't have to have a degree in IT or computer science to do that."

The sometimes-accurate Web encyclopedia Wikipedia devotes the equivalent of five typewritten pages to the word "geek," asserting, Zen-like, "The definition of geek has changed considerably over time, and there is no definite meaning. The social and rather derogatory connotations of the word make it particularly difficult to define. The difference between the terms 'geek' and 'nerd' is widely disputed, as the latter might be identified as someone who is unusually intelligent, and the former as someone who has an eccentric interest towards a certain category or topic."

Templin, 37, an Internet strategy consultant based on Providence's East Side, draws a distinction between nerds and geeks by assigning "a pretty impressive appreciation of aesthetics and ethos" to the latter group.

Meanwhile, Rhode Island — with its pleasant quality of life, leading educational institutions, mix of urban and rural attributes, arts and culture, and proximity to the respective tech and media centers of Boston and New York — offers an attractive environment, he says, for these innovators. And Templin, who consults to the state Economic Development Corporation, credits EDC director Kaplan with recognizing the economic potential of Rhode Island's budding geek community.

To hear some tell it, the Ocean State is mired in woe, a welfare magnet overrun by illegal immigrants, a broken place where public-employee unions steadily give away the store, taxes are too high, and progress is an unlikely prospect.

Considering this, it's encouraging that the geeks — an amalgam of natives, graduates of local colleges, and transplants from other communities — bring a strong measure of optimism and can-do attitude with their considerable brainpower.

"I would certainly rather live in Providence than in the Boston area," says Kingston native Chris Nuzum, the 36-year-old chief technical officer and co-founder of Providence-based Traction Software, who cites the more affordable lifestyle and easy access to sailing in Narragansett Bay. "We're starting to have a bit of a techie vibe here, where five years ago, it was nothing." Now, thanks to the Providence Geeks and cross-pollination between startups and the state, "You know people, you can meet up, and have a great conversation about what you're working on. It really changes the quality of being here."

How much potential is there?

Venture capitalist Lee Hower of Point Judith Capital, who was formerly based in Silicon Valley and is a co-founder of the highly successful networking site LinkedIn, thinks Rhode Island's geek sector offers very good potential for growth.

Networks like the Providence Geeks play a big role in the process of technology innovation, Hower says, and the state has a lot of sources of technical innovation and human expertise, in part because of the presence of universities like Brown and RISD and the Naval technology businesses on Aquidneck Island.

The challenge remains establishing enough critical mass. When it comes to the establishment and growth of IT and digital media businesses in Rhode Island, the decisions generally hinge, says Hower, on questions like, "can I hire the right people, can I find an office space, a relatively small space for a small amount of time; will there be business partners, service providers?" He calls these matters "a little bit more mundane" than the concerns sometimes cited about taxes and the like, "but these are the ones people really focus on when they start a company."

The State of Rhode Island has aided the geek sector through its Slater Technology Fund and an initiative, unveiled in June, which offers investors up to \$100,000 in tax credit for supporting Rhode Island innovators. The latter idea was proposed by the state Economic Development Corporation's Science and Technology Advisory Council, another part of the EDC's effort to capitalize on a stronger technology sector.

Members of the geek community cite other needs, including more incubator space, greater support for computer education, and increased integration between students at Rhode Island-based colleges and local businesses.

As a way of offering a physical focus for the geek sector, the EDC hopes to create the Rhode Island IT & Digital Media Center next to its office in the American Locomotive project in Providence. The General Assembly didn't allocate the requested \$600,000 in annual funding — something that EDC director Kaplan attributes to the tough budget year — but he says, "We're going to keep moving forward."

Although it will take time and steady effort to fulfill the potential of Rhode Island's geeks, Kaplan is upbeat — and probably with good reason. As he says, "I think we have a lot of the foundation in place."

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