





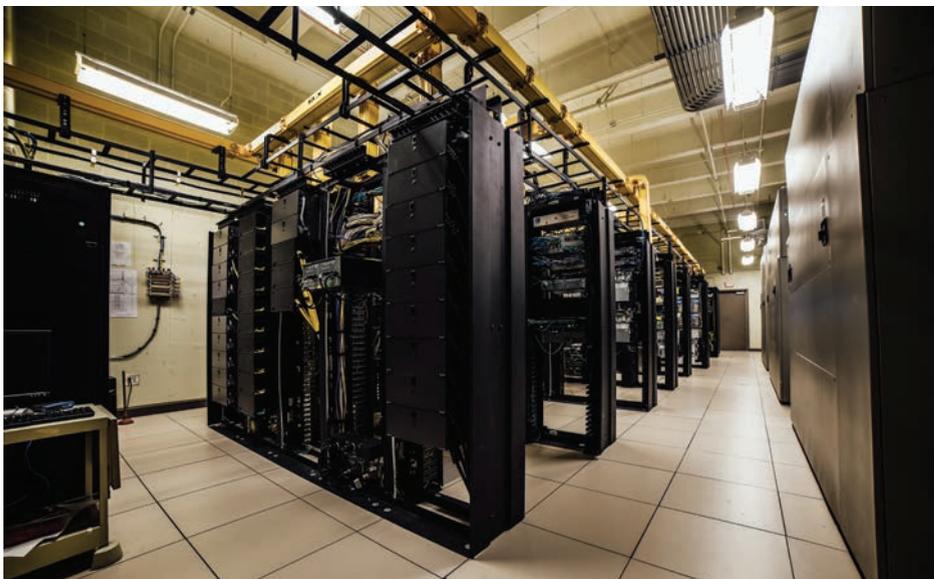
High-Tech Bloomington **ON THE RISE**

By Susan M. Brackney • Photography by Stephen Sproull

(l-r) Indiana University Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer Brad Wheeler, Bloomington Mayor John Hamilton, and Bloomington Economic Development Corporation (BEDC) President and CEO Lynn Coyne stand in front of the video wall in the Marshal H. Wrubel Commons at IU's Cyber-infrastructure Building (CIB), 10th St. and the Ind. 45/46 Bypass.

Think of Bloomington's technology firms as wildflowers in a burgeoning Silicon prairie. Some are already large and showy. Others, small but promising, are just starting to blossom. It's no accident that a surprising number of high-tech companies are thriving here. For the last several years, a multitude of stakeholders have been seeding the city with infrastructure, venture capital, accelerator programs, and more—and it's starting to pay off. Among the nation's small metropolitan areas, Bloomington held steady at No. 2 for its concentration of high-tech gross domestic product (GDP) in both 2014 and 2015, according to the Milken Institute Center for Jobs and Human Capital. GDP is one of the primary indicators used to gauge the health of the economy.

Just how many tech companies presently call Bloomington home? That depends on how you define tech. "People like to say tech,



but what is tech?" asks Lynn Coyne, Bloomington Economic Development Corporation (BEDC) president and CEO. "We have a very, very broad definition. Some people could see it as software development or application development, but it could also be medical device development. There's software as a service. There's software as a product. There are so many ranges of what tech means, and that's the wonderful thing about it."

Coyne estimates 150 tech-related jobs were filled in Bloomington in 2016. He loosely tracks these numbers through free,

online job listings that local tech companies are encouraged to post via two BEDC subgroups, the Bloomington Technology Partnership and the Bloomington Life Science Partnership.

Indiana on the high-tech map

No matter how you define tech, building an innovation culture and community requires patience. "It takes about 10 years to even get to your first real success," BEDC Vice President Dana Palazzo notes. "It's that economic gardening of all of these little things.

You have to feed them all until you get that one big thing. I think once Indiana had that ExactTarget success story—ExactTarget sold to giant Salesforce—that's when we all started saying, 'Indiana can do tech.'"

ExactTarget, a digital marketing firm, was founded in Indianapolis in 2000. Just 13 years later, the company would be acquired by the San Francisco-based marketing juggernaut Salesforce for a whopping \$2.5 billion. Although Salesforce consolidated some Indianapolis-based positions, the company remains committed to staying



8,100 custom-programming and systems-design jobs, *Forbes* reports.

But will Indianapolis' recent successes steal Bloomington's tech-hub thunder? Bloomington Mayor John Hamilton doesn't think so. "Those are not mutually exclusive," Hamilton says. "What's good for Indianapolis can be good for Bloomington, too, as people just look at the Midwest and Indiana generally."

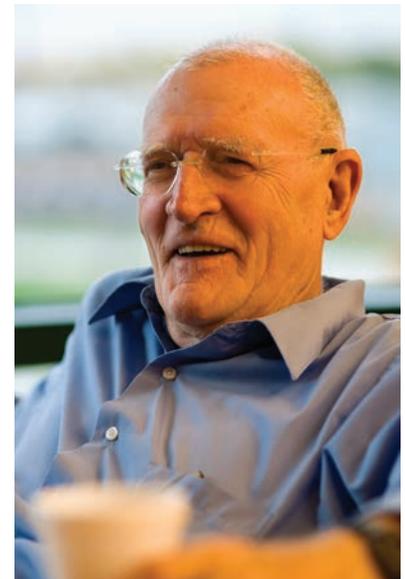
Indiana University Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer Brad Wheeler agrees. "Firms like Salesforce are choosing not to just buy the company and pull everybody out," he says. "Chase Tower is going to be renamed Salesforce Tower. Tech businesses doubling down here is a huge, positive signal. It's very legitimizing to other firms to see those companies making investments in Indiana."

Of course, California has enjoyed one heck of a head start. "Silicon Valley has eight generations or 10 generations of companies ahead of us, because they started with silicon, literally, back in post-World War II," admits Kelly Schwedland, an entrepre-

Bloomington's original startups

But Bloomington has benefited substantially from a couple of its own historic head starts. By hand-shaping his first medical devices in the early 1960s, Bill Cook would set into motion a flourishing medical technology industry. These days, the Bloomington Life Sciences Partnership reports, "Bloomington's concentration of employment in the life sciences is six times greater than the U.S. average, and employment in the technology sector has grown by over 80 percent in recent years."

And, after making a successful pitch to operate a dedicated Internet2 Global Research Network Operations Center in 1998, Indiana University became another of Bloomington's largest tech employers. "You would've thought that it would've had a better chance of going somewhere else, because, Bloomington? Indianapolis? Are you kidding me? These weren't tech hubs," Wheeler says. "But we got that deal and, so, that started off with about seven or eight network engineers. Now, it's a little shy of



neur-in-residence at Elevate Ventures, an Indianapolis-based startup accelerator and venture capital firm. "They've had companies grow up and exit, companies grow up and exit, companies grow up and exit. We're in the early stages of that." Schwedland made these remarks in April during a venture capital panel at Bloomington's annual technology conference, The Combine, which, according to its website, explores "the entrepreneurial spark at the intersection of community, culture, creativity, capital, and code."

in Indiana, citing, in part, the quality and number of highly educated potential employees here. The \$2.5 billion deal helped put Indianapolis on the high-tech map. In March 2017, *Forbes Magazine* ranked Indianapolis fifth out of 15 American cities creating the most tech jobs. Salesforce alone expected to add 800 jobs to its 1,600-employee office in Indianapolis. Since 2006, the job count at Indianapolis-based tech companies is up nearly 70 percent, with 1,700 percent growth in internet-based businesses and

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(top) The Global Research Network Operations Center at IU's Cyberinfrastructure Building (CIB); (above, opposite and this page, l-r) the Data Center at the CIB; BEDC Vice President Dana Palazzo; IU's Big Red II supercomputer, which has a processing speed of one thousand trillion floating-point operations per second (one petaflops); Bill Cook, who co-founded medical equipment manufacturer Cook Group in Bloomington with his wife, Gayle, in 1963. Photo by Steve Raymer

(clockwise from top left) Liscio COO Meredith Root Photo by Rodney Margison; Darren Root, CEO of RootAdvisors, Root Works, and Liscio Photo by Stephen Sproull; the new 6,000-square-foot building housing Rootworks' Company Care Team and Liscio's sales and support staff. Photo by Rodney Margison



20 years old, but we employ about 115 total in its operations, and we pull in \$12 to \$15 million a year in contracts and grants.”

The Global Research Network Operations Center continues to carry out public sector research. Wheeler adds, “We just renewed the contract with Internet2, and we just got an award from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, so, while it was not on the commercial side, it has grown 100-plus jobs here.”

Additionally, there are 560 University Information Technology Services (UITS) employees operating out of IU’s Cyberinfrastructure Building. “For our shop, I think we’re probably one of the largest, if not the largest, tech employers,” Wheeler says. “We’re about 1,060 full-time employees for UITS, and we have a large number of employees who work on research contracts and grants. We have a pretty substantial tech footprint here.”

A company both here and there

Another of Bloomington’s original startups, RootAdvisors, is making new forays in the tech industry. What began as a traditional accounting shop 30 years ago has evolved to provide business-to-business education and creative support through its RootWorks spin-off and, more recently, via Liscio, a new software company with physical offices in both Silicon Valley and Bloomington.

Darren Root, chief executive officer of RootAdvisors, RootWorks, and Liscio, explains, “With RootWorks, we’ve been building and hosting websites for companies across North America for the last 10 years, so we’ve been doing a lot of software development, and now we’ve actually launched a software company and we’re going toward a consumer product.”

The 6,000-square-foot RootWorks and RootAdvisors offices on South Walnut were built for the company in 1996. “We didn’t occupy all of the original building at inception,” Root says. “We grew into the space over time.” With the recent construction of another 6,000-square-foot, two-story build-



ing adjacent to the original Root offices, there is now room for further expansion. “Our new addition will house what we call our Company Care Team for Rootworks, which is sales, marketing, video production, our director of operations, and me as CEO,” he says. “In addition, it will house our COO and sales and support of Liscio.”

Liscio’s COO is Meredith Root, Darren Root’s 28-year-old daughter. “I’m the CEO, but she’s really running the day-to-day operations for Liscio and has been instrumental in the development of the product,” he says.

Root likens that product to the Starbucks mobile app he uses to grab his morning coffee. “We’re trying to create simple, elegant, and smooth relationships for accounting firms and for customers,” he says. As for the name? “I love Italian things, and I was Googling around. The word *liscio* means ‘simple, elegant, and smooth’ in Italian.”

Root had an existing Palo Alto, California, connection through prior investment interests, and two of his Liscio partners will remain based in Silicon Valley. “It’s one



Envisage COO Michelle Cole and Envisage employee Rob Aney take a low-stress walking meeting along the B-Line Trail.

thing to build software that's consumable," he says. "It's another thing to really understand where the marketplace is moving. Having employees in that space out there is really, really important just to stay plugged in to everything that's going on, and it allows us to see the world a little differently."

RootAdvisors, RootWorks, and Lis-cio have a total of 51 employees, with the majority located in Bloomington. That isn't likely to change. "We're going to use their [West Coast] vision, but we're going to grow the majority of talent here in Bloomington," Root says. "We're trying to take the best of both places in our approach, because there's a lot that the Midwest has to offer—certainly value and quality of life."

Capitalizing on Coastal burnout

When it comes to attracting and retaining talent—both paramount for established tech firms looking to expand—Bloomington is well positioned. "One firm, in particular, did not believe that you could hire the quality of talent that you can in Bloomington at the price points that we were telling them," Wheeler recalls. "And I said, 'Well, I pretty much know that to be true. We employ over 1,000 IT professionals just in our shop for the university.' We went through some salary data with them, and, when you've got firms that are looking at Coastal prices—big

metropolitan area prices—and then the cost of living, a lot of them just can't believe it."

But they should. In 2014, *Forbes Magazine* reported, NerdWallet named Bloomington as the No. 1 best city for work-life balance, citing data from a U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey. NerdWallet analysts examined average commute times, income, cost of living, and workweek length for full-time, year-round employees in 536 of the largest American cities. (Bloomington clocked in at 31.9 hours per week with an average 15.2-minute commute time.) Interestingly, six of the 10 worst cities were located in California. The other four "worsts" were distributed along the East Coast.

"What we're seeing here and in Indianapolis and other places is that it's very hard to be in Silicon Valley anymore," Coyne says. "Sure, there are great jobs, and they pay very well, but the lifestyle? It's getting a little crowded there. When you're competing for talent—and it's a very competitive talent market—it's really, where do these people want to be? Where can you go and experience that quality of life and a different environment? That's Bloomington."

High quality, low cost

Envisage Technologies, one of Bloomington's largest tech companies, relies heavily on

Bloomington amenities such as the B-Line Trail in order to get the best performance out of more than 70 employees working to develop training software for federal, state, and local law enforcement and related agencies. Chief Operating Officer Michelle Cole suggests that the city's quality of life actually gives the firm's software developers a competitive advantage.

"When you design computer systems that are going to be used in an emergency, we need to make sure that we're not putting [developers] in a situation of stress where they can only see one specific design, because that design may not be the best," Cole says. "We look to minimize stress, maximize collaboration, maximize the flow of ideas, and get people to think outside the box."

One way the company does that is by encouraging walking meetings on the B-Line Trail and around Bloomington. "Access to green space in our little pocket parks and very close access to nature near the IU woods or the courthouse lawn is really critical to getting people's brains working differently," Cole says.

"One last thing," she adds. "People who are friends ship more software. We have a lot of restaurants in the area where people can go and be friendly with one another. So, we're creating bigger friendships within the organization, and, by doing all of these things, we're going to be able to produce more innovative—and more—software."

IU's Brad Wheeler believes Bloomington's quality of life and comparatively low cost of living do strengthen its hand with expansion firms. "Someone's getting a little further along in their career," he says. "They've got two kids. They're married. They may be gravitating toward firms that provide a little bit more stability. If the firm's going to expand out in the Valley, it's just really hard for a young couple to ever buy a house out there." By contrast, home ownership and access to a strong talent pipeline are within reach in Bloomington.

The cost benefit from improved employee retention is another reason high-tech firms are starting to take a good look at Bloomington. "When I talk to CIOs [chief information officers] from big companies in California or the Boston area, they are just dealing with a bloodbath of turnovers," Wheeler says. "Everybody is recruiting people away from one another, and it's hard to build much stickiness or firm loyalty. Here in the Midwest, we have a much lower



(right) Christopher Carbajal, founder of Donatio, an interactive charitable-giving platform, delivers his five-minute pitch at Demo Day, the culminating event of the B-Start program

Photo by Chaz Mottinger/ IU Communications; (below, right) IU first lady Laurie Burns McRobbie Photo by Shannon Zahnle; (opposite) the Data Center at IU's CIB.

rate of turnover. This is often overlooked, because so many firms have lived with high turnover for so long, they don't even know what it would be like not to work that way."

Stocking the talent pool

As first lady of IU and an adjunct faculty member in IU's School of Informatics and Computing, Laurie Burns McRobbie has observed a strong "push-pull dynamic" among the school's graduates. On the one hand is their desire to remain in Bloomington long-term; on the other is the lure of high-tech jobs in other parts of the country. "The more the tech sector expands here, the more opportunities there are for students to stay," she says. "It's all about whether the jobs that are here in Bloomington are lining up with what students want to do when they have so many opportunities elsewhere. But I know that a number of companies in Bloomington were started in the last 10 years and have very much benefited from the expertise coming out of the school."

In 2017, *U.S. News & World Report* ranked IU Bloomington's School of Infor-

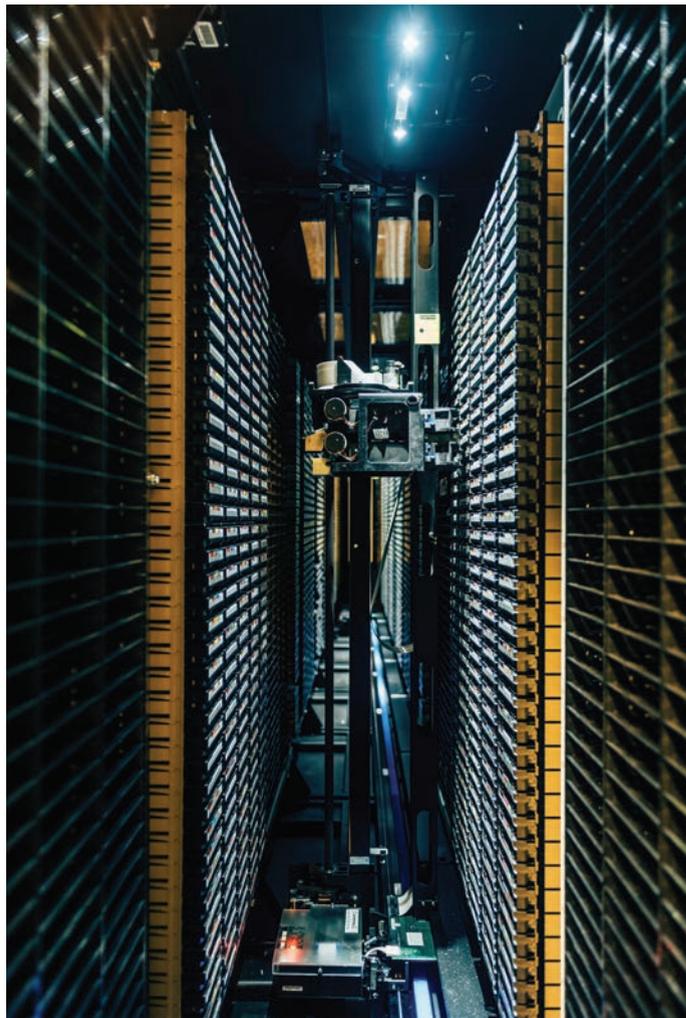
matics and Computing No. 9 in its listing of top library and information studies graduate programs. The school now also includes an intelligent systems engineering component, offering areas of focus in bioengineering, computer engineering, cyber-physical systems, environmental engineering, molecular and nanoscale engineering, and neuro-engineering. "We see an opportunity to really partner with the new intelligent systems engineering program to target in a specific way companies that would succeed in Bloomington," the BEDC's Palazzo notes.

"The downside of being a highly ranked school is that our graduates are in high demand," McRobbie continues. "But I do think that what Bloomington has to offer is tremendous. It is right-sized for certain things, because people in the tech community all know each other. Even in Indianapolis—although Indianapolis has some of the same feeling—but, certainly, once you get to Chicago, it's just too big. In Bloomington, you really can say people know where the resources and the potential collaborations are."



Helping local start-ups

Among those resources are a BEDC program started two years ago that aims to nurture the talent in Bloomington's own backyard. "We started thinking about our entrepreneurial ecosystem as a whole," Palazzo says. "A gap that we saw was that we



weren't really doing anything to engage our 40,000-and-some students who come to our community every year. They are young, energetic, really smart folks who probably are creating ideas all the time for start-up businesses, and there was no outlet in our community to connect them."

Enter B-Start. Part accelerator, part incubator, B-Start began in 2015 as a four-month program for IU and Ivy Tech Community College-Bloomington students with startup ideas. Accepted participants hone their ideas with the help of business members from the tech community. They develop business plans, participate in workshops on customer discovery (finding out what customers want and need) and business model canvas (a strategic management template for developing and documenting business models), and create pitch decks (brief presentations used to provide an audience with an overview of a business plan). Participants also receive pro bono legal services and sessions with IU's Intellectual Property Clinic.

B-Start culminates in Demo Day, during which participants present their polished

startup concepts to a panel of judges. "The startups do about a five-minute pitch in front of about 100 or so folks from the community who have come out—investors, potential investors, local business leaders; the mayor has been there," Palazzo says. "And they pitch their product. There are first, second, and third prizes for Demo Day."

To date, 18 startups have completed the program and some are actively pursuing their ideas in Bloomington. The next iteration of B-Start will be open to nonstudents. "We've had a lot of demand locally," Palazzo says. "Folks are like, 'I live here. I would've loved to have gone through this program.' It's a value-add both to the local folks who are living here and are likely to stay and develop businesses and also for the students who go through the program, because they'll make even better connections."

Palazzo says they hope to implement a summer program, allowing at least one student to dedicate even more time to a burgeoning business model. "So once B-Start ends, one of the top performers has an opportunity to take advantage of a \$5,000

stipend," she says. "They stay over the summertime, commit to being in Bloomington, and really knock out their project full time, as opposed to taking an internship or having to go back home and work."

Adventures in capital

Access to venture capital is oxygen to a startup, but investment in abstract ideas hasn't always been easy to come by in Indiana. "California had 20 years of people talking about it and success happening, so that money out there started flowing," Palazzo says. "And they take greater risks on the Coasts. We're just a little bit more conservative in our everyday approach to things in Indiana. Throwing money at a young kid with an idea and a backpack isn't what we do here."

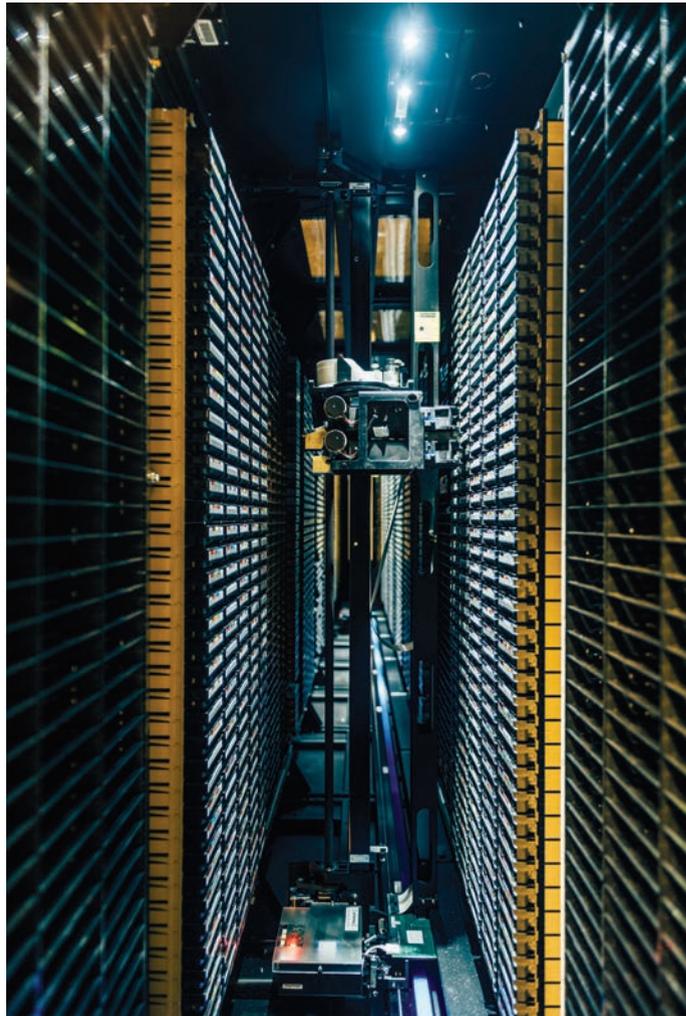
But some venture capitalists seem to appreciate access to the Midwest's less competitive investment market. They get to be choosier and may have time to look more closely at a startup without scores of other investors in the mix. No matter where they invest, the bottom line remains the same. "What investors are looking for: Does this company have the chops to take this thing to an exit?" asks Elevate Ventures' Schwedland.

Is offering quality of life enough?

Regarding larger, more established tech companies looking to expand, IU's Brad Wheeler says they may expect more than just quality of life and cost of living indicators. "It may be the cost of space. It may be economic incentives through tax abatements. It may be a range of things," he says. "But if we put up a set of offers that say, 'Bloomington is a really great place to live, and we've got a strong pipeline of talents from the university, and, you know, we can build a building here or there,' I think the thing that I've learned is that's really just table stakes. That's just making the bet and being able to play.

"Where we seem to struggle in a couple of cases that I've been closely involved with was really the economic incentives, because cities and states are competing so aggressively," he adds. "In one case, a company received a pretty substantial contract from that state to locate there. When other cities and other states are willing to play harder, your charm can only go so far."

But according to Mayor Hamilton, traditional tax abatements may be too blunt an instrument. "In the end, I don't believe paying somebody to create jobs here is the



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BEDC President and CEO Lynn
Coyne; Mayor John Hamilton;
and IU Vice President for
Information Technology and
CIO Brad Wheeler.



right strategy in the long-term,” he says. “Because, if it’s not the right place for them, then convincing them to be here with a little bit of payment up front is not going to change that dynamic. What you really want to do is help support them in being very successful here.”

Beyond having access to the right employees, he adds there are other things the City can do. “Make sure the quality of life here is great—that we have great parks and trails and cultural amenities, so that when their employees come here, they love it,” he says. “And they want to be here and they want their families to be here. That’s what’s really sticky—the good stickiness about economic development.”

Room to grow

Admittedly, the availability of vacant real estate has been another limiting factor. “Some [expansion firms] are looking for very open work plans which may or may not be compatible with older building structures,” Wheeler says. “Some are looking for hip, very old buildings—they don’t want anything that looks too clean and sterile. So, these things all play into it, and we just don’t have much capacity sitting around, because you don’t want to have empty buildings. That’s expensive for whoever owns them.”

On the other hand, a new startup might need something small at first, but then it could rapidly double or triple in size. “In order to allow a company to go from two employees to 10 employees to 30 employees to 50 employees in a two-, three-, four-year time frame, you need the ability to occupy a larger space for people,” says Coyne. “Traditional real estate office leasing environments have lots of walls, and they have lease requirements. Two-year leases. Three-year leases. So meshing a rapidly growing company with the space needs is a challenge.”

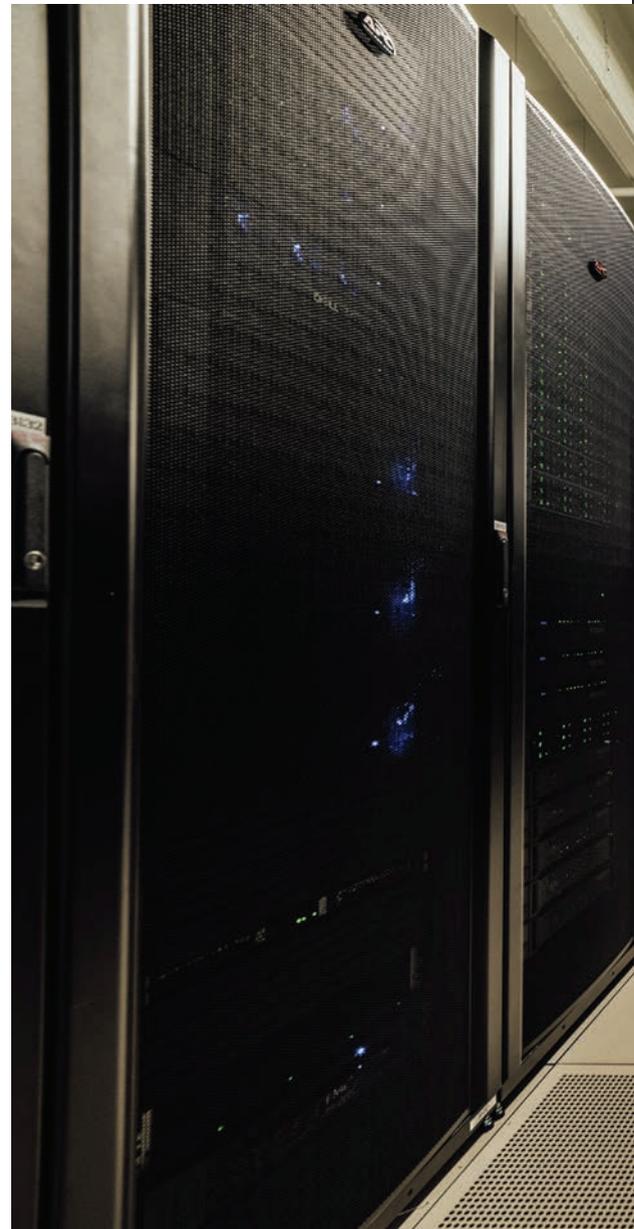
Development of the Certified Technology Park, located downtown at the site of the

old Showers Brothers Furniture building, was expected to be the answer—but it has been in the works for a long time. “I think the approach the City took a few years back was to have a master developer that would do a district-wide plan for development and hope to get one master developer who would basically buy up the whole thing and develop it in a particular way,” Hamilton says. “Then it really took a long time and it didn’t really work. But, when I took this office, I said, ‘We want to develop a tech park organically. We want to get individual investors moving in and building the momentum.’”

Now, Tsuchiya Group, a Bloomington-based corporate entity for Tasus Corporation, will serve as the first anchor business within the Tech Park, and work on the Dimension Mill, a co-work space, that is expected to begin this summer. “Dimension Mill is so important, because it’ll provide places for everybody to sit where they start,” Coyne says. “Then, as they scale, we’ll have migration space where they could go through this progression.”

Two steps forward, one step back

Souping up local infrastructure with a network of gigabit-speed fiber has also been in the works for some time; recently, a deal with Canada-based fiber provider Axia fell through at the 11th hour. The company and its partners spent more than four months in Bloomington, actively developing their fiber model and installation plan, which would have provided every premise in the city with the opportunity to tap into the high-speed, optical fiber network. “While Axia the com-



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—Indiana University Vice President for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer Brad Wheeler



pany was extremely positive and bullish on the build plan for Bloomington, their equity capital investors, which is a global, private equity group, in the end decided this new model was too risky for them just to pull the trigger and say, ‘Yes,’” Hamilton says.

Although the deal didn’t materialize, it did get the attention of local digital service providers. “We saw the three legacy providers substantially up their game and respond competitively to the possibility of a new market player,” Hamilton says. “Comcast, Smithville, and AT&T announced plans to increase their investments in high-speed internet connectivity, so that’s all good.” Meanwhile, the City is renewing the search for a new partner to carry out a citywide fiber network plan.

Working together is key

If one were to create a Venn diagram (those math class illustrations that use circles to show how groups share something in common) for attracting high-tech, it would include the availability of venture capital, access to a rich talent pool, a plentiful and varied inventory of real estate, and intangibles like quality of life and—every bit as important—cooperation among the stakeholders working to recruit existing tech firms and grow new ones. That means coordinating with the Indiana Economic Development Corporation to get the word out about Bloomington to help attract tech firms and tech talent. “We also have folks like Elevate Ventures, which is the state venture capital group, that kind of raises awareness on our behalf,” Palazzo says. “They’re constantly hearing deals that are coming through—companies that are interested in doing business in Indiana. We have a loose, informal partnership with them, where they’ll say, ‘Hey, have you thought about Bloomington, as you consider Indiana?’

“I think that the community is starting to understand that, in order to get to where we all want to be, we have to work together,” Palazzo continues. “There are certain things that are on the horizon, like the Dimension Mill project, that pull together IU, the tech community, the BEDC, and the City, and force us around the table, because, if it’s going to succeed, we all have to be there. A lot of work has been done. We have the momentum, and we’re at a great point right now.” ✨

