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## Colleges, support services helping Whatcom County grow tech businesses

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The tech industry in Whatcom County is growing at a remarkable pace: 164 percent growth in the past 20 years compared to King County's 66 percent and the state's 58 percent growth over the same time frame, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In just the past five years, Whatcom County has seen an 8 percent growth over the state's 6 percent and King County's 5.5 percent. While that's great news for the industry, it seems that our workforce can't keep up with the demand as we continue to add jobs.

Talk to local tech companies and you'll notice a theme - it's really hard to find employees. Logos Bible Software and Dealer Information Systems have opted to start branch offices elsewhere to fill the void left by positions they are unable to fill locally. Canadian-based Universal Tranware considered moving to Whatcom County last summer but pulled out when they failed to find one single iOS developer.

Complaints of tech giants like Microsoft, Amazon, Boeing and Google luring away our graduates and even our seasoned workers are common. Our wages certainly aren't helping the situation - in 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the average monthly earnings of a tech-based employee in Whatcom County was \$4,163, compared to the state average of \$6,157 and King County's higher than average \$6,638.

But working in Whatcom County - in any industry - is not just about wages. Ask anyone who works here versus Seattle and they'll tell you that the time they don't spend in traffic, the proximity to an abundance of recreational opportunities and the overall quality of life are well worth it. The problem is, you've got to be here to understand the allure of Whatcom County; without the high wages of Seattle to attract talent to experience it first-hand, it's a catch-22.

The abundance of job vacancies might not be the case for much longer, however. We already have several schools in the region with science, technology, engineering and math, the so-called STEM programs: Western Washington University, Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College graduate the most STEM students; Northwest Indian College and Washington Engineering Institute also have STEM programs. Those five schools combined had just more than 5,000 students enrolled in STEM programs in the third quarter of 2012.

WCC was named a National Center of Academic Excellence in Information Assurance 2-Year Education in 2011 - one of only 13 community colleges nationwide at the time and currently one of only three in the western U.S. - and is a founding institution of CyberWatch West, a regional cybersecurity education consortium funded by the National Science Foundation. College faculty and administrators also led a National Science Foundation-funded capacity building project to create a four-year degree for students studying cybersecurity, meaning students who complete the first two years at WCC may transfer on to WWU to complete the final two years.

At WWU, with support from the state through the recent budget cycle, the College of Sciences and Technology will soon transition its engineering technology program to engineering. Curriculum changes should be in place by fall 2014. With careful course planning and some use of summer courses, students may be able to complete an engineering degree by spring 2016. This could be a big plus for the local tech workforce.

In July 2012, Washington Engineering Institute received accreditation as a four-year college. While smaller in nature, it's yet another option for STEM education in Whatcom County and can only be viewed as a benefit to the tech community at large.

In addition to promising developments in STEM education, several local organizations continue to work together to support our tech industry. Specifically, the Technology Alliance Group for Northwest Washington, the Big Idea Lab, and the Bellingham Angels who are located together in the Crown Plaza Building downtown, and the Northwest Innovation Resource Center, which is located in Barkley Village. All offer special services geared towards technology-based companies of varying sizes. There are additional business resources such as the Small Business Development Center downtown. With so many options, both new and established tech companies can find an assortment of business assistance.

At this time, Whatcom County has approximately 6,000 tech employees and the TAG estimates that there are more than 575 tech-based companies in the region. With a growing industry base, an increase in STEM education options and a variety of support services, we are well on our way to creating a thriving tech ecosystem.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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