

By Philip Walzer
The Virginian-Pilot
November 6, 2011

We're designing everything from a mobile ad for Google's smartphone search app to a wireless sensor that can detect the alcohol content of fermenting beer.

Hampton Roads is no Silicon Valley. Even so, "I think the area is experiencing good growth in information technology," said Tom Osha, president and CEO of Innovation Research Park @ ODU.

Economic factors both propel and hinder expansion. The concentration of military veterans is a plus. Yet the region's better-than-average employment rate may be dulling the "entrepreneurial spirit," said Tim Early, vice president of Technology Hampton Roads, which promotes technology initiatives.

The Virginian-Pilot is profiling six up-and-coming small tech companies based near Old Dominion University, in downtown Norfolk and in Chesapeake. But others elsewhere are gaining hits and attention.

Customer Magnetism, an Internet marketing agency off Lynnhaven Parkway in Virginia Beach, in September was ranked the nation's second-best search-engine-optimization agency by Topseos.com. Osha also sees potential, particularly in biotech applications, in the city's Princess Anne corridor.

To compete for workers, many companies provide far more than the standard perks. One covers all of their health care premiums. Another allows employees to switch to projects of their choosing every Friday.

Even so, some say it's hard to attract top-of-the-line talent to Hampton Roads. Another challenge Osha sees: a shortage of graduates emerging from local colleges "in the disciplines that companies will need."

Some companies are taking it upon themselves to expand the region's technological core.

Next weekend, We Are Titans is organizing Start Norfolk, a 48-hour competition at the Innovation Research Park near ODU, which will award up to \$20,000 in prizes to those with the most convincing blueprints for a new business or application.

- Philip Walzer, The Pilot