

INL, North Idaho consortium taking on information management

By COREY TAULE
Special to NIBJ

In a rapidly changing world, information is everything. Businesses, if they are to survive and thrive, must have the ability to answer some very basic questions on a daily basis: How do we manage our information? What do we do with it? And how can we best protect it against threats that evolve every bit as quickly as this information flows?

Informatics is the science of information management. In north Idaho, it's especially relevant — and needed — in biomedical research, clinical care and public health.

The Panhandle's thriving health care sector has the potential to lift the region's economy and provide its young people good jobs that allow them to make a living and raise their families at home. To fulfill this vision, a collection of North Idahoans is attempting to implement an all-of-the-above strategy that emphasizes education, information management, cybersecurity and workforce development.

For assistance in what is a large and daunting task, this consortium turned to Idaho National Laboratory.

INL is the nation's lead nuclear research and development laboratory, as well as a world leader in cybersecurity. It's also one of Idaho's leading economic drivers.

INL contractor Battelle Energy Alliance (BEA) is Idaho's sixth-largest private employer. The lab employs nearly 4,200 people who earn an average of \$92,660. In 2016, INL saw its total eco-

nomic output jump by 20.4 percent, or \$324 million, and spent \$136 million with the state's small businesses.

Every year, BEA awards thousands of dollars in technology-based economic development grants throughout Idaho. Among the grants awarded in 2017 was \$6,180 to identify "the regional strength in the health sector, as a whole, and specifically in informatics, to help create new, high-level, high-paying jobs" in north Idaho.

For Gynii Gilliam, president of Coeur d'Alene Area EDC-Jobs Plus, accommodating growth means identifying commonalities. For example, the nuts, bolts and screws that make up the internals of an MRI machine aren't all that different from the parts used in the region's growing aerospace industry. Once the data is collected, stored and analyzed, economic development folks such as Gilliam will be able to make their pitch to manufacturing companies.

"It makes sense to go in this direction," Gilliam said, "because this is where the world is going."

Education

Across Idaho, business leaders, policymakers and educators are focused on workforce development. The jobs of the future will require post-secondary education and not enough Idahoans are qualified to fill them. With tuition rising and student loan debt inevitable for many Idahoans seeking higher education, the state's go-on rate is actually falling.

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North Idaho's decision-makers understand that for their regional economy to grow, affordable education opportunities must be expanded. And so they are looking to a program that began last year in the southern part of the state.

"Your Future in Technology" (Your FIT) is a partnership between INL, Idaho State University, Bannock Development, area businesses and economic development organizations. It began with seven job fairs at high schools throughout southeastern Idaho. These hands-on learning expositions highlighted career opportunities in technical fields, including nuclear operations, electrical engineering, information technology (including cybersecurity) and drone technology.

These forums involve parents and feature materials available in English and Spanish.

"This is an idea whose time has come," said Rick Phillips, director of government & public affairs for the J.R. Simplot Company and a Your FIT organizer.

Is this an idea whose time has come for north Idaho? Perhaps. Karen Thurston heads up a committee that is doing much of the legwork for the informatics project. Thurston is the director of the Cybersecurity Training and Operations Center & Emerging Technology Business Development at

the University of Idaho's Coeur d'Alene campus. She is working with folks in the private and public sectors to examine programs such as Your FIT, and assess the region's academic and workforce development strengths and needs.

That means finding out what career advising resources are available in local high schools; reaching that segment of the population that is a few years removed from high school and unsure of what career path to pursue; and acknowledging that, while this grassroots effort is unfolding, filling immediate openings in the technology sector will require some recruitment from afar.

"We're going to approach it from different fronts," Thurston said.

That includes convincing employers that an early investment in education may pay dividends down the road.

"If we can get employers on board, to offer education incentives, they could fill positions with less turnover," Thurston said.

Safe and secure

INL has emerged as a world leader in cybersecurity, protecting and making more resilient critical infrastructure such as dams, bridges, power plants and water systems from hackers who never stop trying to do harm.

North Idaho's burgeoning health sector has similar challenges. The marketplace

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for stolen medical data is both lucrative and growing. Everyone, from health care providers to pharmaceutical companies, needs to be proactive in protecting data. As Gilliam, Thurston and their colleagues attempt to expand what is already in place and attract new industries, they understand the importance of cybersecurity.

Thurston, in fact, built her program from the ground up, with initial help from an Idaho Department of Labor grant. She understands the need and capacity for growth associated with information protection, something that was on full display during the 2017 Legislative Session.

Lawmakers overwhelmingly approved Senate Concurrent Resolution 105, which allows the state to bond for and construct two new buildings in Idaho Falls. INL will lease the buildings from the state and use them to enhance the laboratory's supercomputing and cybersecurity capabilities.

Students from across Idaho will benefit from the facilities — and expertise contained within — for decades to come. So will companies in north Idaho who accumulate more and more records as they grow.

"It doesn't matter whether its aviation or machinery," Gilliam said. "Everything has a chip."

Because of this, the ability to tap into INL and University of Idaho cyber-

security capabilities will be vital.

"Cyber security is very critical and we all recognize this is one of INL's strengths," Gilliam said.

Reasons for doing

BEA is a nearly 100-year-old nonprofit that aims to improve the world through scientific achievement and the accumulation of knowledge.

The Panhandle is not the only region of Idaho benefiting from BEA technology-based economic development grants this year:

INL helped fund an electric-vehicle purchasing program in Sun Valley, and provided expertise about charging station infrastructure.

A partnership between INL and Boise State University trained entrepreneurs, built a website and is spearheading a beautification effort in remote and sparsely populated Butte County.

INL is helping locals spur business innovation throughout the Clearwater Valley and across the Nez Perce Reservation.

By engaging in communities such as Arco, Orofino, Coeur d'Alene and Ketchum, INL increases its visibility and is able to connect economic development efforts to the laboratory's mission areas.

"We work hard to make sure every dollar we give makes a difference," said Stephanie Cook, INL's program manager for economic

and workforce development.

Thirty percent of INL's workforce is at least 50 years of age and the laboratory faces a looming employee shortage. The hope is that partnerships between INL and Idaho's universities, as well as collaborations such as that going on in north Idaho involving informatics, will allow much of the state's future technology workforce to come from Idaho communities, small and large, rural and urban.

Whether they choose to work in north Idaho's health care industry or venture south to become part of a national laboratory tasked with resolving the nation's big energy and security challenges, INL leadership is happy to play a role in helping educate and train Idaho's students for the jobs of tomorrow.

"Idaho is one of just 14 states with a national laboratory, and that presents an incredible opportunity for all Idahoans," said INL Director Mark Peters. "INL is Idaho's laboratory and we plan to continue demonstrating that through partnerships with our universities and by participating in projects such as the one involving informatics in Coeur d'Alene."



Cook



Peters

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has made a real connection with a patient. That's our job as family doctors — to understand the emotional and technical aspects of medicine.

I know how important the caring is to patients and their families, because I've been there. I want to ensure our patients remain in good hands, and Idaho WWAMI gives me confidence that

Idaho's next generation of physicians is up to the challenge.

Dr. Bob McFarland is a fourth-generation resident of Coeur d'Alene. He's been a member of the American Academy of Family Physicians since 1980. He served for ten years on the board of the Idaho Medical Association, and was its president from 2012-2013. He was the Idaho Family Physician of the Year in 2016. He's a proud alumnus of Idaho's Medical School.