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SPRING/SUMMER 2021

Act Now and Win; or Wait and Lose

The Burgeoning Tech Industry in West Virginia



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Ken Boggs is Vice President of Operations with N3, Part of Accenture. He has experience in all facets of startup, growth and sustainment of business, and is passionate about leadership development. He serves on several boards and councils dedicated to economic development and the wellbeing of the Mountain State. Boggs is also a retired officer from the United States Army.

West Virginia's greatest strength is its people, but its greatest weakness is its declining population that hinders economic development. We have an eager workforce that, through history, has proven its resourcefulness, ingenuity and commitment. We love to live and work here because of our rivers, mountains, rafting, hiking, mountain biking, parks and plenty of space to enjoy it all. Our state's opportunities can be attractive to remote workers and technology companies who would locate here because of the quality of life and low cost of living.

However, even with our strengths and the natural resources that our state is blessed with, it is simply not enough to stop West Virginians from leaving our state or attract new residents to locate here in significant numbers. According to the United States Census Bureau, West Virginia continues to have the fastest shrinking population in the

United States; this is not a distinction that we can afford to continue. It is critical to address and reverse this trend, as companies consider the population when looking at relocation opportunities. Stopping our population loss is essential to our economic development.

I have had a front-row seat at building and expanding an office on behalf of a technology sales firm in West Virginia. In August 2017, they announced locating their first office in West Virginia, and I was their first West Virginian hired. We embarked on a journey to quickly develop and grow an office in South Charleston. We now have nearly 200 employees, all with four-year college degrees, who sell technology on behalf of the industry's largest names.

The decision to locate here was due in part to every West Virginian's work ethic and the

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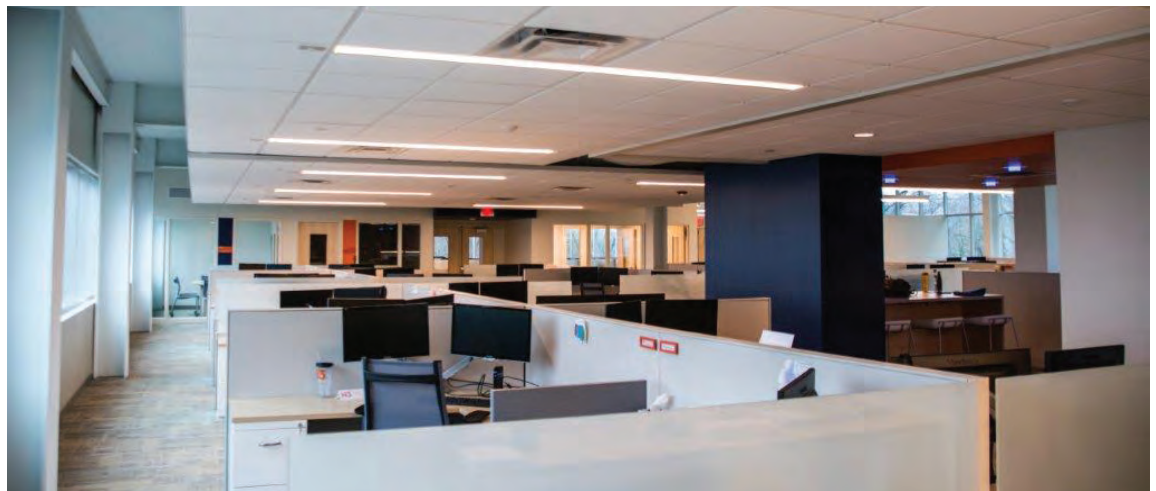


Photo Caption N3's West Virginia office, located in South Charleston's West Virginia Regional Technology Park.



Photo Caption Nearly 200 employees staff the N3 West Virginia office location.

opportunity to do something unique. This decision recognized the quality of life and cost of living as strengths in our state. Growing this office to meet expectations has proved difficult. Our biggest challenge in scaling to the desired number of employees is not the workforce's quality; it is our distributed, limited population. This is where I think the state has an immediate opportunity.

To get to 200 employees, we have relocated many new hires to West Virginia as part of their employment. A couple of years ago, we hired a young man from Silicon Valley. He had a job offer with a major tech company in Utah, and one from us here in Charleston, West Virginia. He chose West Virginia over Utah. The first time he saw our state was when he stepped off the plane with his bags at Yeager airport and climbed into an Uber. He happily remains a resident of West Virginia to this day. Incentive investments like this can help recruit new West Virginians.

Our state can be a pioneer for a new frontier, an Appalachian opportunity created by the ever-developing and quickly changing technology industry. This opportunity is immediate because the global pandemic we are currently living in has proven to the industry that remote working environments are a reality and cost-effective. The need

for thousands of square feet of office space and the associated costs is unnecessary if a large portion of your workforce is working from home. Employees now have the unique opportunity to be unconstrained by proximity to an office when choosing a place to live. What better place to live than right here? As a state, we offer the unique position of both a world-class outdoor quality of life with a relatively low cost of living.

We have many strengths that make us an attractive place to live and work. I would contend that our state's most significant impediment to economic development and, therefore, the burgeoning tech industry is a declining population. If you want to scale economic development and the burgeoning tech industry in West Virginia, then growing our population is a strategic imperative. States like Maine, Vermont and Alaska, and cities like Tulsa and Chattanooga, are incentivizing people to move there simply because it is smart for economic development.

With a growing remote workforce nationwide, unmatched outdoor opportunities, and relatively low cost of living in our state, the conditions are perfect for attracting talented employees to move to our state and retaining those already here with unique opportunities. **W**

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