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# The Journey from Uruguay to West Virginia



## Julia Barrett

Oktana Corporation

Julia Barrett is the General Manager of U.S. Operations for Oktana, which specializes in custom app design and development across the Salesforce platform. Barrett has over 15 years of experience working with technology companies in Silicon Valley and beyond, and selected Charleston, West Virginia as the home for Oktana's first U.S.-based development office.

**Not too many people are able to point to Uruguay on a map. This tiny nation, with a population of 3.5 million, is wedged between two South American giants: Argentina and Brazil. For those who do know, they might think of beaches and beef, which is accurate. But they may also know Uruguay is a country that, despite its size, holds more Salesforce technical certifications than any other country in Latin America.**

Salesforce is an American cloud-based software company headquartered in San Francisco, California. They provide customer relationship management services and a complementary suite of enterprise applications focused on customer service, marketing automation, analytics and application development. To summarize, Salesforce helps companies grow, which is an ever-increasing challenge as the company itself grows and its offerings become more complex – they closed out 2020 with an acquisition of software company Slack valued at \$27.7 billion.

That's where Oktana comes in. Our company provides custom Salesforce development services to a range of companies across the globe. Oktana was founded in 2014 in Uruguay, home country of our co-founders who have been active in the Salesforce ecosystem since 2004 and can be credited with building the niche software development market that Uruguay is witnessing today.



Given the increased competition in Uruguay, with other Salesforce partners looking to leverage the unparalleled talent pool, we expanded to neighboring Paraguay in 2018 and Peru, a country we now know is a partner of the West Virginia National Guard, in 2019. We continued to expand in 2020, hiring developers in Bolivia and Ecuador, but, interestingly, we also made the decision to expand our development team into the United States.

Our process of narrowing locations in the United States started with an agreement of staying east of the Mississippi, but that still left a lot to consider. Our interest in creating opportunity, much as we have done in Uruguay and surrounding countries, helped us narrow the options.

**Photo Caption** Members of the Charleston-based offices of Oktana include: John DeHart, Jacob Welch, Shaka Wilkerson, Cole Swiger, Jared Cunningham and Sean Rickard.



As we zeroed in on West Virginia, other factors began to increase in importance, like cultural values that reflect those of our Latin American team, access to universities and the support of local government. And because Oktana invests so heavily in custom training, we wanted to be sure we built a team for the long haul. We needed to find a home where our employees were committed to staying local. While this factor caused other locations to fall off the list, it pushed West Virginia into the final three.

I've spent much of my recent career working with entrepreneur-related economic development programs, so I had a personal interest in bringing opportunity to West Virginia (much to the chagrin of my Ohioan father). But that wasn't what sealed the decision.

In 2019, while I was working for the government of the Republic of Estonia, I briefly met West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner, who had traveled across the Atlantic to this other tiny nation folks have a hard time finding on a map. Despite its size, Estonia holds the distinction of being the most digitally advanced country in the world, and West Virginia was visiting to better understand, among other things, how a largely rural state could not only provide connectivity to all, but function nearly entirely digitally (including management of its voting process). West Virginia was ultimately the final choice because I decided we would bring our technology jobs to a state open to innovation and in need of support on that journey.

While 2020 was not without its challenges, which may be a bit of an understatement, we opened our doors one year ago and closed the year with more than 20 developers. Building on this momentum, we have a goal of reaching 50 developers by the end of 2021. We recently moved into the Charleston Area Alliance building and have been inspired by the energy



generated by some of the more local initiatives, like CAA's Small Business Incubator. We are very proud of our team and look forward to sharing all we love about West Virginia with our customers as we continue to grow and innovate in the Mountain State and beyond. **V**

*Photo Caption 2* Oktana's footprint in the Americas.