

And in the Darkness Bind Them

INSIDE EUGENE'S
CULT OF TECH

BY BEN RICKER

Eugene tech torchbearer Cale Bruckner had Middle Earth in mind four years ago when he dreamed up the term “Silicon Shire,” because of course he did. And he was correct if he thought it would strike the precise subliminal chords to produce charming pastoral visions of prosperity, while shoving Silicon Valley pitfalls out of the mental picture.

Bruckner himself got his start at Eugene’s Palo Alto Software before graduating from the University of Oregon in ’96. He launched the Silicon Shire online tech directory in 2012 to promote local tech companies and capture graduating talent from UO, Oregon State University and Lane Community College and keep it here.

At the time, California-based businesses were snatching the brightest tech-bulbs out of the lower Willamette Valley before the ink on their diplomas dried, Bruckner says. He wanted local up-and-comers to see what they were missing in and around Eugene before making up their minds.

And it appears to be working. In recent years, Eugene and Springfield’s tech industry has shot forward by leaps and bounds. Success is measured by the hundreds of tech firms that have hatched here, and the thousands they employ.

Eugene’s tech scene is doing so well the state just upped its 10-year regional growth forecast to 28 percent, up from 19 percent.

Small, cheap, quiet and closely surrounded by nature: Bruckner was drawn to Eugene’s Shire-like charm, and he hoped others would be, too. But how long can Eugene bask in the tech limelight before big city problems come knocking?

A couple college kids at a late-summer tech crawl organized by the Technology Association of Oregon in downtown Eugene make faces of disgust when asked if they’d consider relocating to Palo Alto. Speaking casually as hundreds filter into Kesey Square for the tech-themed mixer, they say they mean to stay here after graduating. The boys admit they stand to make a lot more money in the Bay Area, but what a nightmare: The pressure there is racking, the get-rich-quick culture is a bugbear and the cost of Silicon Valley living is outrageous.

Questions about their summer internship assignment at a major tech outfit based in Springfield lead to torrents of proactive-sounding language that ultimately may or may not have something to do with virus protection.

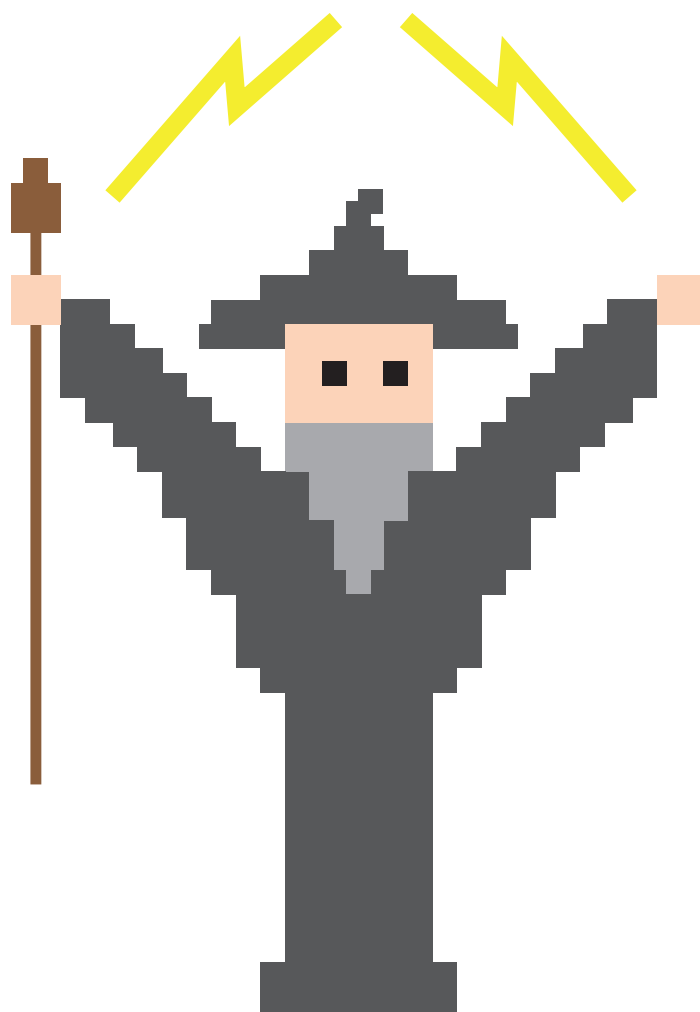


ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH DECKER

Tech is a many splendored thing, so varied in form and function that it’s hard to get a handle on it. Even industry folks struggle to define the high-tech sector without using the word “tech” somewhere in the definition.

It doesn’t help that even the experts at the Oregon Employment Department (OED) can’t say for sure what tech is or what it looks like. “The high-tech industry does not have one standard definition or official government code,” says a 2016 report. “Instead, it is a mix of service and manufacturing businesses from a variety of industries. High tech means different things to different people and organizations.”

All anyone seems to know for sure is that tech is huge and growing fast.

As if to add insult, the minds naming today’s tech

companies seem to be aiming for the sweet spot that hovers somewhere between meaningless gibberish and jumbled-up inspirational slogans pulled from a hat. The results are far-flung oddball constructions like Smarsh, FlishHorse, Cognitopia and FertiLab Thinkubator.

Hearing tech’s opaque jargon for the first time feels like being sucked against your will into the middle of a longstanding game of psycho-intellectual razzle-dazzle, where the object isn’t to conceal the truth, per se — only make it difficult to locate.

Though key specifics are tricky to nail down, Eugene’s tech leaders are hardwired to think in thrillingly contagious boomtown terms like innovation, progress, opportunity and tomorrow. Last but certainly not least, in a region known for its dying timber economy, is all the talk of open, high-paying jobs. Many of the companies listed at siliconshire.org are currently hiring. The OED says the state average salary for tech workers is around \$70,000.

Technology Association of Oregon director Matt Sayre is quick to point out that two of Smarsh’s recent hires are a former coffee shop worker and a grandma, heading off at the pass any preconceived notion that tech jobs are only for Millennial bros.

When Sayre talks about local tech firms he could mean anything from humble design studio Artsdigital.co, which employs only about five people at a time, to billion-dollar newcomers like Avago/Broadcom.

“The high-tech industry is a crucial and dynamic piece of Oregon’s economy,” writes OED workforce analyst Emily Starbuck, in the aforementioned report. “In March 2016, private-sector employment was over 90,700 and contributed more than \$9 billion in covered payroll to the state’s workers.”

The promise of new jobs and good wages works like catnip on many Willamette Valley denizens and their elected and appointed leaders, causing them to do strange and reckless things. Most recently, Eugene City Council and the Lane County Commissioners approved a two-year, \$7-million property tax exemption for international tech behemoth Avago/Broadcom, which makes chips that go inside your iPhone, and probably a lot of other stuff.

Retired state Business Development Department officer Robert Warren expressed chagrin over the tax break in an op-ed published weeks ago in this paper. Tax breaks “can be a powerful incentive to help a company