

# Idaho gets top ratings for economic achievement

by Martin Johncox

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ATIONAL SURVEYS have long ranked Idaho high in recreation, quality of life and agricultural output, but what many people might not know is that Idaho also ranks right at the top as an economic powerhouse.

In the 2007 Development Report Card for the States, produced by the nonprofit Corporation for Enterprise Development, Idaho ranked first in new companies formed, patents issued per capita, and short-term employment growth. What's more, Idaho ranked second in manufacturing investment and advantageous energy costs, and third in long-term employment growth. Thanks to these ratings, Idaho received an overall "A" for economic performance.

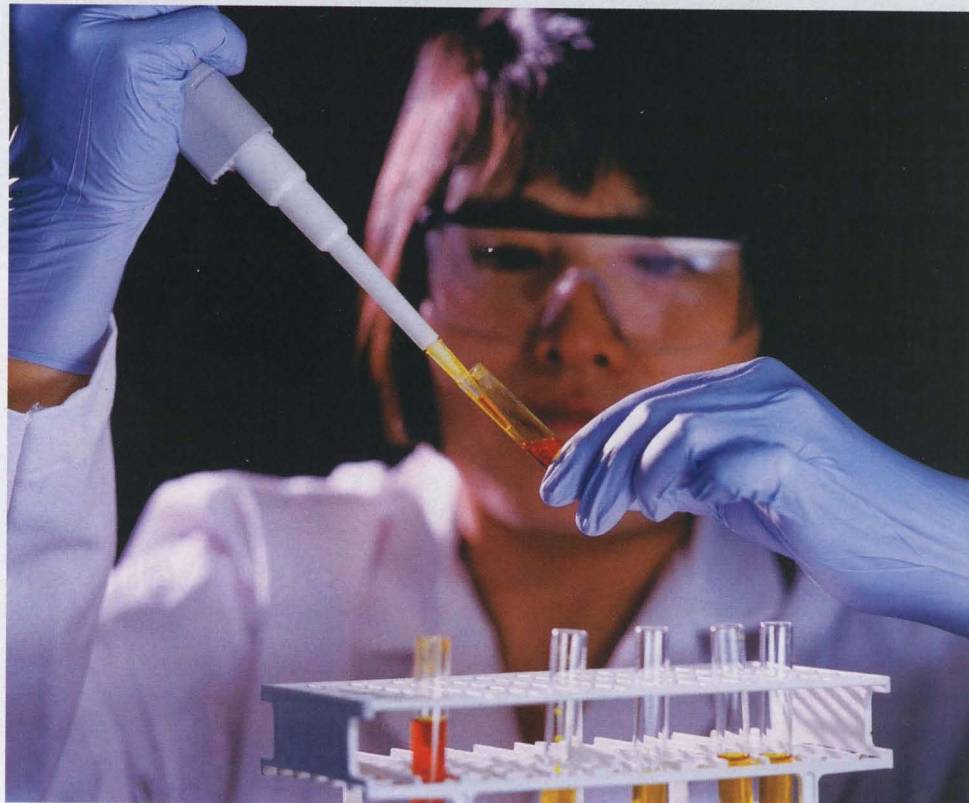
CFED distills its rankings from official reports, but one need look no further than Idaho companies for proof of the Gem State's success as a place that attracts and fosters business. The experiences of companies such as Beckmer Products, SCOTTE-VEST, PakSense, Alturas Analytics, Hoku Materials, Titan Spring Co. and H-K Contractors help put a face on the numbers of Idaho's impressive economic performance.

**New Companies Formed** For every 1,000 workers in Idaho in 2005—the year CFED used in determining the new-companies rankings for its 2007 report—there were 12.61 new companies formed, giving Idaho a No. 1 ranking among the states, according to the CFED report.

One of the notable companies formed during the last five years has been Beckmer Products Inc. of Nampa, near Boise, which was founded in June 2004 by dental hygienist Becky Logue.

Beckmer—a combination of Logue's first name and her husband Mert's—makes a product with a public health benefit. Its Dental Remote Access Terminal (R.A.T.) is designed to improve hygiene and efficiency in the dental office.

Microbiologically speaking, the mouth is a pretty



Left: Titan Spring Co., which is celebrating its 50th anniversary, makes custom precision springs. Its wire-forming machine is shown at the bottom of the page. Titan moved to Idaho this year to benefit from attractive energy costs.

Right: Alturas Analytics, which tests new pharmaceuticals for large and small pharmaceutical companies, has been able to hire and retain top employees in Idaho.





risky place, says Logue, who is the company's president. All sorts of diseases can be spread through saliva, and when a hygienist starts cleaning teeth and gums, most people bleed to some extent, adding to the potential for germs. Hygienists can spread germs between patients, especially when a hygienist stops what he or she is doing to touch something else. For example, hygienists have to measure and type in the condition of the gumline around the teeth, but going between the keyboard and the patient's mouth allows germs to be spread to the next patient.

To reduce the problem, offices try sanitizing the keyboard between patients, but this is not always effective. And using a voice-recognition system to record the data often doesn't work because the systems are sensitive to background noise and raise privacy concerns. Many dental offices use an assistant or even the receptionist to enter the data while the hygienist focuses on measuring—sanitary, but expensive.

"People just don't realize what lives on a keyboard and the risk for cross-contamination," says Logue, a dental hygienist for 20 years. "It's impossible to sterilize a keyboard or mouse, and we'd cover them with plastic wrap, but it's not always effective."

Logue figured there had to be a better way, and one day she noticed her kids playing electronic games that involved using a footpad instead of a hand controller.

That, along with Tom Hanks' by-foot giant-piano playing in the movie *Big*, inspired Logue to ponder a foot-operated computer mouse—especially since dental hygienists already use their feet to operate polishing, rinsing and camera equipment—and the Dental R.A.T. was born.

After some research, Logue discovered that no one had patented a foot-operated data-entry computer mouse. She worked with an engineer, and received advice and consulting services from the Boise State University Technology and Entrepreneurial Center—where she now has an office alongside a couple dozen other companies—to develop a

foot-operated system where the heel does the left click, the toe of the shoe atop a short joystick "mouse" controls the pointer, and four

buttons between the mouse and the left click correspond to numbers. Pressing the buttons for longer or shorter times brings up different numbers.

Logue says the device can be learned in half an hour, as the feet are surprisingly dexterous and can move the pointer quickly between data cells and different programs.

A computer recognizes the Dental R.A.T. as just another mouse, so the system requires no special software. In fact, for testing, Logue had her kids play solitaire, Pong (pingpong) and other computer games with it. Her invention was a runner-up in the 2006 Idaho Innovation Awards presented by the Idaho office of the Stoel Rives law firm.

AirTrack Electronics Corporation in Boise manufactures the device, and a wireless model should be out this fall.

Logue says the Dental R.A.T. has plenty of other uses, although right now she's just marketing it to dental offices. Anyone who needs to use a mouse but keep their hands free could benefit—assembly-line workers, surgeons and food servers, for example—and it could be adapted for people with disabilities, she says.

The system starts at \$995, and Logue says the device will pay for itself in a few weeks if two people are currently employed to enter dental data—to say nothing of the benefits of improved hygiene.

"Instead of standing there entering numbers, that employee can be put to better use," Logue says. "Ninety percent of my stockholders are dental patients who like the safety and privacy factor of it."

Logue's patent is pending. She sold her first R.A.T. to her employer in June 2004 and has sold several hundred since. Customers include the dental school and dental-hygiene program at Idaho State University, her alma mater, and dentists as far

Dental hygienist Becky Logue now owns her own company after inventing the Dental Remote Access Terminal (R.A.T.), which lets dental offices record data efficiently and hygienically. She holds an early version of the R.A.T. above. At left is a newer version.





away as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. She's especially interested in selling to dental schools so that emerging students will be familiar with the technology.

To get her company going, she spent money that had been saved for a backyard pool.

"I asked the kids if it was OK, and they said, 'Yes,'" Logue says. "I hope to build them that pool someday."

**Patents Issued Per Capita** For every million Idahoans, there were 1,084 patents issued in the state in 2005, according to the CFED report—far and away the greatest number of patents on a per-capita basis. Vermont, at 660, came in second.

The 2006 Stoel Rives Idaho Patent Report provides a closer look, showing that many Idaho patents were given to Micron Technology, Hewlett-Packard and the Idaho National Laboratory.

However, the number of patents granted to small and midsize companies increased by about 38 percent last year. Chemicals/materials science patents more than doubled, and innovation even continued in the long-standing field of agriculture, where patents grew 37.5 percent.

SCOTTEVEST, based in the Ketchum–Sun Valley area, holds one of the more interesting patents, for a Personal Area Network: an internal conduit system that lets you thread wires for MP3 players, cell phones, PDAs and other electronic gadgets through the seams of your garments, providing hands-free use and essentially making your clothing the carrying case. The company received the patent in December 2004.

The company's vests, coats and pants are selling well—President Bush just ordered his second one, says company CEO and founder Scott Jordan. In addition, in response to seven years of requests from women, SCOTTEVEST will launch a ladies' line in December.

Jordan says it doesn't surprise him that Idaho attracts innovative people. He started his company

in 2001 in Chicago and moved to Idaho in 2003. He had been coming to Sun Valley frequently for vacations, and decided he could work anywhere and run his business. He tests new designs on the ski slopes of Sun Valley.

"I like skiing in the morning and answering e-mails on the lift ride up, and taking a conference call on the ski runs down," Jordan says. "Most people in Idaho weren't born here—they came here to do something better, and there's much more of an entrepreneurial spirit."

That's not to say that innovation isn't also home-grown. PakSense was formed by longtime Boise resident Tom Jensen, a product designer who had worked on products for Apple and Hewlett-Packard, among others.

The company sprang from a 2002 airplane conversation that one of Jensen's associates, Wayne DeBord—who worked in business development for high-tech firms—had with an executive from a meat-packing company. The executive lamented the lack of an affordable, accurate way to tell if meat had been kept at the correct temperature during its time in transit. When DeBord returned home, he talked the issue over with Jensen, and the two men decided to see if they could design a solution.

Technology had long existed to document the temperature of food and other sensitive materials in transit, but existing sensors cost \$25 to \$130, were about the size of a PDA, could be damaged and didn't measure the product's temperature so much as the air temperature around it, Jensen says.

Given the recent concerns over food safety, he says, "We're in the right place at the right time."

As a co-inventor, Jensen was charged with designing a temperature monitor that was less than \$20, reusable, tough, tamper-proof, accurate and very small. After some design work by himself and with other engineers, he developed what he dubbed the "Smart TXi Label" and took it to market in April 2006. DeBord does not play an active role in the company but is a shareholder.

PakSense's award-winning "Smart TXi Labels" use green lights and amber arrows to indicate whether a product, such as meat or produce, has been kept at a safe temperature during its time in transit to consumers or other end users.