

The Belfast-Boston Technology Connection: A Trans-Atlantic Innovation Corridor

DESPITE the economic turmoil in the U.S. in the past two years, the Greater Boston area continues to enjoy a vibrant high technology sector which has helped insulate the Massachusetts and New England economy from the worst of the global recession. Greater Boston is home to more than thirty-two colleges and universities including many diverse and internationally recognized research institutions such as: Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Boston University.

The "knowledge economy" in Boston benefits from an experienced investment community of seasoned venture capitalists and angel investors and a tradition of entrepreneurship – known to Bostonians as "Yankee Ingenuity"! Greater Boston is a leading U.S. center for innovation in: information technology (software and communications), life sciences (biotech and medical devices), healthcare and medical technology, defense electronics, marine science, robotics, digital games and energy technology (photonics, power generation and renewable energy).

In the past ten years Northern Ireland's economy has experienced promising growth in the high technology sector with an increase in the number and kind of innovative technology companies spun – out from the University of Ulster and Queen's University...along with a good number of successful "gurus in the garage"! Many of these technology entrepreneurs from Northern Ireland have been drawn to, and have established corporate presences in, the Greater Boston and Massachusetts area.

Boston is a natural launch-point and commercial gateway to the U.S. marketplace for Irish technology firms.

Belfast entrepreneurs who have located in Boston represent a range of advanced technologies and unique products applications – from educational software and analytical instruments to medical devices and biometrics security systems. Most importantly, they all have been enjoying success.

For example: Antrim based TextHELP Systems (www.texthelp.com) has developed innovative software for learners of all ages with reading, attention, or language difficulties. From a modest start in Boston nine years ago TextHELP's software programs are now used in school districts across the U.S.

In addition, TextHELP's new product for speech enabling websites, BrowseAloud, has been a big success and has recently been adopted by the Washington, D.C. Metro Transit System, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

Another success story is Andor

Northern Ireland and America continue to forge strong partnerships in ICT. **KATHLEEN HAGAN**, founder and president of Hagan & Company, an international marketing and management consulting firm based in Boston examines the successful collaboration



The greater Boston area continues to enjoy a vibrant technology sector, despite the economic turmoil in the United States

Technology, (www.andor.com) a Queen's University spin-out that develops and manufactures high performance digital scientific cameras for academic, industrial, life science, and government researchers around the world. Andor is a publically traded company on the London Stock Exchange's AIM market and grew at 24 per cent this past year despite the global recession. In the U.S. Andor has grown and expanded its market presence significantly in recent years and this year expanded further by acquiring two U.S. laser imaging companies: Photonic Instruments and Imaginative Optics.

In the medical device area, Intelesens (www.intelesens.com) is an exciting spin-off of the University of Ulster that has developed a state-of-the-art intelligent, wearable, non-invasive, wireless vital signs monitoring device for use primarily in remote patient monitoring and personal telehealth applications. Intelesens began its expansion to the U.S. in the early days of the company's development mindful that partnering with a leading U.S. teaching hospital would offer special credibility in launching its first product in the highly competitive U.S.

medical device marketplace.

Another growing Belfast technology firm that recently established its U.S. presence in Boston is award winning Core Systems, (www.coresystems.biz), a developer of innovative biometric security and interactive inmate communication and services technologies to help correctional facilities create more secure environments and efficient inmate management processes. Core Systems launched its U.S. subsidiary TUSA-USA in Boston in 2009 after two years of intensive market research and business development lining up key strategic partners in corrections commissary, legal publishing, and kiosk manufacturing.

Companies like TextHELP, Andor, Intelesens and Core Systems have been successful in very different markets and each operates under different conditions that required different strategies and investment of resources. However, they have all displayed some common characteristics and made similar planning decisions while establishing themselves in the U.S. marketplace. In each case:

1. The CEO has been actively engaged in – and in some cases leading – the U.S. development effort.

2. The companies were "in it for the long haul" and did not let frustrating set-backs or challenges discourage their efforts to build a presence in the U.S. marketplace.

3. The company either had a board member from the U.S. or a key U.S. strategic partner to give a U.S.-centric perspective to understanding the market opportunity and to making key decisions.

4. The company sought to continuously and relentlessly improve their product(s) through investment and serious attention to R&D.

5. Understood that relationships matter and sought to build trusted relationships for the long-term.

The Belfast to Boston technology corridor continues to grow with Total Mobile and AXIS Three opening U.S. sales offices in Boston in 2009 and other Northern Ireland companies in 2010 assessing the Boston area for their U.S.- H.Q.

While there are other excellent locations in the U.S., such as Silicon Valley, that are strategic for some N.I. technology companies, Boston continues to attract and welcome the steady stream of talented entrepreneurs from Northern Ireland who are part of the growing Boston – Belfast Technology Connection.