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Tech firm expands to D.C. for new opportunities

BY REBECCA GOLDFINE

Positioning itself to better compete for government contracts and to handle an anticipated growth spurt, a Portland-based technology company has opened a satellite location in Arlington, Va., and moved into a bigger office on Middle Street.

When Christopher Bender established Northcross Group Inc. in Portland in 2006, he says he always planned to orient his business toward Washington, D.C. But first he needed to attain private-sector credibility. In the past five years, Northcross has grown from one employee to 20, and Bender is hoping to double his work force in two years.

Northcross Group specializes in cyber security and business technology systems. "We don't narrow it down too much," Bender says, referring to the sectors in which his company works, but he adds, "one of the things we do is work in highly regulated areas," such as finance, health care and manufacturing.

Part of Northcross' plan to double in size requires bringing the company's public-sector work up to 40% or 50% of yearly revenue. Currently, the split between the company's government and commercial contracts is 20%-80%, according to Bender.

"There is more work out there than competition," Bender says, "which is a good thing." At this point, his company is making under \$5 million a year, he says, putting him in a particular small-business bracket as defined by the federal government.

The federal market not only appears to promise growth for Northcross, it also offers its employees professional challenges, Bender explains. Government contracts tend to be longer -- two or five years, even -- and projects are often conducted on a very large scale.

Although federal government projects present Maine technology companies with many opportunities, it can be challenging for far-off businesses to successfully compete for projects, despite all of the advances in remote technology. But a few have fostered a connec-

tion to D.C., including Technology Systems Inc. in Brunswick, which does defense-related work, and Penobscot Bay Media, or PenBay, in Camden, which has multiple locations, including an office in D.C. And still other Maine technology companies have representatives in the capital, "perhaps more than we realize," according to Joe Kumiszczka, the executive director of Tech Maine, a trade group based in Portland.

"A lot of it is having good relationships with other contractors down there," Kumiszczka says, which can lead to professional collaborations on ambitious bids, "as well as keeping a keen eye on what is happening legislatively and politically so you know how to position your bid."

Before opening an office in Arlington, Northcross landed a Department of Homeland Security project. For the past year, the company has been working on a regional cyber assessment of the area around Boston (which includes parts of New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Rhode Island), looking at the potential impact of a terrorist act in downtown Boston. With the increasing interconnectivity of our technology systems, a devastating attack there could have widespread reverberations, disrupting city services, police work, traffic lights and more, Bender says. Northcross will also help establish a resilience plan if such an event ever occurred.

"Professionally, it's very interesting," Bender says, speaking about federal work in general. "Employees get a lot of exposure and interaction to technologies and companies."

The office in Arlington has two full-time staff at the moment, Bender says, one of whom is a business-development specialist who will try to establish contacts and help

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Christopher Bender, founder of tech company Northcross Group Inc., hopes a new D.C. office will help secure government work

the company compete for federal work -- doing "face time," as Bender calls it. "It gives us some differentiation," he says. When 20 companies are vying for a federal contract, it helps if your company is already known, he explains.

While Bender and other Portland employees will likely travel frequently between Washington, D.C., and Maine, Bender says he has no plans to leave Portland. Though Bender, who is originally from Chicago, worked in D.C. prior to moving to Maine, he and his wife have two young daughters they want to raise here, he says.

To reinforce his local commitment, Bender tells a quick story of the time he and his wife were considering moving north. They left D.C. to travel to Portland around Valentine's Day, and Bender recalls his wife saying to him that if he could stomach Maine in the middle of February, than she knew he could make a life up here. ■