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A small team with a mission can achieve big things

By Mike Benbow, Herald columnist

I have to admit that I didn't expect a lot when I got up early one day last week to listen to Mike Schwenk's presentation entitled "Innovation, Economics and All That Jazz."

Schwenk is director of technology and deployment at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in the Tri-Cities, one of the Battelle labs where 4,200 scientists and others think deep thoughts. He was the speaker at a breakfast meeting for the Everett Area Chamber of Commerce that focused on the importance of innovation.

I expected a talk similar to what I'd heard before about how technology is good because it creates a lot of decent paying jobs. Most of those talks are theoretical and have a tendency to go over my head or to bore me to tears.

So it was a delightful surprise that Schwenk seemed terribly practical and disinclined to talk like the rocket scientists he works with.

He got my attention right from the start by saying that all the theoretical talk about job creation isn't very valuable because there's no precise way to determine how many jobs a technology creates and how many it eliminates.

He noted that his lab comes up with an average of one cool invention idea every day, then said it can be pretty useless if those ideas aren't accompanied by patents that transfer them into a useful product.

Schwenk said think tanks as well as communities need to dump the randomness of their approach to make real things happen.



"You have to start with an end in mind and team up to achieve that end," he said.

For example, he noted that workers at his lab are developing a way to anticipate threats to the United States like the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the

Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001.

"It's a big problem," he said. "It's an enormous intellectual challenge, and people are signing up to solve this together."

He suggested that communities such as Snohomish County should identify the really important issues and enlist teams of people in government and private business to get things done.

"If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there," he said.

Schwenk passed along what I thought was a great idea for local people looking for ways to employ technology to create jobs -- creating a new industry for aviation biofuel.

"Boeing wants to go green," he said. "They've already flown planes (with biofuel). We know it works, but creating an industry is a difficult problem.

Schwenk wasn't talking about using a big government agency to tackle that problem. In fact, he suggested that a small, nimble group of people excited about the idea was the only way to go.

That struck a nerve with attendee Pat McClain, who works for the city of Everett.

It reminded him of many years ago, when a few people in Everett were excited about having a Navy base here as a way to provide a more diverse and stable economy.

I forget what McClain's title was in those days, but his job was to make that happen -- without much money or any staff.

He recalled last week how business leaders stepped up, doing things such as paying to send him to Washington, D.C. Others in government used their contacts to make sure McClain got in to see the right people in the Pentagon.

They didn't ask to be in charge and they didn't seek any credit, but quite a few people stepped up to do what they could to make the idea happen, McClain recalled. Eventually, the community was selected for what became Naval Station Everett, which continues to be an important economic asset.

I liked Schwenk's idea of creating a new industry for aviation biofuel, and I liked his suggestion that we create a lean and mean team to make it

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happen. As McClain noted, Snohomish County already has a track record of success with that approach.

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