ARIZONA'S TECHNOLOGY MAGAZINE

TECH CONNECT

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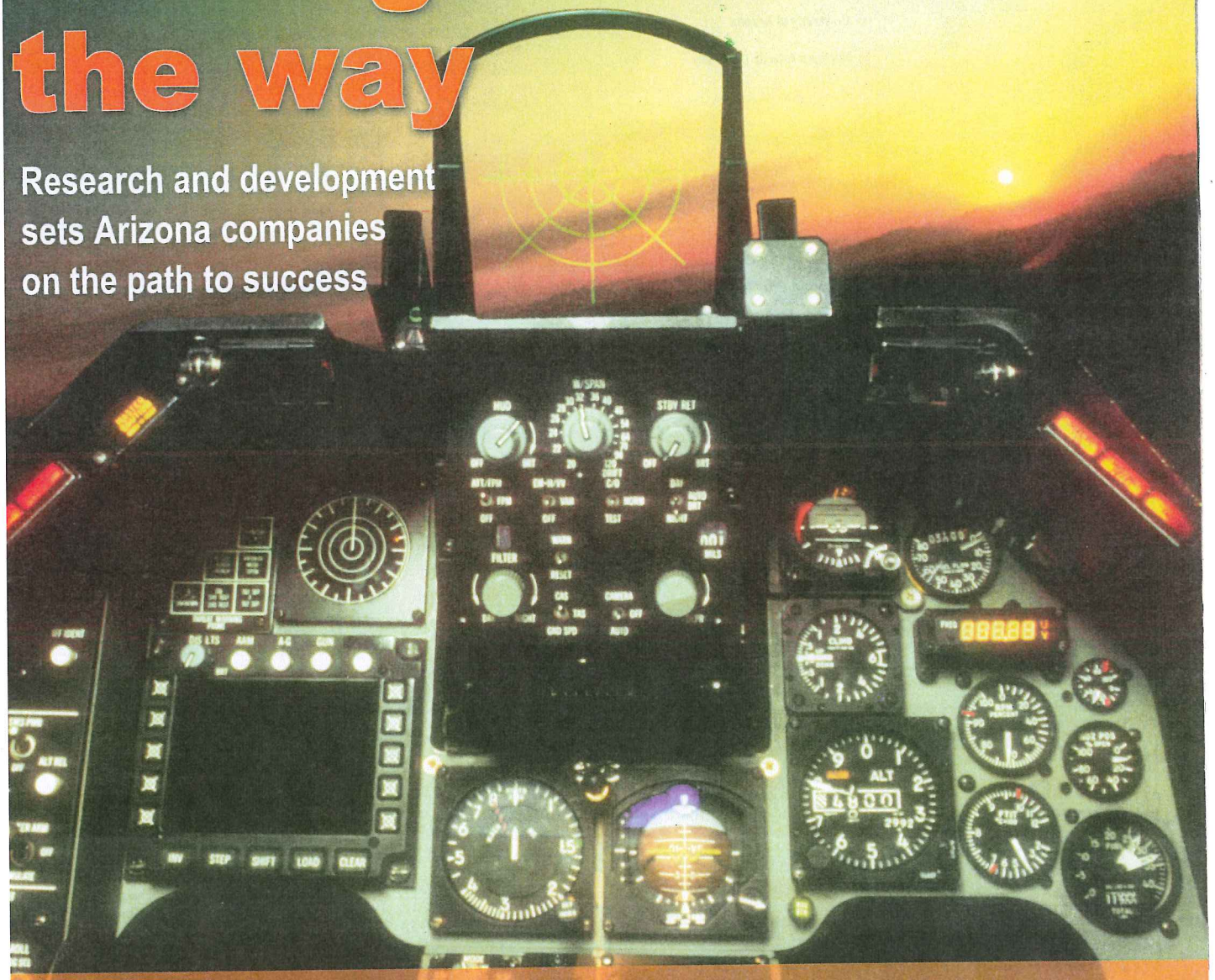
Finding the way

Research and development sets Arizona companies on the path to success



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Innovation celebration

Arizona SciTech Festival evolves STEM focus into economic development platform for communities

What do robots, baseball and wine have to do with economic development? More than you think. From Tempe's "Geek Week," a fusing of science fiction and robotics to Scottsdale's Spring Training Festival and its Science of Baseball, to Mesa's Tech Trek featuring a Creativity Festival and Maker Faire, to Verde Valley's Expo featuring the Science of Wine, communities throughout Arizona are creating highly visible, public events that showcase how science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) are being applied at a local level.

Half a million Arizonan's have come to know the Arizona SciTech Festival and many of its more than 400 interactive events which provide opportunities to learn about and experience STEM in their very own communities.

A feature that distinguishes Arizona's SciTech Festival, now entering its third year in 2014, from other science festivals worldwide is its focus to develop infrastructures that complement and unite collaborators from industry, community, government and the education sectors statewide. As a result, collaborators are engaging in ways that bring value and create opportunities to promote the unique aspects of Arizona in cities and towns.

"When local needs are triangulated among regional collaborators and addressed through highly visible, public celebrations of STEM, real synergy is created," said Jeremy Babendure, Executive Director, Arizona SciTech Festival. "This generates thriving community partnerships, an enhanced public understanding of the region's economic assets, an increased quality of life and broader public association with the region's identity as it relates to science, technology and innovation – all vital factors in the creation of an innovation economy."

Babendure

Surprising to some, Arizona SciTech Festival organizers do not produce any of the 400 festival events but instead focus their attention to inspire and enable collaborators to create meaningful STEM-based opportunities for their communities while developing effective infrastructure to support partner efforts.

Since being initiated with the City of Chandler's Education Coalition in 2012, under the leadership of Councilmember Rick Heumann, 15 communities from Glendale and Tempe to Sahuarita and Verde Valley have embraced the Arizona SciTech Festival as part of their overall strategies to accomplish their economic development goals.

Heumann

So how does it work?

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First, from a partnership perspective, the Festival provides an accessible platform to align collaborators from government and community, educational institutions and businesses that are often immersed in local needs but unable to effectively collaborate together on common projects. Government and community leaders seek meaningful ways to connect with the public and local institutions to facilitate growth and enhance thequality of life for their constituents. When it comes to economic development,

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Arizona communities will offer hundreds of events to showcase how science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) are being applied locally.

JIM POULIN | PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL

FESTIVAL: Organizations collaborate to host more than 400 events

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municipalities express that it is important for their community members to understand its local assets and potential as an innovative region.

Educational leaders strive for the most meaningful and effective ways to educate and reach the public in traditional settings (schools, colleges, universities) and venues such as museums, parks and libraries. They are often looking to build collaborations that bring the "real world" into context but often lack the time and resources to make the right connections. Businesses vary in size and scope but typically are interested to share the excitement of what their companies do. They seek a qualified workforce to help them grow and expand and have a strong foundational grasp of the STEM fundamentals at work in their professions. Arizona SciTech Festival brings these groups together.

In Chandler's case, its three-day "Chandler Science Spectacular" event includes a Technology Crawl, a Night of Art and Science, and a STEM Saturday Celebration. Technology Crawl attendees have learned about the importance and real-world applications of liquid nitrogen, the various products and industries Intel Corporation has seeded, as well as the concept of what an incubator does for the community and how it works with early stage companies that are developing innovative technologies and products for tomorrow.

The City's Night of Art and Science utilizes a "sneaky science" strategy to immerse science, technology and innovation into everyday culture, which comes alive during Chandler's Third Friday Art Walk. From the science of glassblowing to 3D printers and design, attendees learn that STEM skills allow for the creativity and innovation all around us. More interestingly, the added connection with STEM and education makes this one of the most attended Chandler art walks of the year.

Watson

"Science Saturday," the City's day-three finale is an amazing demonstration of its unified partnerships in action. Students from Chandler Unified School District, Kyrene School District and local charter schools communicate science topics that are most exciting to them. More than 50 businesses and community organizations showcase the exciting science behind their wares. Students, Arizona's future workforce, are inherently inspired about the importance of STEM by not only experiencing opportunities with their family and friends, but also by learning from their peers who collaborate with STEM professionals in the field.

For Chandler, the public is engaging in STEM not as an educational or academic activity but as part of their community and cultural group. From Council members actively attending every event, to students enthusiastically representing the science at their schools, to economic development officials landing new industry partners, it's clear that the annual Chandler Science Spectacular brings tremendous short- and long-term economic benefits to the community.

"Arizona communities are continually seeking platforms to showcase their leadership in key sectors and distinguish themselves as world-class environments for business growth," said Sandra Watson, President and CEO, Arizona Commerce Authority. "Our state's SciTech Festival is another strategic way for cities to align with the private sector and engage with the community around a unifying theme. STEM skills are pillars of our education system as well as key drivers of business growth in today's global marketplace, and this link between businesses, educators and job talent is critical to innovation and economic development long term."

Other communities continue to join. Similar to Disneyland with its regions such as Frontierland, Tomorrowland and Fantasyland, Arizona residents will increasingly become aware of the economic regions and industries/opportunities within the state as they travel and experience various Arizona SciTech Festival events. As more members of communities engage in education by showing the science or technology behind their work, we will model the importance of science, education and innovation to our current and future workforce. This will not only inspire more Arizonans to innovate and create the next "big idea," but also transform the thinking about investing in innovation as common practice and present to top companies worldwide that Arizona is a leading region to consider for expansion and growth.