

EDC panel stresses need for tech expertise

[Thomas J. Monigan](#) Wednesday March 5th, 2008

OKALOOSA ISLAND — Back when Rome ruled the western world by building roads and waging war, the poet and playwright Terence coined the phrase, “Fortune favors the brave.”

But it pays to be smart, too. Wednesday’s roundtable breakfast hosted by the Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County provided pretty much the same message with its “Advancing Technology Talent” program. More than 150 people attended the session at the Ramada Plaza Beach Resort. “Cutting edge technology” in the Roman Empire might have involved inventing the double-edged sword, which Caesar’s legions found very useful. But even that didn’t work when the when the Visigoths hit town.

Here on the Emerald Coast, the Air Force is always generating and refining technology that has made America a world power. And even in an age of shifting strength based on the global economy, military technology remains a sustaining force.

“The crisis is now,” said Col. Kirk Kloepfel of the Air Force Research Laboratory Munitions Directorate at Eglin Air Force Base. “We have a huge crop of people at the 25- or 30-year level who are ready to retire ... and if we don’t find a way to replace them or keep performing at that level ... we’re in a world of hurt.”

Kloepfel was joined by college presidents John Cavanaugh of the University of West Florida and Bob Richburg of Okaloosa-Walton College. Also on the panel were Kenneth Ford of the Florida Institute for Human & Machine Cognition, John Rogacki from the University of Florida’s Research and Engineering Education Facility and Joseph Story from The Andrews Institute. One by one, each man made it clear: There is plenty of competition around the globe, and major competitors like China are sending many of its best and brightest here to bring knowledge back home. Youngsters must get interested early in technology and engineering, and they must get related activities to keep them involved through middle school and high school.

Ford pointed out that although American students have a high opinion of their skills, standard testing shows something completely different. “Parents are key here,” he said. Monthly “science camps” for high schoolers are just as valuable as sports camps that abound these days, he insisted. “It shifts their thinking on what a career in math and science might look like,” Ford said. “Their image is likely someone with a thick German accent, a frock, no girlfriends and bad cars.”

Richburg laid out the two main ways to get talent: Recruit it or “grow your own.” Recruiting means competing in salaries in a region that has traditionally emphasized quality of life ahead of money, he said. “That old ‘sunshine differential’ ended 10 or 15 years ago,” Richburg said. “Our beaches are wonderful, but groceries still have to be purchased.”

But achieving that that is not nearly as difficult as developing home-grown talent, he maintained. “The biggest problem is our society’s aversion to high academic requirements for middle school and high school,” Richburg said. “We need a national commitment like the days of ... our race to the moon.”

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