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## **TeCMEN still finding ways to share defense contracts**

**[Thomas J. Monigan](#)**

Want more proof that timing is everything, especially when it comes to business? The group known as TeCMEN is a prime example. It's been operating for almost two decades under the umbrella of Okaloosa County's Economic Development Council. But it took some bad news from the federal government to make eventual participants realize just how valuable membership could be.

Twenty years ago, when Bob Richburg was in his early days as president of Okaloosa-Walton College, he met with business professor David Goetsch to form a local networking group. It involved technology companies that had links to the military on the Emerald Coast. The group was called *Keep the Work at Home*, but it was far from an instant success. It really didn't click at all, Goetsch recalled recently.

But when the first President Bush took office in early 1991 and he immediately cut the military's budget by 25-percent. "That's what got the CEOs interested in working together," Goetsch said. "And it's continued to work because it's been operated by a neutral third party in the form of the EDC, which doesn't compete for those government contracts."

So on the second Tuesday of every month, TeCMEN holds a breakfast meeting at the Okaloosa-Walton College/University of West Florida Fort Walton Beach campus. Jeff Fanto from the EDC is in charge.

Gordon Eldridge from BAE Systems has been a part of the group for more than 10 years. His company employs almost 200 people here and about 97,5000 around the globe. BAE Systems is a global defense and aerospace company that delivers a full range of products and services for air, land and naval forces, as well as advanced electronics, information technology solutions and customer support services. Its sales totaled more than \$31.4 billion in 2007.

"There are not many companies that are manufacturers in this area of defense work, and we have a lot of specialized capabilities and needs," Eldridge said. "This group is good for networking and solving problems together. We can team up if there's a need we can't take care of ourselves ... instead of

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outsourcing the work outside the area. This is a great forum for economic development for this area.”

Membership is broadening, too. Those attending are no longer strictly tech people, with the Workforce Development Board for Okaloosa and Walton Counties being a prime example. Medical organizations are involved, as are colleges and universities. About 80 names show up on the monthly sign-in sheet, but Fanto and others have realized that keeping pace in today’s world demands other kinds of access to each other.

With that in mind, TeCMEN has developed a new Web site with the help of Dean Patti Bonezzi and the Choice Information Technology Institute at Niceville High School. Instructor Sean McSheehy and his students made it happen and Alpha Data Corp. of Fort Walton Beach took it from there as the EDC’s technology partner. Hixardt Technologies from Pensacola was also involved.

“It’s a virtual collaborative environment we’ve envisioned for several years,” Fanto said. “It features online password-protected opportunities for local companies to collaborate on potential business opportunities together.”

Eldridge of BAE Systems called the potential of the new feature “exciting.” “This is a new forum with real-time access,” he said. “You can post information and have a chat room. It’s an area where you can pull information from or put information out there. And you can do that without having to wait for the next meeting. It just creates bigger opportunities.”

Want more info?

You can contact the Economic Development Council of Okaloosa County at 850-651-7374, [www.florida-edc.org](http://www.florida-edc.org) or by sending an e-mail [info@florida-edc.org](mailto:info@florida-edc.org)