



Innovation. Passion. Collaboration.

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Mentoring and pitch events at the Innovation Pavilion bring out dozens of start-up gurus to help fellow entrepreneurs. Courtesy of Innovation Pavilion

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Ask those in the know why the hub of entrepreneurial and start-up activity in the Denver south area is gaining a national reputation for innovation and you get remarkably similar answers.

“We used to say that we’re in the information age, but now we say we’re in the innovation age,” said Vic Ahmed, co-founder and chairman of the Innovation Pavilion in Centennial.

A serial entrepreneur, Ahmed has built several companies from scratch and is a co-founder and chair of the TiE-Rockies entrepreneurial organization. “If you’re not changing, you’re dying. ... Change and innovation are tied together. In the field of innovation, we call it ‘building the plane while you are flying it.’”

The Innovation Pavilion has organized a dizzying array of programs and structures in a campus setting that Ahmed calls an “ecosystem for entrepreneurs.” They include a tech incubator, divisions that address key Colorado industry clusters, a programing division, a STEM high school program, a corporate innovation center, an investment fund and something Ahmed calls its “idea zone.”

Together the many units satisfy three basic goals: support creation of entrepreneurial eco-systems in niche markets, provide a corporate innovation-management forum and offer entrepreneurial technical education.

While the capacity of Colorado’s much touted work-life balance is attracting another wave of in-bound migration, it is the idea of “collaboration” that has others enthusing about the state.





Vic Ahmed, co-founder and chairman of the Innovation Pavilion in Centennial

"I created companies in the northeast and in Florida and I've never seen anything like the collaboration here," said Paul Suchoski PhD., chair of the TIE Rockies entrepreneurial start-up program. "[In] other places, everyone keeps things close to the vest, afraid someone will steal your idea. Here, you have a challenge and 40 people will show up to help you solve the problem on your new product or business. It's the most collaborative place I've ever seen."

Mike Emerson, who has started and built two companies and is looking around for another, is sanguine about why he chose to innovate rather than toe a corporate line. He prefers to think of himself as a person who sees opportunities, rather than a serial entrepreneur

"Most people aren't comfortable with the ambiguity that innovators seek," said Emerson, who holds a business degree from the Wharton School. "Many of us involved in innovating new products feel like outliers, not comfortable in massive corporate structures. We like to create and build."

Colorado is considered a hotbed of innovation, perhaps not as flashy as Silicon Valley or as well known as Boston or Seattle, but nonetheless attracting millennials and the talent that some experts credit for moving the state to the fourth top position in the nation for start-up growth.

"Colorado is certainly top of mind among site-selection consultants and expanding companies for its highly educated workforce and high-performance business climate," said Tom Clark, CEO of the Metro Denver Economic Development Corp. "Targeting our marketing and recruitment efforts in these innovation clusters is the right strategy to drive our economic future."

Denver south's innovation community crosses several industry clusters—from technology to digital healthcare, aerospace and aviation—to energy, the Internet of things and environmental developments.

Innovation is changing both large and small companies, but in different ways.

"Frankly, the pace of technological change is happening so quickly to large and small business that no one will survive unless they change," Ahmed said. "The difference is that large companies are good at incremental change, the kind that improves operational effectiveness and efficiencies."

But Ahmed says large companies are usually not good at real innovation or true disruption.

"They aren't as nimble as small start-ups, where experimentation is easier," he said. "That's where we can play a role, helping with incremental improvements."

Ahmed believes that innovative thinking is—and always has been—critical to the future of the world.

"It's the urge to find new ways of doing things that imprints on the human condition," he said. "Innovation leadership has two parts—first that this thinking challenges the status quo, the second that it improve the human condition. Innovation is necessary to the world's future."

Economists agree.

"A common theme across all nine [industry] clusters is the entrepreneurship, innovation and overall magnetism that they have in expanding the economic capacity of metro Denver," said Patty Silverstein, Metro Denver EDC's chief economist. "These industries shape the culture of our business community that attracts the future workforce, particularly millennials, as well as vital investment in our economy."

