

New centre offers high-tech edge

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A new centre promises to create more high-tech jobs in the Okanagan Valley.

The Okanagan Research an Innovation Centre, housed in the Dominion Radio Astrophysical Observatory near White Lake, officially opened its doors Friday with a special ribbon cutting ceremony that included local MP Stockwell Day.



Photo by Wolf Depner wolf depner Western News Reporter

Peter Haubrich ORIC's executive director and RFind CEO Sharon Barnes hold up "tags," which are devices using that help track items using wireless technology. They ywere developed with the help of of ORIC, a high-tech business incubator based at the Dominion Radio Astrophysical Observatory near White Lake.

"This centre will accelerate the research, development and commercialization of new technologies, providing significant economic benefits to the Okanagan, British Columbia and Canada," said Day.

Executive director Peter Haubrich said ORIC is the only fully fledged business incubator in the Okanagan, supporting companies with access to the extensive infrastructure and know-how of DRAO.

Candidate companies must be working in a field related to the expertise at DRAO, have a strong management team and a sound business plan, he said.

Goals of the centre include performing applied research, training professionals and commercializing technology to establish new business for existing companies or create new companies, said Haubrich.

He helped launch the non-profit centre about two years ago after an extensive career in European research and development for a major multi-national company.

"I was very much engaged with start-ups and innovation," he said. "When I was confronted with the potential of this valley and its research facilities. After meeting (DRAO director) Tom Landecker and doing a due diligence for NRC-DRAO, I became convinced that we can do great things."

ORIC works through leverage, said Haubrich. "Start-up companies, especially in the wireless domain, can create a great company with almost no capital investments," he said.

"ORIC provides also essential support to start-ups (such as) mentoring, access to capital, support in recruiting, support with intellectual property and so on."

The first tenant in ORIC's incubator is RFind, an upcoming company which recently received the first prize in the prestigious Telus New Ventures B.C. Competition in September 2006.

The company beat out 90 other entrants in winning \$60,000 for its product that uses radio-frequency techniques to "find things" in warehouses, shipping yards and big industrial production lines.

RFind CEO Sharon Barnes said locating at the observatory helped her firm concentrate on development work.

In less than a year, the company went from idea to market-ready product, said Barnes.

"ORIC provided mentorship and guidance that helped us make decisions that seemed difficult at the time, though in retrospect made all the difference to getting to market quickly," she said.

"By helping us improve our time to market, we saved a lot of time and money. We owe ORIC a lot."

Other start-ups may say the same in the near future.

Steve Kenny, managing director of emerging technology company SnowSports Interactive, said Friday that his company is developing a real-time location based service to improve the skier safety and ski-hill management.

Other dignitaries attending the opening included National Research Council president Pierre Coulombe whose organization oversees the observatory.

ORIC will be the "primary point of contact" for companies wishing to use the observatory, said Coulombe.

"Establishing ORIC addresses one of NRC's important goals, to foster regional economic development around our operations."

ORIC, for all its ambitions, remains for now a modest operation.

While ORIC includes a board of directors with representation from industry, academia and government, Haubrich is ORIC's only employee.

"We used contractors to do some of the development work for our client companies," said Haubrich. "As soon as our funding or revenue increase, we will hire more highly skilled people."

But there is no question that the success and growth of other companies is the first and foremost thing on Haubrich's mind.

"ORIC aims to raise the survival rate of its client start-up companies," he said.