

Bloomington, Indiana

Located less than an hour from Indianapolis, two hours from Louisville and three from Cincinnati, the city of Bloomington, Ind., could understandably dwell in the shadows. But it doesn't. This Indiana community of 183,000 consistently appears in national rankings for job growth, business appeal, and livability. Bloomington has been recognized by Inc. magazine as one of America's Best Cities for Doing Business and listed among Entrepreneur magazine's Top 50 Hottest Small Cities for Entrepreneurs. It is ranked No. 3 on Forbes magazine's list of Best Places for Business and Careers. The Milken Institute named Bloomington No. 1 among 124 small metro areas for high-tech employment.

Bloomington's path into the national spotlight has not been without sharp curves. Founded on the strength of the limestone industry, Bloomington flourished as its quarries produced and marketed the highest quality limestone in the U.S. The town grew up around a seminary that would become Indiana University. The world's largest furniture manufacturing facility made its home in Bloomington, followed many years later by the largest color television plant in the world. But as manufacturing shifted and technology changed, Bloomington found itself with empty buildings and hundreds of jobless workers.

"Our community was in a similar position to other Midwest communities dominated by basic manufacturing," said Ron Walker, president of the Bloomington Economic Development Corp. "It was an economy with a lot of traditional manufacturing, and we were just beginning to see the potential for newer high-tech industries."

Bloomington's General Electric refrigerator plant managed to survive the closings and job shifting. 1999 saw a huge reduction in its 3200-member workforce, but the plant remained open. In January of 2008, GE announced the 800-employee plant would close. On July 28, 2009, however, the manufacturer announced the plant would remain open with 500 jobs securely in place.

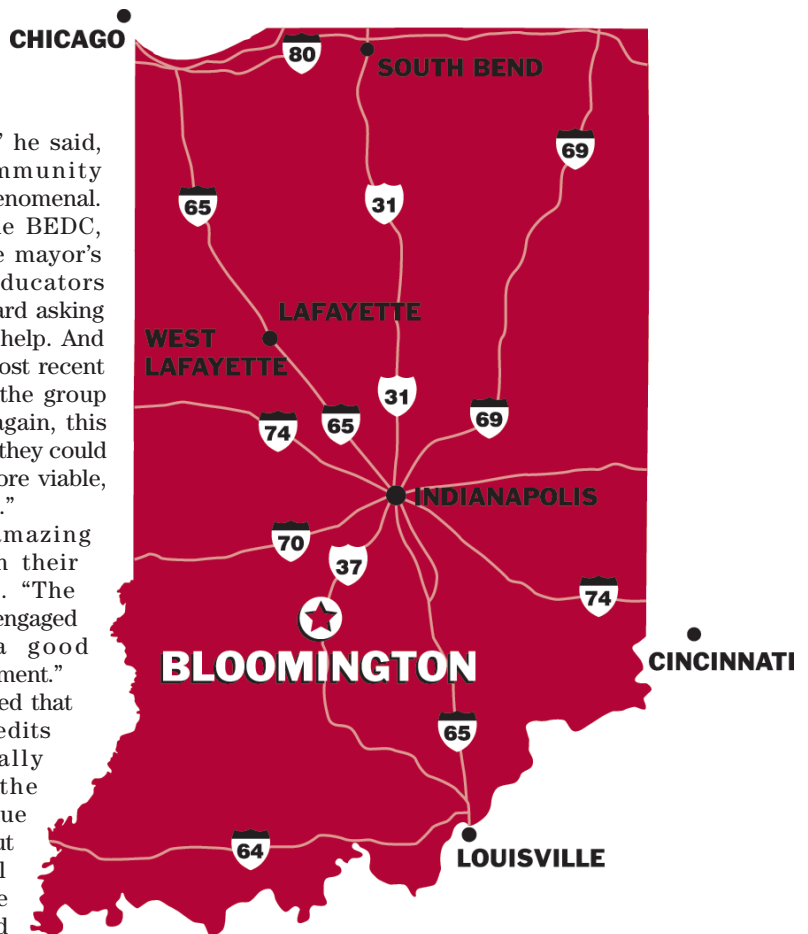
Kent Suiter, plant manager, remembers the 2008 decision. "It was a very difficult

announcement," he said, "but the community response was phenomenal. Everybody – the BEDC, United Way, the mayor's office, local educators – jumped on board asking how they could help. And now with this most recent announcement, the group came together again, this time asking how they could help make us more viable, to keep us strong."

"It is an amazing willingness (on their part)," he said. "The community is so engaged in creating a good business environment."

Suiter explained that federal tax credits made it fiscally possible for the plant to continue manufacturing, but from a goodwill perspective the community had a big influence in what GE was able to do. "Our workforce is a reflection of Bloomington and the community," he said. "This is a very, very good workforce. I've been here over 20 years and they never cease to amaze me with their focus on customer service, their dedication, and willingness to change. It is exciting to be able to keep the plant open."

Willingness to change was key to Bloomington's survival when traditional manufacturing dwindled. Fortunately, community leaders recognized the local workforce potential for advanced manufacturing and production. They had the foresight to quickly put in place the economic development tools that would make the region attractive to high-tech industries and the workers associated with them. Bloomington has become a regional economic center anchored by Indiana University and home to a diverse business community that excels in pharmaceuticals, medical devices, technology, healthcare and the arts. Employment in the technology sector has grown by over 80 percent in recent years.



Envisage is a high-tech employer that came in the early days of Bloomington's transition. Established just prior to 9/11, the firm focuses on automating the complex learning environments associated with first responders including fire, police, rescue, and hazmat teams. Envisage also develops software for the homeland defense training industry.

Ari Vidali, chief executive officer of Envisage, explained that he chose to locate in Bloomington because of its atmosphere. "Bloomington is an extraordinarily good environment for our business," he said. "There's a lot of intellectual talent and therefore a very good pool for finding employees."

"The city has an amazing amount of cultural amenities for its size," he continued. Indiana University's presence means a diverse ethnic community creating a broad array of festivals and food venues. With IU's ranking as the number one music school in the nation, arts and entertainment options are often world-class. He said, "It's all the big city amenities with a small town feel. People are looking for that."

When Envisage recently began looking for a larger space, Vidali admits they considered moving out of Bloomington and closer to their clients who are on the east coast or near large military bases.

“Both the state and the city came together,” he said. They offered a set of incentives and tax abatements that would assist with recruiting, training and offset some of the costs of moving into a larger space. “With that, we focused our energy on doing what we could to stay in Bloomington,” said Vidali. “We wanted to stay.”

This fall the company will move into a building on the city’s historic county square which will provide room for expansion (a 50 percent increase in workforce by 2011) and put the firm in the heart of downtown with its shops and restaurants. Vidali said, “Walkability is important to us because we promote the work-life balance. We’ll be able to do errands as we come in or go out. It will be convenient for daily life.”

Vidali is very happy to be in Bloomington. He recalled how helpful the mayor and city council were in the early days of establishing Envisage, and how the BEDC worked with them to identify suitable space and assist throughout the process.

“It’s an ideal location for entry-level startups or established tech companies,” he said. “A lot of technology and innovation is happening in Bloomington. There are many high-tech success stories here.”

As Bloomington continues its journey from traditional factory assembly lines to bio-scientific research and I-T development, the local base of technically skilled workers grows along with the number of technological firms. Small startups come to Bloomington for the resources and support they know they will find by being a part of an advanced tech community. Established tech companies appreciate the energy and creativity that is fostered when high-tech firms are in proximity to one another.

Walker explained that attracting high-tech industry is not just about developing the region as a hub for advanced technology. It is also about building a culturally rich, diverse community, with strong greenways that make it attractive to the 25-40 year old, highly-skilled workforce. “That particular demographic can be very choosy,” he said. “We want to be one of those communities they choose.”

Vidali understands that very well. Like many other high-tech businesses,

Envisage often brings in people from outside for the highly specialized upper level positions. “Bloomington is a wonderful environment, a safe place to raise a family,” he said. “The types of folks we attract are mature professionals with families, so we wanted an environment conducive to raising families.”

When potential employees come to Bloomington, they like what they find.

Vidali said this makes Bloomington very attractive to Envisage as it seeks top-quality job applicants. Couple the allure of Bloomington’s small town feel – big city appeal with its growing reputation as a center for high-tech industry, and Vidali sums it up, “The overall climate in Bloomington for tech companies is very good.” 🏡

bloomington
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DISCOVERY & INNOVATION

TALENT
Indiana University: 39,000 students
Ivy Tech Community College: 6,000 students
Home of a New Tech High School (one of 40 in the US!)
Over 55% of residents have a college degree or higher!

PLACE
31 Parks on 2,300 acres
Home of Indiana’s largest inland lake
Home of Indiana’s only National Forest (200,000 acres)

LIVING
Cost of Living: 12.49% lower than U.S. average
3 of Forbes’ Best Small Places for Business & Careers

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