

Seattle's cloud-computing boom is new force driving regional economy

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Western Washington state's economy has long been driven by companies that build complex systems, from Boeing's airplanes to cellular networks and the personal computer operating systems that gave rise to Microsoft.

Amazon.com's growth into a technology power through its Amazon Web Services cloud-computing unit and Microsoft's move to compete aggressively in that market have added the cloud to Seattle's list of specialties.

From 2013 to 2016, Washington's employed labor force grew by 7.2 percent, according to state occupational data. The number of workers employed in roles core to cloud computing - including computer-systems analysts, network architects and software-application developers - grew by 26 percent, to 80,017.

"There's an aspect of pride for the city," said Corey Sanders, a Microsoft engineer who leads a cloud-computing team. "You're a big cloud company? You're here."

From his old apartment, Sanders had a unique view of Seattle's cloud-computing boom.

His windows overlooked the two new towers at the core of Amazon.com's corporate campus, a building boom made, in part, to house the thousands of engineers who have helped make Amazon the undisputed leader in the business of renting computing power and data

storage.

Meanwhile, he and his team worked on a key part of Microsoft's challenge to Amazon.

"It was very daunting," Sanders said of his charge when he joined the team building Microsoft's Azure. "We did have a very big competitor to look at."

Google is another major player in the Puget Sound area, with engineering offices in Seattle and nearby Kirkland. It's constructing a campus just blocks from Amazon's headquarters.

Facebook put the finishing touches this year on its own larger, custom-built engineering outpost in the city, and already has plans for another expansion.

Dozens of cloud-focused Silicon Valley transplants and startups are clustered throughout the area.

As with all booms, there's a downside.

The pressures of a roaring, technology-fueled local economy have created what Seattle Mayor Ed Murray calls a housing-affordability crisis. Homelessness is on the rise, and the new buildings going up along with the high cost of living have dramatically changed the character of the city.

For those with the right in-demand technology skills, Seattle remains full of opportunity for second acts.

Deepak Patil, who spent 16 years at Microsoft, started work in January at Oracle as the Redwood City, Calif., company embarked on a hiring

spree to help build its own cloud platform.

"We are in the middle of one of the most dramatic evolutions in modern civilization," Patil said. "And Seattle happens to be the epicenter of this revolution."

Manuel Medina is among the generation of entrepreneurs that used both Microsoft and Amazon as a training ground.

He came to Seattle out of Harvard's business school in 2003, joining a team that later became a part of Amazon Web Services. The company, he says, was his second MBA.

Two years later, he jumped to Microsoft, pitching in on MSN, video gaming and mobile.

Now, he runs Outreach, a Seattle software startup that makes cloud-based tools for sales professionals.

Its service is built on Amazon Web Services. About-two thirds of Outreach's engineering staff, Medina says, came from Amazon.

It's still hiring.

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