

Geek on the Beach, Erik Peterson with Appriver



by Sena Maddison,
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Jonathan Arneault, director of North America SaaS with IBM could have worked anywhere in the world. When he asked his boss 10 years ago if the company minded where he lived, his boss said, “As long as you have an airport and the Internet, I don’t care. Your job doesn’t require you to be in a physical locale. Since that’s the case, pick where you live!”

Arneault chose Pensacola. Besides the obvious draw of sugar white sands, there are many advantages for telecommuting employees to select Pensacola. “I’ve worked remotely since 1999,” Arneault said. “I started working remotely in New York and the job carried with me when I moved to Florida. When I came here, there was zero change in the work except that I had no state income tax which is a tremendous advantage. If you are from New York and you move here, it is an

instant six percent pay raise just for moving. Plus, my little 1,400 square foot house in New York cost nearly the same price as my 3,000 square foot house here that is three blocks from the bay.”

Travel time is another consideration. “Let me tell you something about the Pensacola area – this is a fabulous commuter city,” Arneault said. “I can be in downtown Atlanta faster than people who live in Atlanta, and I do it often. I can be there for a morning meeting and back in Pensacola at lunch. From 2009 to 2010, I did 400,000 miles out of Pensacola running a worldwide business. Living here, I reach anywhere in the world in the same amount of time as I would if I lived in Prague or Dubai or Istanbul. Plus, the cost of living is lower and there are great schools here. My family is happy here and it’s a very easy commute for me and those like me.”



photo by Guy Stevens

Brenda Harris at the Cowork @nnex

significant amount of high tech immigration in this area,” he said. “They will come because they can start by telecommuting and then what you will likely see is startups and move-ins around those startups that are known companies. I anticipate that in five years this will happen organically because the pieces are in place and word is getting out.”

IBM already has 27 mid-to-senior level employees in Pensacola, and only two of those have any direct responsibility locally. All these employees have self-selected the Pensacola area as the place they wanted to be.

The word is getting out that Pensacola is a perfect spot for tech careers and Arneault takes every chance he can to show the area to colleagues. “In February we had a team meeting here,” Arneault said. “We had to have it someplace – and my team all said, ‘Well, we’ve never been to Pensacola, but we have heard so much about it.’ We had a very productive team meeting while we just happened to be staring at the Gulf of Mexico. My colleagues said, ‘You really live here?’ I’d point over the sound and say, ‘My house is right there.’ Two of them are looking at moving here because the cost of living is lower and had a wonderful experience and met nice people.”

Arneault sees opportunities increasing every day. “I anticipate we will see a

Another tech executive drawn here by the lifestyle is **Brenda Harris, global sales enablement manager at Oracle**. Harris was also able to bring her job with her to Pensacola. “My role is teaching salespeople globally how to sell our products,” Harris said. “We have made a large shift to the cloud and I create the messaging and the content that supports it. So they can take that content and make it their own.”

Harris has worked with Oracle for 10 years, six of those years in Pensacola, and she loves working from home. “It’s just about being able to have that work-life balance,” she said. “It’s important to have that conducive work space that makes you happy. I can’t say enough about how fantastic Oracle has been about allowing their employees to have the independence to be able to work from home.” Her stay on the beach started with a boat. She and her husband Jeff traveled

the world on their boat for two years before weighing anchor on Pensacola Beach. “We found this area because we had a boat,” Harris explained. “We were looking at coastal areas near Atlanta where we could keep it. We stopped in Pensacola to see what it was like and said ‘Wow, it’s really quite affordable here!’ I just fell in love and we ended up buying a place, and I’ve been here ever since.”

The beach is only one of Harris’s reasons for landing here, “I also like that it is a community,” Harris said. “In a big city where there are a lot of companies, you don’t always connect with people. There are a lot of ways to connect with people here – like having meet-ups and joining IT Gulf Coast.”



Jonathan Arneault, director of North America SaaS with IBM

While Pensacola is a draw for telecommuters, the lifestyle, the ease of travel and the growing tech community are also assets to existing tech companies and their office-based employees. The work-life balance offered by Pensacola area’s leading employer, Navy Federal Credit Union, is a huge draw for tech professionals when considering job offers. Bill Hills, Navy Federal’s chief

information officer, says Navy Federal’s employees really enjoy living in the Pensacola community. “At our Navy Federal Pensacola campus, we are rapidly expanding our career opportunities for IT professionals,” Hills said. “Our Pensacola employees love that they have the benefits of working for a large organization but are able to serve our members while experiencing the more laid-back lifestyle of living in a Florida beach town.”

GEEK SPOTLIGHT

Erik Peterson, customer care specialist at AppRiver, has helped to promote ITEN WIRED by serving as an official ‘Geek on the Beach’ ambassador for the last three years. Originally from Massachusetts, Erik traveled the world with the U.S. Navy before making the Pensacola area his home. “I found myself sitting on a sugar white beach with a summer breeze listening to the warm waves from the gulf run ashore,” Peterson said. “Traveling across the world, I’ve seen many places and people. Nothing has impressed me more than Pensacola. The community and natural beauty here are great. Pensacola has the best people, downtown culture, and beaches. I can see myself living here for a while.”