

Matt Wilson - Invena

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Rough seas off the western coast of Africa are making it difficult for a company to complete its work. Where would such a company turn for a solution? Would you believe, to a business in rural Kansas? This is today's Kansas Profile.

Matt Wilson (no relation to the author) is owner and founder of Invena Corporation in southeast Kansas. Matt grew up in Eureka, graduated from what is now K-State Salina and earned a mechanical engineering technology degree from K-State Manhattan. "I had mentors, professors who made a great impression on me," Matt said. His corporate career took him to large companies in Allentown, Pennsylvania and Dallas, Texas.

In 1997, Matt's father was diagnosed with colon cancer, so he moved back to Eureka and set up shop as an individual consultant with his mother Carma doing the books. They named the new business Invena, as a play on the word invention. "That's what we do. We invent things," Matt said.

"We had a nice website and fancy business cards," Matt said. "We just never invited anybody to the corporate headquarters." That was because, for the first two years of operation, the corporate headquarters was the guest bedroom of his parent's house. "I lived on the road," Matt said.

Over time, the business evolved beyond consulting. "We would design something for a company, and they would say, 'Looks good. Just go ahead and get it built somewhere.'" So Invena started producing these products through subcontractors and eventually moved into doing the manufacturing themselves.

Matt bought the old train depot in Eureka and remodelled it into the corporate office. Since those first years, Matt has remarried, his mother Carma retired, and his father survived the bout with cancer. The company has grown to 35 employees with more than ten million dollars in annual revenues.

Invena is known for design and precision fabrication of equipment and controls for the energy and aerospace sectors, but the company remains flexible. Essentially, Invena is an engineering problem-solver. “There’s a lot of opportunity,” Matt said.

For example: After the earthquake in San Francisco, California authorities required that all buildings and fixtures be earthquake-proof. Invena was called upon to do the required analysis for one company’s wheel racks.

When an Argentina firm acquired a used cryogenic plant but found that the equipment manufacturer had gone out of business, Invena “reverse-engineered” and built the necessary equipment.

When a large customer in Houston had a big fast-track design project, Invena set up a remote office at the customer’s facility and quickly hired and trained a dozen CAD designers and engineers to execute it. Then Invena set up another remote office at the manufacturing plant in Tulsa to work with the folks on the shop floor.

Invena’s customers are mostly Fortune 50 companies – not Fortune 500, Fortune 50 – so they are very successful. “Eighty percent of our business is export,” Matt said. He estimates that Invena has worked with customers in 54 countries. Wow.

That’s quite remarkable for a company in a rural community like Eureka, population 2,940 people. Now, that’s rural. For more information, go to www.invena.com.

What are the challenges of doing this international work in a small Kansas town? “We have to plan ahead – can’t just run downtown if we need some unusual part,” Matt said. “But we love it here. I couldn’t stand to move back to the city,” he said. “We recruit people from the west coast where there is lots of crime and a high cost of living,” Matt said. “When they come here, it’s like a dream. Our rural location can work to our advantage.”

Matt is now working with the K-State Department of Architecture on designs for downtown redevelopment in Eureka. “If all I accomplish at the end of my days is to say I helped save my hometown, that’s good enough,” Matt said.

It’s time to leave this platform off the shore of West Africa, where Invena helped solve the problem of the rough seas. We salute Matt Wilson and all the people of Invena for making a difference with their entrepreneurial engineering. Their business is helping rural Kansas make waves.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.