

Bionetics DES Group (formerly Atlantic Inertial Systems)

Wanting to expand its customer base, Atlantic Inertial Systems Inc. (AIS) entered the Potentia Economic Gardening Network in 2015, which is hosted by the Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority. Yet achieving that goal was complicated by AIS' acquisition history. The Heath, Ohio-based company, which provides engineering services for inertial instruments and missile guidance systems to the defense industry, had gone through numerous acquisitions since its launch in 1996, and was owned by UTC Aerospace at the time.

“Being associated with a large corporation, we had a lot of restrictions, but no support in going after new work,” says Tin Le, general manager of AIS. “We needed to develop our own marketing and business development savvy.”

The Economic Gardening researchers investigated a variety of opportunities, but AIS didn't have the skills or resources to go after many of them, such as manufacturing or new product development, says Le, explaining that his team is comprised entirely of engineers and has a very niche expertise in sensor design. “Still, it was helpful to know what paths not to go down, so we didn't waste time and resources in trying to win new customers.”

Then one of the researchers brought up the idea of increasing revenue by cross-selling and upselling within AIS' existing customer base. “This may sound like an obvious solution, but it wasn't evident to us at the time,” Le says. “When he suggested that, everything clicked and fell into place quickly. Instead of reaching out beyond our capabilities, we began to focus on what we've already established.”

Among its client base, AIS had two very large customers. In the past, face-to-face meetings were rare, held only if the engineers had deliverables or management reviews. Yet the level of interaction escalated quickly as AIS strove to establish stronger relationships. “We asked to meet with them on a monthly basis to discuss other work we could do — and to our surprise, they were very welcoming,” Le says.

Another change, AIS became much more proactive about education. “There is often high turnover in our customers' buying departments, and new buyers aren't always aware of us or how highly we're rated,” Le explains. “Yet we are able to point to data in their own systems that shows our excellent performance history.”

As a result, AIS has won several new contracts with existing customers — the first in more than 10 years.



Left to right: Tony Adesulu, David Clark and Tin Le at work on the design and development of a power supply.

Case study: Bionetics DES Group

As AIS was going through its Economic Gardening engagement, there was a surprise: Its parent company put them on the auction block. Yet the Port Authority was able to help AIS transition to a new owner: Bionetics Corp., a Virginia-based engineering and applied science company with an office in the Port Authority's office park. "Without the Port Authority, we'd probably be dissolved and closed," Le says.

Instead, rebranded as the Bionetics Corp.'s Defense Engineering Services Group, Le's company has a rosy future. Implementing insights and information gleaned from Economic Gardening, along with other services from the Port Authority, Le expects 2018 revenue to increase by 50 percent from 2017.



The National Center for Economic Gardening is a partnership between the Edward Lowe Foundation and Chris Gibbons. NCEG helps state and regional organizations establish Economic Gardening networks, delivers Economic Gardening services and maintains national standards in training and certification. To learn more, visit www.edwardlowe.org.