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This CSX vendor is bringing cutting-edge international technology to the U.S.

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After six years working in the railroad industry, Norwin Voegeli saw an opportunity.

While working in Jacksonville on railway signal engineering services for the German rail company Siemens, Swiss native Voegeli realized that smaller rail services companies focused on serving North America rather than tapping into the international community.

So four years ago, Voegeli started Jacksonville-based United Rail, a signal engineering services company for Class 1 railroads and mass



TBJ FILE PHOTO

United Rail, which is working with CSX Corp., is leading in many technologies, including PTC.

transit that also handles business development for international transportation companies technology.

“There’s a huge network in the rail industry,” Voegeli said. “We see technology that fits the U.S. market.”

Much of what United Rail does is signal engineering: providing hardware and software to keep trains from running into each other. Among others, Voegeli said United Rail works with Jacksonville-based CSX Corp (Nasdaq: CSX).

But the company is now branching into new technologies through partnerships with international rail companies, such as working with Switzerland-based Ganser CRS AG to provide a diesel engine injection that saves fuel and improves emission levels.

“We learned about the technology and found there was nothing else comparable in the U.S.,” Voegeli said.

Another partnership with the German BBR Automotive GmbH will provide a new signaling system that is specific to light rail and yard operations.

So far, the international partnerships are paying off for United Rail and the foreign companies.

“We see plenty of medium-sized companies in Europe that are very interested in the U.S. market but have no idea how to enter,” said Voegeli. “As a native-German speaker who’s been in the U.S. for 10 years, I can help them understand U.S. businesses. I can close the gap in both directions. There’s interesting technology on both sides of the pond, and it’s not easy to interact when you’re far away.”

Voegeli added the company is growing. In 2014, revenue was \$1 million. In 2015, it was \$1.5 million. For this year, the company plans

for revenue to be between \$2.5 million and \$3 million. The company has 14 employees, including one in Toronto, and is hiring one more.

As the company strives to be at the forefront of new technology, there's one hot-button safety initiative it's involved in.

By 2018, the federal government will require Class 1 railroads to be equipped with positive train control or PTC. The mandate for that system, which automatically slows down trains under certain circumstances, was already extended from its original deadline of Dec. 31, 2015. Voegeli said it could get another extension to 2020.

"PTC is on a good path to be ready by 2018, but it's still a stretch," he said. Voegeli said when Europe tried to implement its own system, which was difficult because each country had its own signaling system, it took about 20 years. "That's what makes me think PTC could take a while. These railroads have to define, set and test these systems."

Another new technology, preventative maintenance, is being tested in a pilot program with CSX. The technology monitors the interlocking system to make sure it's working and maintenance is done before there's an emergency breakdown.

"There's a train delay if the switch doesn't work," Voegeli said. "Freight rail has to pay penalties if they're off schedule. If it happens on a passenger train, passengers panic." He added that early repair is much cheaper than emergency repair.

As the company continues to develop, Voegeli said United Rail will continue to work with the Class 1 railroads, but is doing more work with light and commuter rail.

“The workload for Class 1 railroads has been down dramatically because of their freight recession,” he said. “So about 90 percent of our work is with mass transit.”

But with more cities moving toward light rail — including nearby Orlando with Sunrail — it’s a hotbed of potential for United Rail.

“It’s a growing market,” Voegeli said. “It will work for us, and then the Class 1 rail will come back.”

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