

BUSINESS

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A GUIDE TO LOCAL BUSINESS

“Our region is comprised primarily of services-based industries but also contains a starkly diverse landscape. Despite the differing industry profiles in each county, the smaller business presence remains consistent.”

— **Brent Kettler**, research and data consultant who analyzed the business climate for the FutureMakers Coalition.



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Small business vital

Small businesses comprise 90 percent of Southwest Florida's companies

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

WITH JUST EIGHT EMPLOYEES AND PRODUCTS dependent on technology, Atilus represents the present and future of the Southwest Florida business landscape. Launched 10 years ago by Florida Gulf Coast University students Zach Katkin and Harry Casimir, the Bonita Springs web design and marketing firm is among the majority of companies in Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry and Lee counties. It's a small business.

More than 90 percent of all local businesses employ fewer than 20 people providing everything from marketing, advertising and consulting services to air conditioning,

automobile repair and even health care. Of the region's 31,369 businesses, more than 28,000 are small operations, according to Brent Kettler, research and data consultant, who analyzed the business climate for the FutureMakers Coalition.

“The number of small businesses is staggering,” he said. “It really surprised me the 90 percent was consistent from county to county. Our region is comprised primarily of services-based industries but also contains a starkly diverse landscape. Despite the differing industry profiles in each county, the smaller business presence remains consistent. Another commonality is an increasing

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reliance on both technology and specialized or hard skills in most communities.”

Knowing the role of small business in the regional economy provides a foundation for the FutureMakers Coalition to develop cradle-to-career programs guiding students as well as working adults to post-secondary degrees and certifications that not only address where the jobs will be in a decade, but provides support and pathways to get there.

“This information tells us we are economically dependent on small companies,” said Tessa LeSage, director of social innovation and sustainability for the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, which is the anchor organization for the coalition. “It provides a new understanding of the region, illustrating the



LESAGE

types of businesses that are thriving, as well as bringing to light the jobs that will be sustainable. High-skill, high-wage attainable jobs are the focus of FutureMakers, and our ability to work with our partners in business, education, government and the



MATHIS

community is the key to transforming the workforce and creating a more vibrant economy.”

Julie Mathis, executive director of the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce, said the majority of the organization's members are small businesses. “I think we're very similar to other communities. We range from startups and new businesses to mom-and-pop companies,” she said. “Small businesses are a constant and will continue to grow and expand.”

Identifying and supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs like Mr. Katkin and Mr. Casimir will also factor into a sustainable workforce, Ms. LeSage said. Programs such as the Small Business Development Center at FGCU, the school's Institute for Entrepreneurship and a new entrepreneur minor offered through the department of management will also prove instrumental.

Collier County Public Schools recognized the need to develop young entrepreneurs when it introduced INCubator-edu in 2013. The program provides high school students with the opportunity to create, develop, market and finance a product or service, receive coaching and mentoring advice from local entrepreneurs and business experts.

“Helping our residents start a business contributes to the region's economic health,” Ms. LeSage said. “It's only been recently we, as a country, have embraced the mindset that anyone with specialized skills can start their own business and be competitive against larger businesses. I think the shift toward shopping locally is helping small businesses thrive. The ability to own a small business also prevents ‘brain drain’ by keeping residents in the area. Chances are they have a skill the public or other businesses need.”

That's exactly the reason why Mr. Katkin and Mr. Casimir launched Atilus. “People start their own business or freelance because their degree might not be what big businesses are looking for,” Mr. Katkin said. “They can subcontract with other companies and businesses.”

SWFL as a work destination

Given its direct access to larger metropolitan areas via the Southwest Florida International Airport, its beaches and



Zach Katkin and Harry Casimir launched Atilus 10 years ago. The firm has eight employees.

COURTESY PHOTO

general lifestyle, Mr. Kettler sees the region as a “work destination.”

“We are in a really prime position to market the area as a great place to work,” he said. “And why not? Look at our cost of living and rent compared to San Francisco and New York. Florida is a business-friendly state. It's among very few states that don't have a state income tax.”

For Mr. Katkin and Mr. Casimir, Southwest Florida was already home when they started Atilus in 2005. Although their client portfolio includes companies in New Jersey and Massachusetts, they stay connected through the Internet and technology. Their six employees work from home several times a week.

“Southwest Florida has a good quality of life and setting up and owning a business and being part of the community was easy compared to other areas,” Mr. Katkin said. “Technology gives us the flexibility to be geographically flexible.”

A growing trend for freelancers

Technology — a constant no matter the business — and a younger workforce that grew up on it are also contributing to the groundswell of employees and contract workers who may never work in a bricks-and-mortar office. Using freelance workers when a full-time position doesn't make good business sense helps the bottom line.

“The number of freelance workers has increased 20 fold in five years,” said Mr. Kettler. “Of the 151 million workers in the country, 53 percent are freelancers. There's been a dynamic shift of employers using contract workers especially in companies led by Generation X. They get the same caliber of work. Also younger workers are demanding the freedom.”

Millennials, 18 to 34 year olds, now represent the largest population in the American workforce, surpassing Gen X during the first quarter of 2015. At 53.5 million, they account for more than one in three American workers, according to the Pew Research Center.

Ellie Hofer, a single mother and former fulltime employee of 4What, which creates interactive multi-media learning applications for local and international clients, started working from home last summer after executives decided an onsite presence was not a requirement. She saves hours by eliminating the daily commute from Fort Myers to Naples and is home for her 6-year-old daughter.

Hofer recently shifted from full-time to pay-per-job contracts to use her extra time to explore other passions. She loves teaching, wants to design educational video games, devote more time to painting and hopes to combine all of the above

into her own entrepreneurial endeavor.

Many companies also rely on freelance writers to contribute copy to websites, blogs and other print and digital platforms. Atilus was using several local and out-of-the-area writers until it recently created a staff position, Mr. Katkin said.

Contract employees with in-demand health care degrees and certifications also enjoy the freedom to choose their hours and assignments. Many recent nursing assistant and practical licensed nursing graduates of Charlotte County Technical Center have opted to work as 1099 employees, a school representative said.

“The economy is shifting and entrepreneurs and freelance employees are critical to making the ‘new’ economy work,” said Ms. LeSage. “Small businesses require the skills of freelancers to succeed because they cannot hire employees for every skill required to run their business. As a region of small businesses, the workforce must include individuals who can fill that gap. We need to work with our partners to support this freelance and entrepreneurial spirit to meet the demands of our economy.”

Minting entrepreneurs

In today's business climate, good ideas often translate into success as entrepreneurs. “We have to teach people how to start their own business,” said Mr. Kettler. “If they have a good product they reach clients all over the country. It's not like it used to be where a business was 10 to 20 minutes away in a physical location.”

Mike Gookin, president of Applied Physics Laboratories in Fort Myers, had a brilliant idea — literally — when he and his colleagues perfected the GPS Lock Light, which required astrophysics algorithms to determine when to turn on and turn off lighting in parking lots, on signs, outside homes and for a number of other applications.

Lock Light employs nine and became commercially available in 2015.

Chambers of commerce and other agencies also offer programs geared to budding entrepreneurs and small business startups.

FGCU's Small Business Development Center provides 25 full- and part-time consultants in the five-county region to potential small business owners and hosts training events and expos to connect these entrepreneurs to companies dedicated to helping small businesses secure insurance and even startup capital. Its work complements the university's Institute of Entrepreneurship which also prepares students to launch a business, said Lois Knox, SBDC director.

New businesses will also spring up

in the skilled trades as technical college graduates become business owners, filling the voids as the older generation of electricians, plumbers and air-conditioning experts retire.

“What we're really seeing is a lack of skilled labor,” said Ms. Knox. “As parents we need to tell our children not everyone is cut out for college. Certificate programs are very important. We need plumbers and electricians and construction workers. Our homebuilding industry was the hardest hit in the country. We lost skilled labor to the north or construction workers retrained for other careers.”



KNOX

Where the jobs will be

Mr. Kettler applauds the FutureMakers Coalition for bringing together stakeholders who will help shape that future workforce. The coalition is one of 75 metropolitan areas throughout the country working with Lumina Foundation to increase the quality of America's workforce through increased post-secondary education — college degrees and the ever-increasing demand for industry certifications.

The U.S. lags behind other countries in the percent of citizens who have any post-secondary education. In Southwest Florida only 27 percent of the workforce meets the criteria; the FutureMakers' goal is to increase that number to 40 percent by 2025.

Employees with college degrees and trade-specific credentials make more money than their colleagues without either.

The tech industry will continue to play a major role and influence every facet of the future of business in Southwest Florida.

The Southwest Florida Regional Technology Partnership works with small tech companies by promoting networking opportunities for entrepreneurs and others in the field. It also introduces high school students to the possibilities of tech jobs requiring post-secondary certifications or four-year degrees, said administrator Deborah Johnson. Its annual TechMatch connects employers to future employees and interns.

“We have a blossoming ecosystem here of entrepreneurs in technology and also offer a pitch night for funding,” Ms. Johnson said. “We're seeing young software developers growing out of a business and spinning off to form their own companies.”

Dante Cioffi, a website and dot.net instructor at Fort Myers Technical College, estimates about 40 percent of his students — ages 18 to 68 — start their own business, generally as consultants.

One of those students was Jesse Cooper, a 2009 graduate, who worked on a contract basis for Puma, Clorox and local companies. He was a consultant for Fort Myers-based Chico's for more than a year before being hired fulltime as a web developer.

Mr. Kettler predicts the success of the FutureMakers Coalition and Southwest Florida's economy will rely on small businesses.

“We have to be open-minded to get there,” he said. “Everybody needs to realize we have a completely ripe environment for success.”

“Our research will continue, with an emphasis on identifying patterns, collaborations and communicating our findings to ensure local residents can access the programs, industry certifications and college degrees that best equip them for success in the jobs emerging and remaining in Southwest Florida,” said Ms. LeSage.

For more information, see futuremakerscoalition.com, call 274-5900 or email Tessa Ms. LeSage at TMs. LeSage@floridacomcommunity.com. ■