



Green Bay incubator helps small businesses succeed

In the past few weeks, this column has been looking at various options for locating a business. One of those options was a home office with the added benefits of virtual tenancy and the use of virtual assistants. But, what happens when the business outgrows the home or employees are added?

Lisa Harmann, program manager for the Advance Business Center at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, has a good alternative for young businesses.

The incubator offers 42 individual offices, four office suites ranging in size from 760 to 966 square feet, and 15 flexible spaces or light manufacturing bays from 606 to 1,000 square feet. The costs start at just \$236 per month and include options that help reduce operational expenses.

"We try to offer a variety of services to assist these small businesses no matter what stage they are in," Harmann said. "For instance, those that have an office in the home may need a stepping stone before making the commitment to leasing an office."

The incubator allows the tenant to go from virtual tenancy to single offices to office suites. Likewise, with the flexible light manufacturing bays, tenants can expand as the business grows.

"Much of the success of the incubator is focused on being flexible to be able to meet a variety of needs," Harmann said.

The purpose of the incubator is to provide targeted services in addition to space. Since opening in 1987, scores of businesses have participated. On-site business partners including SCORE, the Wisconsin Entrepreneurs Network, the Wisconsin Business Development Finance Corp, the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Small Business Development Center and the NWTC Center for Entrepreneurship provide seminars, counseling and other programs. Tenants also are encouraged to learn from each other.

Harmann considers that one of the most exciting parts of the incubator.

"No matter if you look from a program manager standpoint or as a tenant, being involved in the incubator is like one big family offering a nurturing environment to help each other succeed," she said.

Another benefit is that it provides a great deal of professionalism. Greeting clients in a home office with children running around in the background can be challenging. The incubator's Class A space allows the business to present a quality image. As a tenant, there is access to conference rooms, free high-speed Wi-Fi, a receptionist, technology center, mailboxes, a loading dock and forklift, and a network printer/copier and fax machine.

Harmann said that the goal of the program is graduation to new space. Since inception, 244 businesses have found this success. When that happens, tenants are assisted with site location and research assistance. On average, tenants are only in the incubator for one to three years, but surveys show they are enthusiastic about the experience.

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