

Charlotte-area resources for small-business owners and entrepreneurs

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Natalie Williams, executive director of The Women's Business Center of Charlotte, cuts a ribbon during the center's open house. It's located at 9115 Harris Corners Parkway in Charlotte. CELESTE SMITH CE-SMITH@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM

If you're looking to start a business, you've come to a place where you can get a lot of help.

Charlotte's and the region's small-business and entrepreneurship community is surging. According to Ventureprise, UNC Charlotte's business incubator, start-ups likely created about 23,000 jobs in the Charlotte metro area in 2014, based on national figures.

For new entrepreneurs and prospective business owners, there's a range of resources and initiatives available locally. Here's a partial rundown, in alphabetical order:

Chambers of commerce: While the Charlotte Chamber has the name recognition, smaller chambers in the region offer networking and professional development events. These groups include the Latin American Chamber of Commerce of Charlotte, Charlotte LGBT Chamber of Commerce, chambers out of the Lake Norman and Mooresville-South Iredell regions and towns of Matthews and Mint Hill.

CharlotteBusinessResources.com: Website managed by the city of Charlotte and other organizations that focuses on small-company owners looking for local services, workshops and business support groups.

Charlotte Mecklenburg Library: Provides business owners with data, computer classes and programs targeted toward specific needs. The library's website, www.cmlibrary.org, has business directories and databases that include demographics and industry and trade information. Has 20 branches around Mecklenburg County, all with free Wi-Fi. The library also is a member of the Foundation Center's Funding Information Network, so non-profit owners can find grants and organizational resources, too.

Charlotte SCORE: Network of volunteer business mentors that offers free advice and in-person and online workshops, some of which have fees.

Co-working spaces: Designed to be affordable, flexible and shared, these spaces target start-ups and entrepreneurs who don't always want to work at home or from a local coffee shop. There's at least eight of these spaces in the region, with talk of more on the way.

Enventys: Local product development firm that can help inventors determine if their product or idea is marketable. Its CEO, Louis Foreman, is creator of the PBS TV show "Everyday Edisons," a reality show for inventors.

Incubators and accelerators: Provides entrepreneurs support to help launch and grow businesses. Local ones include CLT Joules, an incubator for early-stage energy companies based at UNC Charlotte; Ventureprise, which is UNCC's business incubator and accelerator, Area 15 warehouse in Charlotte, a small-business incubator; City Startup Labs, an entrepreneurial school for young black men; and the Elma C. Lomax Incubator Farm in Concord, a training ground for farmers.

Knowledge Park: This economic development strategy in Rock Hill is focused on developing a corridor between downtown to Winthrop University that attracts jobs, entrepreneurship and technology and lifestyle amenities. The Technology Incubator at Knowledge Park, located downtown, is designed to support the launch and growth of new technology companies in Rock Hill.

Nontraditional lending sources: This includes the Charlotte Community Capital Fund, a public/private fund established in 2003 to help local small businesses gain access to capital. The city partners with major banks to provide an 85 percent loan guaranty for business loans made by two local nontraditional lenders: Self-Help Credit Union and The Support Center. Because the loans are guaranteed, the lenders can use more flexible underwriting.

Packard Place: This uptown Charlotte entrepreneurial hub houses accelerators QC FinTech, a boot-camp style accelerator program focused on financial service technology companies, and RevTech Labs program, which provides free mentoring, workspace and programming to new technology startups. It also hosts HQ Charlotte co-working space and regular events, including PitchBreakfast, where Charlotte startups can practice their business pitches to an audience.

Small Business Centers: Located within North Carolina's community colleges, these centers offer counseling, workshops and classes to existing and prospective small-business owners. Local centers are at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, Gaston College, Rowan-Cabarrus Community College (seminars in both counties) and South Piedmont Community College in Monroe.

Women entrepreneurs: There's a push to offer support: In 2014, billionaire fashion mogul Tory Burch and Bank of America included Charlotte in her Elizabeth Street Capital initiative to ease women's access to loans. Earlier this year, U.S. Small Business Administration grant funded the opening of a Women's Business Center of Charlotte, a resource center offering workshops and counseling for upcoming entrepreneurs..

Local networking groups include a Charlotte chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners and Metropolitan Business and Professional Women, and a Charlotte chapter of Femprofessionals.

Celeste Smith covers small business and entrepreneurship for the Observer.

On the web Chambers:

Latin American Chamber of Commerce of Charlotte: lacccharlotte.com

Charlotte LGBT Chamber of Commerce: clgbtcc.org

Lake Norman Chamber of Commerce: www.lakenormanchamber.org

Mooresville-South Iredell Chamber of Commerce: www.mooresvillenc.org

Matthews Chamber of Commerce: matthewschamber.org

Mint Hill Chamber of Commerce: minthillchamberofcommerce.com

Community colleges:

Central Piedmont Community College: www.cpcc.edu/sbc

Gaston College: <http://www.gaston.edu/home-page/small-business-center/>

Rowan-Cabarrus Community College: www.rccc.edu/sbc

South Piedmont Community College: www.spcc.edu/cce/sbc

Incubators and accelerators:

Area 15: areafifteen.com

Elma C. Lomax Incubator Farm: www.carolinafarmstewards.org/lomax-farm

QC FinTech: www.qcfintech.co

RevTech Labs: www.revtechlabs.com

Ventureprise: ventureprise.org

Other resources

Charlotte SCORE: www.charlotte.score.org

PitchBreakfast: www.pitchbreakfast.com

HQ Charlotte co-working: HQ community, Packard place

CLT Joules: cltjoules.com

Charlotte Community Capital Fund: <http://charmeck.org/city/charlotte/nbs/ed/financialprograms/pages/cccfund.aspx>

Women's Business Center of Charlotte, email: WBC-Charlotte@theinstitutenc.org

NAWBO Charlotte: www.nawbocharlotte.org

Metropolitan Business and Professional Women: mbpw.org.

Femprofessionals Charlotte: <http://www.femprofessionals.com/organizer/femprofessionals-charlotte/>

Knowledge Park: knowledgeparkrockhill.com

Eventys: eventys.com

Charlotte Mecklenburg Library: www.cmlibrary.org

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