



## SMALL BUSINESSES GET BIGGER, BETTER—WITH LIBRARIES' HELP

In 2020, the United States was home to

**31.7 MILLION** small businesses employing

**60.6 MILLION** workers, representing

**47.1 PERCENT** of job holders<sup>1</sup>



**Ed Koltonski**  
Business and Investment Librarian  
Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County  
Youngstown (OH)

### SMALL BUSINESS IS BIG

In 2020, the United States was home to 31.7 million small businesses employing 60.6 million workers, representing 47.1 percent of job holders and accounting for 1.6 million net new jobs.<sup>1</sup> When entrepreneurs go looking for help, they often turn to their public libraries: Almost 60 percent of libraries provide resources to users who'd like to start a small business.<sup>2</sup>

One thriving business development center is housed in the Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County (PLYMC) in Ohio, which has a long history of serving the business community. For more than 95 years, PLYMC's Business and Investment Center (BIC) has worked with local entrepreneurs and other community partners to empower patrons with business knowledge and skills and to nurture the Youngstown area economy.

PLYMC Business and Investment Librarian Ed Koltonski estimates that the BIC serves about 500 patrons yearly. "The types of resources we have available—they rival [those of] some universities," he says. Among those resources are free access to business-intelligence databases, such as ReferenceUSA and Mergent Intellect; collections on entrepreneurship, industry analysis, trade-specific technology, and many other topics; free mentoring; and hands-on training.

### SERVING A RANGE OF NEEDS

Nearly a century after its founding, the BIC continues to see significant demand for its services—most recently, by former automotive industry workers left jobless by the closing of a nearby General Motors manufacturing facility. "They've taken their buyout, they feel too young to be retired, and they're kind of dubious about working for someone else," Koltonski says. "A lot of them have decided to go into business for themselves."

Many of those aspiring entrepreneurs have limited computer proficiency and/or have not obtained a college degree. That's where BIC's resources can help fill the gap, he says. "I tell them, 'You might need to learn a few new skills.' I can show them the steps they need to take and help them move forward."

For example, through BIC's Book-a-Librarian program, library users can sign up for an hour of one-on-one consultation with Koltonski, who can suggest the most appropriate next step in their business journey. That might be registering a business name with the Secretary of State, developing a business plan, or finding local partners for business loans.

Another segment of BIC users: owners of existing businesses that aren't thriving. "Usually they're coming in to do due diligence that they didn't do the first time around—tracking their finances, figuring out their break-even point, things like that," says Koltonski.

Whether Koltonski is working with a new entrepreneur or the owner of an existing company, he finds it helpful to have them use *Gale Business: Plan Builder*, a step-by-step online planning tool. *Gale Business: Plan Builder* uses information and tools to guide users through the entire business development life cycle.

"When I'm working with someone with little to no business background, I refer them to step 1, where they can begin to build their entrepreneur profile, or step 2, where they start to think about how their business will operate," he explains. Meanwhile, established businesses may be better off starting with later steps, such as working on a break-even analysis, a business plan, or financial projections.

One recent patron was "really panicking about the number side of things," Koltonski recalls. "We sat down and worked on the break-even analysis, and after she started using the *Gale Business: Plan Builder*, a lot of her anxiety dissipated, and she has started a business since then."

Either way, Koltonski says, the fact that *Gale Business: Plan Builder* doesn't require Microsoft Office skills makes it more accessible to users. "The vast majority of business and financial plans are Excel templates, and that's unnecessary gatekeeping," he says. "Not everyone has a computer at home with Microsoft Office on it. When working with this resource, I can focus on the content side of things: 'This is what goes in here, and why,' instead of, 'This is how you edit in Excel.'"

1. U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2020 Small Business Profile.

2. University of Maryland Digital Inclusion Survey, accessed January 13, 2021.



Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County

## BUILDING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM

The BIC works in concert with many other entrepreneurial partners in the Youngstown and Mahoning County area, including the Youngstown chapter of the SCORE business mentoring network, the local business incubator, and other public libraries. “I’ve been really surprised by how many groups and organizations are available for people who want to start a business around here,” Koltonski says. “There are so many resources that it becomes an issue of communicating instead of competing.”

For example, when he noticed his business planning classes were duplicating the efforts of the Youngstown Business Incubator, he changed his approach. Now the incubator sends its participants to the BIC to learn how to use the *Gale Business: Plan Builder* software, which reinforces what they’ve already learned at the incubator. “It’s become a lot more of a symbiotic relationship,” Koltonski says. “We’re trying to bridge instead of silo.”

He also recommends cosponsoring programs with other community organizations. “I get so much more engagement if I cohost a program with the Youngstown Business Incubator or if I’m part of a program at the YWCA. We get to spread out the workload a little bit, and we get to promote it more effectively,” he says. “If you have two or three different community partners, everyone is able to speak to their strengths, and there always ends up being a high turnout.”

Partnering with other community stakeholders also helps ensure value for program participants. “The people who come in for a program have to leave with something, whether that’s a list of local contacts or a new *Gale Business: Plan Builder* account,” Koltonski emphasizes. “As long as they leave with something, that seems to be a good step forward for them. Those are people I will typically see show up to another program.”

Koltonski does a lot of showing up himself—giving talks about the BIC to other community groups and working with the local chamber of commerce to spread the word about what the library can offer. Perhaps most important, “I keep myself very available by email, text message, and messenger app, because I tend to be moving around quite a bit,” he says. “So many of the people I work with are constantly on the run, too, whether they’re business professionals or not. We’re all trying to stay a step ahead, which is why it’s nice that *Gale Business: Plan Builder* works on my phone well.”

## ADVICE FOR OTHERS

To libraries considering whether to increase their offerings for new and existing businesses, Koltonski urges them to remember what he calls “the core mission of all libraries”: providing the resources that a community needs. “That fundamental shift that’s been taking place in libraries to becoming places that inform community members and allow them to get actionable data—that’s central to what we’re doing,” he says.

But what if a library doesn’t have a trained business librarian? As Koltonski points out, “A question is just a question. It doesn’t matter if it’s a genealogy question or a business question; there are tools for answering it. Yes, you’re getting a business question, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you need to be a business expert to answer it. You just need to be an information professional. Take your MLIS [Master of Library and Information Science] skills and apply them to learning about business resources.”

Using a tool such as *Gale Business: Plan Builder*—which offers integration with several other tools, such as *Gale Business: DemographicsNow*, *Gale Business: Entrepreneurship*, and *Gale LegalForms*—can help a library stretch its business resources as far as possible. For example, Koltonski says, “At different steps throughout *Gale Business: Plan Builder*, prompts reveal additional content and tools to help users understand or further explore concepts. So if someone is doing a break-even analysis who has never even heard the term, they can click a menu and get sent to helpful articles.”

“I want to be here to help people as much as humanly possible, but I don’t want them to be reliant on me for anything,” he finishes. “They’re going to have to develop their skill sets. And being able to say, ‘I have a question. How do I find the answer?’ is the ultimate skill set.”

### Plan for success with these resources

***Gale Business: Plan Builder***—An intuitive dashboard walks users through five steps of business planning and includes easy-to-use tools and templates. For libraries subscribing to any of these resources, *Gale Business: Plan Builder* is integrated with:

***Gale Business: DemographicsNow***—A wealth of highly detailed U.S. demographic data, ideal for gaining consumer and market insights which is crucial for opening or growing a business.

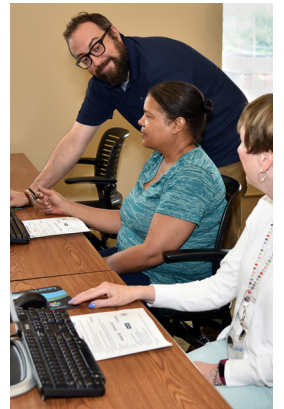
***Gale Business: Entrepreneurship***—Information on how to plan, fund, start, and manage a small business, including nearly 1,000 sample business plans.

***Gale LegalForms***—Access to thousands of state-specific legal forms relevant to starting or managing a business.

“

*If you have two or three different community partners, everyone is able to speak to their strengths, and there always ends up being a high turnout.”*

**Ed Koltonski**  
Business and Investment Librarian, PLYMC



“

*Yes, you’re getting a business question, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you need to be a business expert to answer it. You just need to be an information professional.”*

**Ed Koltonski**  
Business and Investment Librarian, PLYMC