

TODAY'S FOCUS

Programs help launch businesses

Cheap rent, office space make Michigan viable for start-ups

BY JENNIFER YOUSSEF
The Detroit News

The time is ripe to launch a business in Michigan, experts say.

They point to an abundance of commercial buildings, cheap rent and plenty of unemployed workers. Those factors, along with affordable housing and the lure of living near family and friends, are helping attract many former Michiganians home, they say.

While the state does not keep data on former Michiganians returning for economic or other reasons, there are plenty of state and other programs to help entrepreneurs launch a business.

"Entrepreneurship in Michigan is getting much more attention," said Tom Kalchick, associate director of the Michigan State University Product Center for Agricultural and Natural Resources, which helps entrepreneurs start up businesses in the food, natural resources and bio-economy sectors. "As people lose their jobs, they're starting to look at opening their own business."

The product center is getting two or three inquiries a day, on

average, from entrepreneurs seeking assistance with their start-up business, Kalchick said. Two years ago, an average of three people called the center each week.

Suzanne Vier is among the former Michiganians who used the center's resources to launch a granola company after returning home. She worked with the center's nutritional analysis expert for the packaging of Randy's Granola and the company uses the Starting Block Kitchen Incubator — affiliated with the center — to make the product.

"MSU's Product Development Center is an incredible resource for specialty food companies. We

recently worked with them on our newest product. So Very Cherry, and they had great ideas and were very willing to help," Vier said.

Among the programs available to help entrepreneurs get started:

■ **Michigan State University Product Center**

Helps develop and commercialize high-value products and businesses in the agriculture and natural resource sectors.

East Lansing
(517) 432-8750

■ **Michigan Economic Development Corp.**

Assists new ventures, expansions and relocations with vari-

ous services. Can connect entrepreneurs with university resources, business experts and investment funds.

300 N. Washington Square
Lansing
(888) 522-0103

■ **Tech Town**

Helps develop companies in emerging high-technology industries, including advanced engineering, life sciences and alternative energy.

440 Burroughs
Detroit
(313) 879-5250

■ **Ann Arbor SPARK**

Offers programs, resources and support to innovation-based businesses in the Ann Arbor re-

gion
201 S. Division, Suite 430
Ann Arbor
(734) 761-9317

■ **Automation Alley**

Technology business association that aids in the growth of high-tech businesses

2675 Bellingham
Troy
(248) 457-3200

■ **Inventors Council of Mid-Michigan**

Offers educational information to inventors and opportunities for networking with other inventors and small businesses.

(810) 245-5599

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SHANE PLISKA, FAMILY-OWNED INTERIOR LANDSCAPING FIRM

Pliska had been reviewing scripts for a Los Angeles film company when he stepped back and assessed his life.

The Franklin native realized that he didn't quite fit in so decided to come back to Michigan and help grow his family's West Bloomfield-based business, Planterra.

"I loved a lot of things about Los Angeles," said Pliska, who lives in Birmingham. "Part of me said I could do well in Los Angeles, and I was doing well, but it really wasn't me."

Since returning to Michigan a few years ago, Pliska, now company president, accomplished what he set out to do: He diversified the business's customer base, acquired two other companies, opened another office in Las Vegas and put the company on the path to a successful future.

"I'm living the dream, in terms of being an entrepreneur," the 29-year-old said. "I'm just so happy with what I do day to day."

Shane Pliska, who grew up in Franklin and lived in Boston and Los Angeles after high school, came back to grow his family's plant business in West Bloomfield.

Charles V. Tines / The Detroit News

Kim and Eric Bruce are coming back to Michigan to bolster the return of a state favorite, Velvet Peanut Butter, after 11 years in Atlanta. They say they'll be happy to be closer to family.

Photo courtesy Kim and Eric Bruce



ERIC AND KIM BRUCE, ENTREPRENEURS

After living in Atlanta for 11 years, the Bruces are coming home to bolster the return of a beloved Michigan brand: Velvet Peanut Butter.

The couple began producing and marketing the peanut butter last year; it can be found on grocery shelves throughout Metro Detroit. While they will continue to make the peanut butter in Georgia, where the peanuts are, their administrative and other offices are being moved here.

"We love this state," said Eric Bruce, 43, who grew up in Detroit. "It's our home."

Their 6-year-old son asks them almost every day when they're moving to Michigan, said Kim Bruce, 41, a Waterford native. For the couple, it's important their two kids see their relatives more regularly, she said.

"No one's getting any younger," Kim said. "We're very excited to come back."

"You don't realize what a treasure this state is until you leave it," Eric said.

CAMILLE JAYNE, BUSINESS CONSULTANT

With a little push from Gov. Jennifer Granholm, Camille Jayne is returning to her native state.

The California business management consultant was persuaded to move back after reading a Time magazine article in which Granholm urged a former Michiganian in Nebraska to return home.

When Jayne casually asked her husband how many business leaders he thought would heed the governor's call, he responded, "You're not."

As soon as he uttered the words, Jayne made up her mind to move home.

"Michigan gave me my start," the Dearborn native

said. "I love Michigan."

She and her husband, Brad Jayne, also a Michigan native, bought property here in April and put their Irvine, Calif., home on the market. The couple will relocate as soon as their house is sold.

Meanwhile, Camille Jayne is looking for a management position, one that will allow her to use her expertise to help a company expand. She has several interviews lined up.

"It's an exciting time in Michigan and I want to be on a team that helps Michigan grow," she said.



Photo courtesy Camille Jayne

Camille Jayne decided to heed Gov. Jennifer Granholm's call and return home.



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Jordan Wolfe, 27, who owns an educational software company, says Michigan offers great opportunities.

JORDAN WOLFE, SOFTWARE DEVELOPER

Wolfe, an Oakland County native, moved all over the globe after leaving Michigan to go to college in Indiana in 2000.

He returned home in late 2008 for family reasons and with his professional background, he eventually launched an educational software company, uwemp.com.

Wolfe, 27, admitted he had an attitude when he first returned to Metro Detroit, but his thinking did a 180-degree turn after he realized the immense opportunities here for entrepreneurs.

"There are more opportunities in Michigan than anywhere else in the world," said Wolfe, who lives in Royal Oak. "I feel like I'm on cloud nine."

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greener pastures in other states. The repatriated Michiganians are undeterred by the state's high unemployment, the implosion of the automotive industry and a host of other economic woes.

"When times are tough, people tend to move back home," said John Challenger, a consultant at Challenger, Gray and Christmas, a Chicago-based business consulting firm. "Starting (a business) where you know people is crucial."

A nearby network of family, friends and the community creates a stable environment to launch a business, he said.

"People have been stranded," he said, explaining that the soft



Gary Malerba / Special to The Detroit News

Joe Glendinning, 32, was a lawyer in Chicago. Now he and sister Rose run two Biggy Coffee outlets.

job market nationwide is making it difficult for workers to advance in careers or find other work.



John T. Grellick / The Detroit News

Suzanne Vier returned from New York to launch a gourmet granola company. "This is my home."

"They're saying 'I can't sit on the sidelines anymore.'"

When few job options are

available, and the entrepreneurial spirit kicks in, there's no better place to open a business than where the entrepreneur knows people who can help, he said.

People who hail from the Midwest, where families often remain for many generations, tend to return to their home states because of strong family ties, said Todd Hohauser, a recruiter at Hohauser & Associates, a Troy-based executive recruiting firm.

"There's always folks who are interested in coming back here," he said.

Looking for a place to launch her gourmet granola company, Suzanne Vier, a former Metro Detroit living in New York City, decided on Michigan, drawn by its diverse agricultural offerings, large manufacturing hubs and robust work force.

Vier and company co-founder

Randy Tenbrink began selling Randy's Granola at Eastern Market last year. Vier, who is now the sole proprietor, moved the operation from west Michigan to Detroit earlier this year.

"I left New York having built a close network of friends and professional contacts, but I've met and reacquainted with some wonderful people here, and I'm closer to family again," she said. "This is my home, and I'm happy to be back."

Gordon Krater, managing partner at Southfield-based financial services firm Plante & Moran, isn't surprised to hear that native Michiganians are slowly trickling back to the state to start a business.

The timing is perfect for entrepreneurs to open a business in Michigan because a large number of vacant commercial build-

ings are available, rents are low and there's a big pool of unemployed workers, he said. Another draw for people who have been living in other states and want to move back to Michigan: The housing supply is plentiful and reasonably priced, he said.

"The stars are starting to align," he said, noting that the economy seems to have finally turned the corner, the auto sector apparently has bottomed out, Detroit has a new mayor and the city's school system appears to be on the mend with new leadership in place.

All those things are good reasons for people to come back home and give Michigan another try, he said.

"It's a good time and place to start a business here," he said.

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