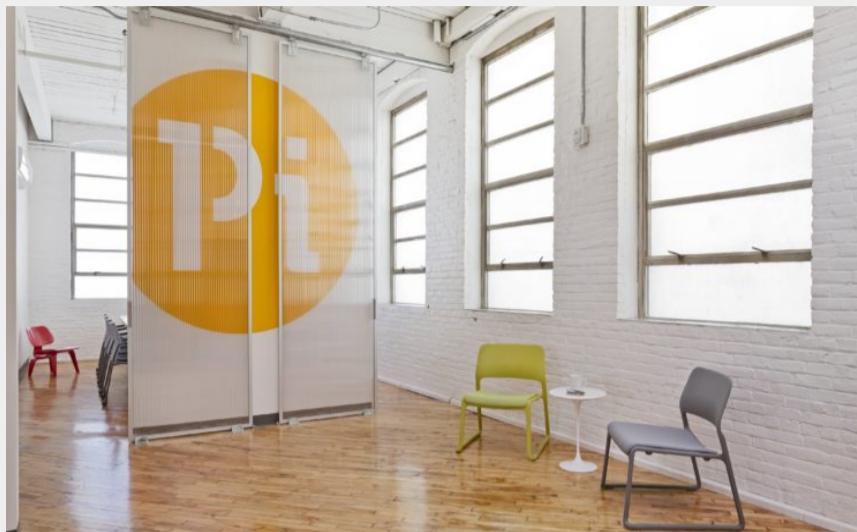


Small business incubators grow companies, jobs, and networks

By: *Cris Collingwood*

January 20, 2022 3:33 pm




Meeting space at Pi, Southside Bethlehem Keystone Innovation Zone, 2nd floor, 1911 Silk Blouse Factory PHOTO/PROVIDED –

Paul Hodges had an idea to make grow lights that looked good in homes and offices, unlike those on the market that were suitable only for the basement.

“I realized that people wanted to grow plants inside, but the lights were ugly,” he said. “I wanted to make beautiful lights with warm white ambient light in modern fixtures.”

To accomplish his goal, Hodges turned to the Partnership for Innovation (Pi) at the Southside Bethlehem Keystone Innovation Zone (KIZ) for help.

 small business incubator which provides affordable space to startups that are eligible for the KIZ program until they outgrow the space. Asher Schiavone, economic development coordinator for the City of Bethlehem, said Pi is an affordable space for startup companies within the Southside Bethlehem KIZ. It offers new entrepreneurs loft-style ceilings, hardwood floors, and brick walls to retain the industrial nostalgia of the former silk mill that houses the program.

More importantly, it offers startups with the support needed to make a company grow.

Two other incubators offer the same type of help. Ben Franklin TechVentures is located at Lehigh University in Bethlehem and Bridgeworks Enterprise Center is in the former Mack Truck Plant 4A in Allentown.

Hodges said he received “tons” of help from the Bethlehem Economic Development Corp. to launch Soltech Solutions. “They were incredible supporters and they offered us countless resources from an initial grant to get us started to tax credits.”

Soltech Solutions started in a small 200 square-foot office where “we were touching elbows.” Now the company is utilizing 5,000 square feet to produce its grow lights. “We started with three people and now employ 21,” he said.

And after five years in business, the company is looking for new space in an industrial park in Bethlehem. “It’s just incredible what the incubator has done for us. None of us are from the Lehigh Valley, we moved here to take advantage of the incubator and made this our home. I wouldn’t think of going anywhere else,” he said.

Laura Eppler, chief marketing officer for Ben Franklin Technology Partners of Northeastern Pennsylvania, said TechVentures typically houses 30-40 companies at one time. Currently, they have 34 in the technology-based sectors, including life sciences, electronics, materials, advanced manufacturing, and computer applications.

“Companies typically stay for five years, and life science companies can stay closer to seven or eight years because of the time needed to navigate the U.S. FDA (Food and Drug Administration) approval process,” she said.

The companies are offered management guidance, business planning, and marketing help along with investment and venture capital funding.

“Business incubators help early-stage firms win the incredibly difficult fight to succeed in the marketplace,” Eppler said. “It’s about improving people’s lives by creating highly paid, sustainable jobs. It’s about innovation, creating products and processes that improve the human condition,” she said.

“Since 1983, Ben Franklin’s incubator has graduated 69 successful companies, together grossing more than \$1.2 billion in annual revenue and creating more than 6,900 jobs,” she said.

Bridgeworks occupies 64,000 square feet in the Mack Truck plant and is the only incubator in the Lehigh Valley dedicated primarily to manufacturing startups, said David Dunn, program director. There are 11 manufacturing companies, and they typically stay for three to seven years, he said.

“The office space is leased long- or short-term to those who don’t want to work at home. They want networking,” he said. “We have lawyers, architects, computer programmers, ad agencies and manufacturing reps.”

All tenants have access to mentoring, training, conference rooms, administrative support, shared machine shops, a loading dock and forklifts.

Since the start of the program in 1989, there have been 64 startups with 34 successful graduates, 28 of which are operational. About 600 jobs have been created primarily in the Lehigh Valley.

Tyson Daniels, president and CEO of Polymer Contours Inc., a custom injection molding business, is a Bridgeworks success story. Daniels, who purchased his company in 2015 from an owner who was a tenant, said he invented a product in 2011 and had it manufactured in China, shipped back, and sold here.

“It was through that product that I met Dunn and the staff. I was trying to get into the Valley community.” Daniels said he never planned to get into the injection molding business but while attending programs at Bridgeworks he met Anthony Durrante, who now works with Ben Franklin.

“I told Anthony I wanted to buy a business and he told me the injection molding business was for sale. It was meant to be.”

Daniels grew from a small space with two machines and one employee to a larger space with four machines and nine employees. He is also graduating from the program. He is purchasing the A1 Restaurant building on North 16th Street, staying in Allentown.

“I’m happy to be part of the bigger business community in the Valley,” he said. He will be renovating the property and adding six machines. Once that property is up and running, Daniels said he will move the four machines to the new digs and hire eight to 10 more people. “I would like to see that happen in six months, but with the supply chain slowdown, it might take longer.”

Daniels said the best part of being at Bridgeworks, aside from not working out of a garage with no support, is the weekly meetings with all the owners and a business coach.

“We would talk about whatever was holding us back,” he said. “It’s really good to sit down and talk about the challenges with everyone. We all have different backgrounds, but we can give each other insights. The energy is really important,” he said.



Cris Collingwood
