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**Educated success**

**Local business education options abound, from college courses to chamber seminars**

BY JENNIFER ROBISON

Perhaps your business ran well when you started it.

A couple of years later, though, your work force and your sales are multiplying -- and so are the issues you face in serving your customers and accommodating your employees' needs.

For many entrepreneurs who reach such crossroads, one answer can be found in continuing education. They want additional training to guide them through the rough spots that come with an expanding business.

Options abound for professionals on the hunt for fresh business skills. Getting the most out of continuing education requires knowing what's available in the market, and how much it will cost.

**WHO NEEDS THE TRAINING?**

Small-business consultants say there's a sweet spot in the business-startup arc during which entrepreneurs should think about seeking additional training.

Plenty of business owners know they need help launching a new company, and businesses that have made it past the five-year mark are often in growth mode and have worked out their biggest operational questions.

Problems generally emerge in the period between startup and maturation -- the two years to five years



JOHN LOCHER | REVIEW-JOURNAL  
 Dave Paullin, holding frame, and his wife, Nicky Paullin, present a picture to Stephen Sawyer, right, and Don Luck, left, in the Service Corps of Retired Executives office in Las Vegas.



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 John Prowell of E Studio Lighting, left, talks about his business with Roger Dunivan of SCORE.

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after a company opens, said Anna Seifert, operations manager of the Nevada Microenterprise Initiative and project director of the Women's Business Center in Las Vegas. That "emerging" phase is a potential trap for many business owners.

"For most people who go into business, all they can think of from the start is getting to that growth phase (in five years)," Seifert said. "They forget to plan for in between startup and their growth phase. They leave a big gap. That's why 85 percent of businesses fail in their first three to five years -- they didn't plan for that emerging phase. They flounder because they didn't plan."

Michael Waters, president of Phase 1 Sports in Las Vegas, has attended training through Seifert's group several times. He said continuing education has been essential to the growth of his athletic-scholarship business.

"It's helped me learn about expansion," Waters said. "I've been trying to progress from a small business that I started and ran for three or four years on my own to bringing in a team and hiring people to handle different parts of the business so we can grow."

For most entrepreneurs, concentrating on a few key areas can pay major dividends for their business.

**AREAS OF EMPHASIS**

Just about any owner or manager of a smaller concern could benefit from even rudimentary accounting training, said René Colen, a business counselor with the Service Corps of Retired Executives.

Colen has guided a number of small-business operators whose companies were doing well and began to stumble. The usual culprit: Their administrative processes weren't equipped to properly manage accounting functions as their enterprise flourishes.

"Things start to get out of hand," Colen said. "They don't understand why they're doing so well business-wise, but they don't have any money in the bank."

Because financial oversight touches so many aspects of a business, there are benefits to streamlining and upgrading fiscal skills, he said. Tracking numbers properly can allow business owners to identify their best customers and vendors -- and their worst -- and enable swift redirection toward a company's more-lucrative elements.

Inventory management also hobbles many small businesses, particularly companies in manufacturing and retail. The flow of goods and services changes as a company expands, and that can challenge many managers.


Marketing, advertising and sales are also essential to a broad range of businesses, and they're top issues that drive entrepreneurs into SCORE's offices for guidance.

"People spend a lot of money and they wonder why they're not getting a return, or they don't spend any money and they wonder why they're not getting customers," he said.

Other concerns, such as intellectual-property rights or labor law, are often



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prime candidates for outsourcing, because they don't often affect a company's broader survival. Rather than developing intensive knowledge in such areas, entrepreneurs should consider hiring consultants to deal with patents or to write or review human resources manuals.

Company owners can establish their own list of continuing education priorities by weighing their particular professional strengths. Ask where your time is best-used, Craft said. Perhaps any consultant can handle your company's accounting, for example, but only you know the intricate marketing nuances your product requires.

Re-examine your business plan as well, Siefert said. Your company's road map can indicate where you'll need to focus your efforts. If your company's entire future rests on protecting an original idea, for example, then it might be time to bone up on intellectual-property law after all, on top of retaining an attorney. A business that needs to triple its inventory load to meet growth goals will require an owner well-versed in supervising the stockpiling of goods.

### **'THEY HIT DIFFERENT PIECES'**

Any entrepreneur considering continuing education will need to determine whether the expense is worth it.

And there are major differences in the prices business owners will pay to upgrade their knowledge base.

Some of the classes, workshops and counseling offered through local nonprofit groups are free, while courses available at local universities and colleges will cost.

Consultants say free classes won't replace tuition-bearing seminars.

"They hit different pieces," Colen said. "Schools like CSN, UNLV, Nevada State College, they offer accounting courses, and we don't try to compete with that."

SCORE's financial-management training is more introductory, Colen said. It's designed to familiarize businesspeople with basic accounting concepts and terms, and show them how software can help them track business.

"We won't make them experts on QuickBooks, but we make them comfortable enough to deal with an accountant, or to go sign up for a UNLV class," Colen said. "Our classes are complementary (to colleges' classes)."

Nonprofits' seminars also differ in their practical nature, Siefert said.

Where an accounting course at a college might delve into financial theory and overarching fiscal-management themes, a workshop through the Nevada Microenterprise Initiative, SCORE or the Nevada Small Business Development Center will deal with hands-on applications of specific accounting practices.

"Really, a lot of people need both types of education," Siefert said. "They might have been to business school, and they might have diplomas, but now it's time to take that knowledge and apply it to real life."

Where nonprofit services are especially valuable is for small companies without significant capital to invest in continuing education, Colen said. An upstart firm with three employees and light gross sales will have a hard time finding consultants for fees they can afford, so free help is virtually their only option.

Craft advises businesses to look for learning opportunities at all levels, but she's especially keen on going through SCORE, the Nevada Microenterprise Initiative and the Nevada Small Business Development Center for beginning help. Don't judge their value by their low cost.

"Inexpensive doesn't mean the classes are not comprehensive," Craft said.

Jennifer Robison writes for the Business Press' sister publication, the Las

Vegas Review-Journal. She can be reached at [jrobison@reviewjournal.com](mailto:jrobison@reviewjournal.com) or 380-4512.

### **Plenty of training options available**

There are wide differences in the availability and cost of additional business training, including classes at local universities and workshops through area nonprofits and trade groups. Here's a sampling of who offers what, and for how much:

•**Service Corps of Retired Executives:** This nonprofit group of volunteers conducts several classes for nominal fees. Among its most popular offerings is "How to Really Start Your Own Business," a four-hour, \$45 class for businesspeople ready to strike out on their own. Everything from reviewing a potential business concept for its value to generating financial plans is on the agenda. SCORE also holds a \$10 class on obtaining loans through the U.S. Small Business Administration. For established operations, SCORE has a 2 1/2-hour seminar called "Managing Your Business Finances." The \$45 class is a "very simple introduction" to accounting concepts, said SCORE counselor René Colen.

SCORE will also put together special classes on specific topics for businesses requesting additional training. The group has led courses on topics including insurance, marketing, advertising and business plans for both local companies and trade groups visiting Las Vegas for conventions. There's no set charge, but SCORE asks for a donation to the group. Contributions typically run \$400 to \$500 for a class ranging from 10 to 35 attendees.

Entrepreneurs can also tap into SCORE's free counseling for advice on inventory management, finances, sales and other operational areas. It typically takes one to four counseling sessions to iron out smaller dilemmas, Colen said. For businesses in serious trouble, SCORE will assemble a team to work over the toughest problems.

•**Nevada Small Business Development Center:** This agency, which operates on the campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, offers a variety of classes and workshops covering topics including business management. The centerpiece of its services is NxLevel, a 13-week, 42-hour series targeted to entrepreneurs. Featured lessons include marketing, understanding and using financial statements, negotiating deals and managing growth. NxLevel costs \$395.

•**Nevada Microenterprise Initiative:** A 12-week course on whether a business is feasible covers topics "from A to Z," said Anna Siefert, the group's operations manager. Mission statements, marketing, finance and management are part of the curriculum. It costs \$125 to \$325, depending on a participant's income.

The agency's 14-week business-growth class is designed for companies two to five years old. It covers many of the same topics as the feasibility class, including helping entrepreneurs determine whether they're mentally and physically ready for the challenges of ramping up their operation. It costs \$325.

In addition, the initiative offers two- to eight-hour workshops on topics such as working with regulatory agencies, writing ads that sell and buying workman's-compensation insurance. "Ask the Expert" workshops with attorneys, accountants and other professionals are free, as are seminars on taking out business loans. Other workshops cost \$35 to \$55.

The initiative's officials will also sit down with business owners one-on-one for free to guide them to professional sources who can help with basic operational problems.

•**Chambers of commerce:** Area chambers of commerce run a broad array of business seminars for both members and nonmembers.

The Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce has a Business Education Series with courses during most months. Topics include sales, marketing, new business technologies and customer service. The series costs \$30 for chamber members and \$45 for nonmembers.

"We bring in top consultants, people who normally charge several thousand dollars to consult," said Cara Roberts, a chamber spokeswoman. "The series is designed specifically for people with smaller businesses, companies that don't have a lot of time to spend expanding their professional skills and who are looking for very affordable, cost-effective and time-effective ways of achieving their goals."

The North Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce's seminars cover everything from developing a marketing plan and getting publicity to human resources. The idea is to "help businesses improve their operations and subsequently, their bottom line," said Sharon Powers, the group's president and chief executive officer. The cost: \$16 to \$35. Nonmembers are welcome.

**•Local universities and colleges:** The University of Nevada, Las Vegas and the College of Southern Nevada offer courses in accounting, human relations, management principles, organizational behavior, personnel administration and bookkeeping, among other topics. Fees at CSN start at \$54.75 per credit in 2007-2008 and \$57.25 per credit in 2008-2009. At UNLV, fees start at \$116.75 per credit this year, and \$129.50 per credit in 2008-2009. Rates vary depending on whether classes are at the graduate or undergraduate level, and whether they're distance-learning classes or on-campus courses.

Private colleges also offer continuing business education, though their selections are generally the priciest seminars available. The University of Phoenix, for example, conducts online classes for business owners who want to boost their professional skills. Tuition starts at \$494 per credit for undergraduate courses, and \$612 per credit for graduate classes.

-- Jennifer Robison