

## Libraries fill vital role in changing economy

By Meg Dalton



A space at the Ferguson Library in Stamford has been equipped with technology resources that small business owners can use. The room is part of the Small Business Resource Center, shown in a photograph taken on April 28, 2016.

The recession that hit in 2008 took an almost incalculable toll on the local economy, leaving lost jobs, a financial system in shambles and thousands of people desperate for an opportunity. For many of them, that opportunity came at an often-overlooked place — the local library.

The recession sparked a wave of entrepreneurship. A recent report from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor found that 27 million Americans were now starting or running new businesses, representing nearly 14 percent of the population. Beyond that, more than 50 percent of those polled believed there were good opportunities for starting a business, according to the report co-sponsored by Baruch College and Babson College.

Fairfield County has its fair share of incubators, accelerator programs and coworking spaces, including the B:Hive in Bridgeport, SoNo Spaces in Norwalk and the Stamford Innovation Center. But local libraries can provide comparable space and services at no cost.

Libraries turned outward following the economic turmoil as they recognized what was really happening in the community, according to Sari Feldman, president of the American Library Association. Led by qualified staff, libraries started connecting patrons to traditional resources, databases and research as well as rethinking existing programming and workspaces to engage the would-be entrepreneurial population.

These public institutions have become more proactive in terms of identifying trends, understanding needs and strengthening local partnerships. Though providing business resources and databases isn't new, many librarians recognized a shift in the way people use the information and materials — not just for consumption, but for action. Embedded in their communities, libraries have become hubs for small business and startup activity, she said.

“We’re really looking at how we can have more community engagement and be much more about improving the quality of life in the community,” Feldman added. “Beyond just the traditional library services, we’re taking a more active role.”

Now many libraries have ascribed to the coworking concept in major ways: by providing quiet and collaborative workspace, hosting networking sessions, rethinking programming and expanding digital resources.

“Libraries are kind of support systems and community networks at different life transitions,” Feldman said. “Connecticut has this real tradition around libraries and places high value on them.”

### **A new economy**

From Greenwich and Stamford to Darien and Norwalk, it's maybe not surprising that local libraries worked with the community to develop services specific to a new economic climate. With a community full of financial services professionals, the Greenwich Library has greatly

expanded its business resources over the last few years. Located on its main level, the Peterson Business Wing provides business materials and databases for patrons.

The staff provides help with business resources for people looking for something specific and not sure what resources to use, from Gale Business Insights for articles and product information, Reference USA for company history and competitor research, demographic statistics, grant databases, industry reports, investment analysis, rankings and more. In addition to its reference materials and databases, the public library has purchased Bloomberg and Money.Net terminals, which allow users to monitor and analyze markets with real-time data.

Programming has also played an integral role in the library's transformation. In partnership with SCORE Fairfield County, the Greenwich Library does more than 14 business-focused programs every year with topics like email marketing, understanding financial statements and intellectual property. The library also hosts its own business programs and events regularly, from "Simple Steps for Starting Your Business" to "Create Killer Marketing Content for Your Business."

"The library is becoming more and more like a community service center as opposed to bookstore," said Yang Wang, assistant business librarian at the Greenwich Library. "That's why we need more programs, databases and e-books."

### **Finding jobs**

Elizabeth Joseph, the coordinator of information and adult services at the Ferguson Library in Stamford, said they have also been able to better understand the needs and values of their community members in the developing entrepreneurial scene.

They noticed a large number of patrons were unemployed or under-employed and actively looking for jobs. So, in partnership with the Stamford Innovation Center, Fairfield County Business Council and SCORE, the Ferguson Library developed the Stamford Small Business Resource Center.

Nestled on the third floor of its main branch, the center opened two years ago thanks to funding from the First County Bank Foundation. In addition to its extensive collection of print and digital

materials, it serves as a collaborative space for working, brainstorming and networking, in addition to offering private rooms for meetings and teleconferencing. Joseph said they have offered research assistance to more than 50 people working on their business plans in the space.

Through the center and its business programming, the library has also been able to refer more than 75 people to SCORE for further small-business mentorship, as well as reach around 700 people through its workshops and events.

“Supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs is important to the vitality of the city,” Joseph said. “The more we support their goals and help them achieve success, the more we have a city that we want to live in and be proud of.”

### **Meeting space**

Nearby Darien Library offers similar workshops for entrepreneurs and small-business owners, in addition to a widely popular business book club. Hosted every other month, the book club features general business titles and has become a destination for more than just book discussion. Its 25 regular attendees view the club as an opportunity to network with like-minded individuals, said Sally Ijams, head of knowledge and learning services at Darien Library.

Its most popular service for the business community, however, is meeting space. Patrons can book private rooms for two hours at a time, and Ijams said they’re constantly reserved for client meetings, phone conferences and collaborative sessions. The Darien library’s basic business services remain steadily popular, too. Patrons can use faxing, printing, copying and scanning center as they put together their business plans or pitch decks.

Like its counterparts in neighboring towns and cities, the Darien Library functions as a workspace where collaboration emerges as patrons work side by side. Through this shared work environment, business ventures have been formed, information exchanged and relationships developed.

“It’s one of the best parts of our job when two like minds meet at the library and go on to create something special,” Ijam said. “We don’t see it every day, but when it happens, we know we’re doing something right.”

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