

HARVEST Time

WITH THE AID OF THE FLORIDA ECONOMIC GARDENING INSTITUTE, TWO LOCAL SECOND-STAGE COMPANIES ARE POISED FOR GROWTH.



» In the past five years, they have accounted for 80 percent of the job growth in Florida. They employ 10-50 workers, have sales in excess of \$1 million annually and have experienced growth in both employment and sales in at least three of the last five years.

They are known to economists as “second-stage” companies — growth companies — and Florida has decided they are a good bet ... likely to be the engine of economic recovery and expansion.

They number 5,000 statewide. They are Central Florida companies such as Blue Orb, a major player in the video game hardware industry that makes controllers that provide game console experiences right on your PC.

“From both the CEO roundtable and the economic gardening program, Blue Orb has grown substantially. When you have folks with companies here in Central Florida able to help you grow your own company, that’s a huge benefit,” says Pete McAlindon, Ph.D., president of Blue Orb.

And they are companies such as Engineering & Computer Simulations Inc. (ECS), a high-tech training company located near the Central Florida

Research Park adjacent to the University of Central Florida.

“My main concern as a defense contractor whose primary focus is advanced learning technologies is the budget for R&D. As a firm in ‘No Man’s Land,’ I need all the help I can get,” says Waymon Armstrong, president of ECS.

Blue Orb and ECS are beneficiaries of the Florida Economic Gardening Institute (FEGI), which was created by the 2009 Florida Legislature and is headquartered at the University of Central Florida’s Office of Research & Commercialization, the same team that has earned international recognition for nurturing start-up companies in its network of incubators. Both companies are taking advantage of GrowFL (www.GrowFL.com), a program of FEGI, to receive the attention of a unique team of analysts capable of helping them identify the road to growth. Called the “Jumpstart Team,” GrowFL brings sophisticated knowledge of tools and resources and how to use them.

What stands out to these entrepreneurs about GrowFL?

According to McAlindon it was “the allure of getting help from a group of talented, dedicated professionals who really understand my business, were quick in responding to my company’s needs, and could help my company grow.” Specifically, he said the team was able to identify an effort that really helped with Blue Orb’s marketing efforts.

To ECS’ Armstrong, the speed with which the GrowFL team responds on



Pete McAlindon



Waymon Armstrong

PHILAN EBENHACK

market research issues is key. "They are so fast in getting relevant information to you! It has helped us revise our business plans as we look to commercialize."

Gardening Institute Executive Director Dr. Tom O'Neal says, "Think of this like an incubator program for grown-up companies." O'Neal is also associate vice president of research and commercialization at UCF and an early adopter of the concept of economic gardening. "We knew we could help these companies that are very good at the basics of what they do, but need help identifying and adopting tools that can help them grow."

GrowFL will provide in-depth techni-


cal assistance to 300 companies in its first year and a broad range of growth-oriented programs for as many as 1,000 second-stage executives statewide, including CEO forums, CEO peer-to-peer roundtables, seminars and more.

In less than 120 days, the team at FEGI pulled together a hub-and-spoke network of regional affiliates and took the concept to market, bringing in applications from more than 100 companies to go through an in-depth interview with the Jumpstart Team, while simultaneously qualifying and training a Florida-based team of analysts to continue to provide economic gar-

dening services on an ongoing basis.

"Governor Crist and the Legislature showed great insight into the needs of private enterprise and what small business can do for our economy when they funded this program," says O'Neal. "Our goal is to create a rich system of resources here in the state that can energize these companies to achieve their potential."

Seminole County Director of Economic Development Bill McDermott, who also chairs the marketing committee of the Florida High Tech Corridor Council, says, "While like all economic developers I am always in search of that next great mega corporation that will instantly help create hundreds of jobs in our community, the numbers are clear. We need to focus resources on those companies that are truly adding to our job base right now.

"These companies are the real deal. Because the Florida Economic Gardening Act focuses on a number of high tech and related sectors, the High Tech Corridor region stands to benefit greatly from this in that we employ 70 percent of the state's high tech workers ... many, if not most, in second-stage companies." 

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