

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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ECONOMIC
GROWTH & OPPORTUNITY

Winning in the Workplace

A steady workforce, reliable benefits and community support are essential to the success of local businesses in Lawrence.

by Tara Trenary, aerial photography Marc Havener

SMALL BUSINESSES OF
500 OR FEWER
EMPLOYEES
MAKE UP
99.9% OF ALL
U.S.
BUSINESSES

Local businesses are the backbone of any community and the stability of its economy. They want their communities to thrive and vice versa. A skilled workforce, a stable business environment, quality infrastructure, good quality of life, access to markets, a supportive local government—all are essential to maintaining a strong and stable community. But how do local businesses and communities work together to maintain that stability while also growing the economy?

According to the 2022 *Forbes* article “How Small Businesses Drive the American Economy,” by Martin Rowinski, former *Forbes* Business Council member, not only do small businesses provide more jobs, they also bring careers and opportunities. “Successful small businesses put money back into their local community through paychecks and taxes, which can support the creation of new small businesses and improve local public services. No matter how small it starts—one, two, five, 10 employees—within that town, the city or the county, your small business creates new economies where once there was nothing.”

Small businesses can also focus more energy on customers’ needs, which can make them more adaptable to change in times of economic uncertainty, he adds.

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) statistics state that small businesses of 500 employees or fewer make up 99.9 percent of all U.S. businesses and 99.7 percent of firms with paid employees. Of the new jobs created in 2024, small businesses account for 64 percent. There are approximately

34,752,434 small businesses in the United States that employ 45.9 percent of American workers, or about 59 million people. Small businesses are 43.5 percent of the gross domestic product and pay 39 percent of all private sector payroll.

Needless to say, the American economy and its workforce depend on small businesses to thrive. But what do these businesses need to be successful within their communities?

Good People Equal Success

For Chris Piper, president of Grandstand, that answer is easy: a trained and motivated workforce, competitive wages and an affordable cost of living. “Our focus is on the fundamentals of customer service and operations. A trained and motivated workforce is key to our expansion,” he explains.

Piper says the main hurdle the business faces is limited workforce because of the high cost of living and housing. “We can’t attract workers to an unsafe or expensive environment.”

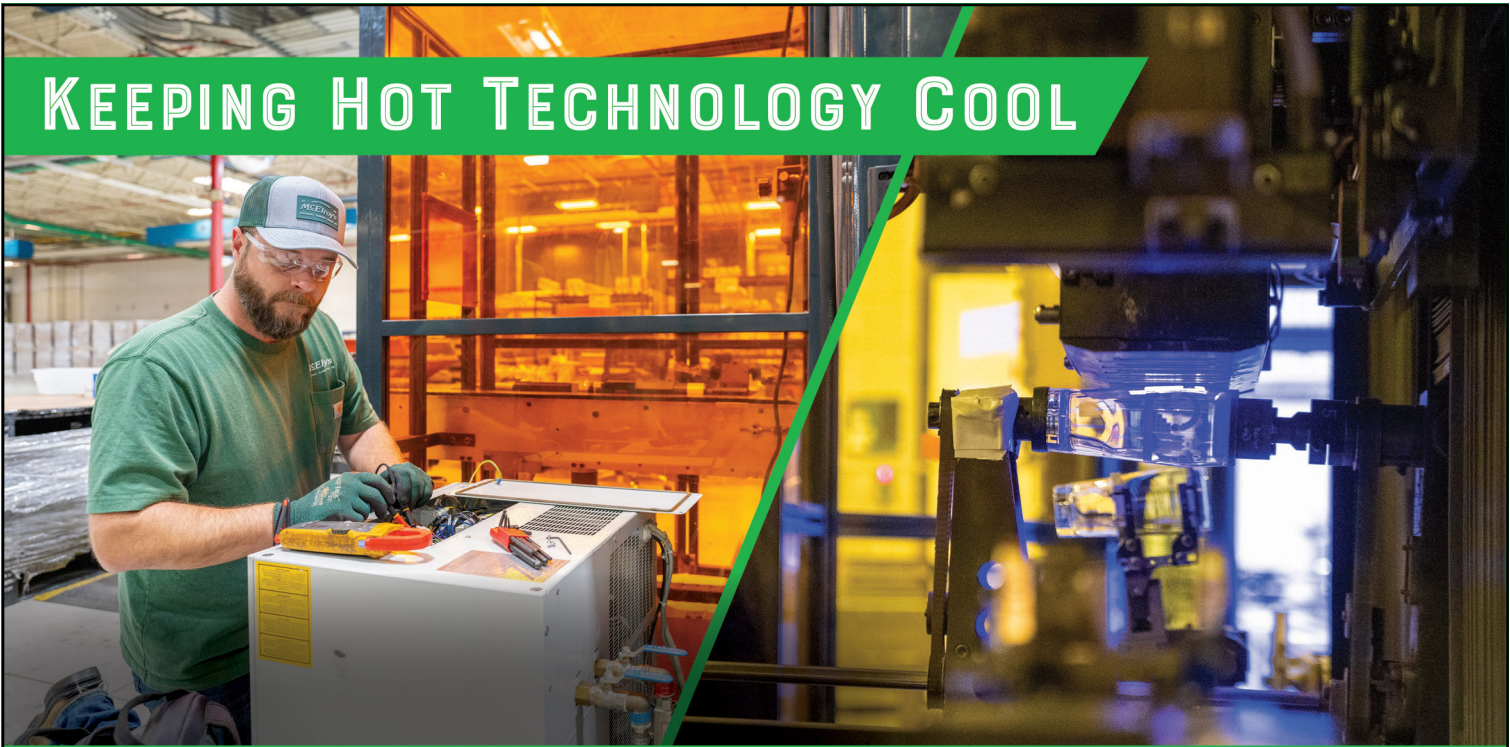
Grandstand, which opened in 1988, began by printing water bottles and T-shirts, and grew into providing branding solutions and serving the craft beverage industry. It has worked with more than 17,000 craft breweries, distilleries, restaurants, corporations and businesses, currently working with more than 9,000. “Our vision is inspiring success through great people and constant improvement,” Piper explains.

He adds the company anticipates 5 percent growth in 2025, 10 percent in 2026 and 15 percent in 2027. With approximately 150 employees, he touts perks such as above-market wages, 100 percent coverage of single health care and an in-house gym with personal trainers as some of the benefits that his employees enjoy.

“Our vision is inspiring success through great people and constant improvement,” Piper says.



Chris Piper, President and CEO of Grandstand



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Steve Maceli with Team Maceli at the 2023 Lawrence Business Magazine Foundation Awards

Learning To Adapt

Maintaining a talented workforce is also a high priority for Stephen Maceli, owner of Maceli’s Banquet Hall & Catering, event specialists in Lawrence for nearly 30 years. “We are constantly growing, so we can continue to increase pay and benefits for our employees,” he explains. “I would like to believe that we pay above the local market average. Instead of having a few positions that pay extremely well and many that pay moderately, our strategy has been to pay most of our full-time employees well in the same pay range.”

With 15 full-time and 25 part-time employees, the biggest challenge the company faces is that it’s highly seasonal, so maintaining steady cash-flow and income is always a high priority, Maceli says. “Our town is highly influenced by KU [The University of Kansas] football and basketball. Football home games usually mean hotel prices are higher and [they are] full. This is problematic for folks wanting to have a fall wedding. So even though restaurants and hotels may be booming, event spaces may not be.”

To combat this challenge, he says his company is becoming more actively involved in community organizations and playing a greater role in the overall planning of fundraisers that occur in its venues. “We try to support our hospitality partners through promotion as well as through our joint efforts with the Lawrence Wedding Collective,” he adds.

Maceli says a little help from the City couldn’t hurt through more controlled increases in property taxes. “Such drastic increases wreak havoc on our businesses, because even if prices are increased, actual increases may not be fully implemented for months and or even years,” he explains.

Maceli’s offers two venues for hosting events of all sizes, event planning, catering and weekly curbside meals. “Not only do we help clients plan events, but we also execute them,” Maceli says.

Event coordination involves venue setup, wedding ceremony coordination, banquet/meal execution, audio visual operations, client management, cleaning the venue inside and out, as well as creating/adjusting lighting schemes, he adds.

Maceli credits the company employees hard work and dedication to it becoming the “high-profile success story that we are. Adapting is something that naturally happens, every day of the year. As I tell my staff regularly, every day is another opportunity to learn something new,” Maceli says.

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Work/Life Balance Is Key

Having the most talented people working for the company is also at the top of the list for Mike Bernholtz, plant manager with Amarr, the third largest garage door company in the nation. Founded in 1951, the company specializes in design, manufacture and distribution for both commercial and residential markets.

Bernholtz explains that when he first started at Amarr in 2021, the turnover rate was approximately 50 percent but with the changes he's implemented that relate directly to keeping his workforce happy, that rate has dropped to about 5.4 percent.

"We have a very good work/life balance here," he says. "One of the things we had to realize is we have to adjust the way that we work to the way that workforce wants to work today. A lot of the changes we made to really assimilate people to our culture and how we want things."

And adjust the company has.

With a goal to continue growing by 5 to 10 percent per year, Amarr has overhauled the way it maintains its workforce. Most importantly, it offers competitive wages and benefits. "We pay well. We are and have been at the top as far as wages in Lawrence for manufacturing," Bernholtz says. The company offers a 401(k) bonus program, which automatically puts 3 percent in for workers no matter if they participate, as well as weekly pay, a progressive wage scale, yearly raises, a pension and tuition assistance.

Flexible schedules are one of the things employees love most about Amarr. "Most of our schedules here, you work three days a week. That's the lion's share ... it's compressed," he says. Employees work three 12-hour shifts with a swing day on Saturday if work orders are done. And with perfect attendance, they get four hours of compensation pay. "So that gives me stable ops and them some money in their pocket," Bernholtz adds.

Another important part of Amarr's operation is training. The company's close relationship with Peaslee Tech, a technical training center here in Lawrence, has helped in that regard. "We develop our team and our people here," he says. "I don't want to wait around to find good leaders. I think if we take the time and invest, we create the leadership that we want. That's helped us grow, but we're also supporting local resources" Amarr sends its leadership, supervisors and line leads to Peaslee for training. Other essential workers also take continuing education classes.

"It's a great living. But people don't know that," Bernholtz explains. "They can't see that because they're not exposed to it. They all think they have to go to college. Why not help them, shape them and show them some opportunities? We offer careers here."

He wants people to understand that manufacturing and other trades, like welding and maintenance, are really good career paths. "Because let's face it, college isn't for everybody," he adds.

Amarr also offers many other perks to its employees in an effort to keep the best workers.

An onsite nurse can do well checks and blood draws, and order prescriptions—all right from the workplace. The company partners with local restaurants that park food trucks outside of the business so employees have a diverse array of lunch options daily. "Employees love it, but we're also supporting the community," Bernholtz says.

Another important benefit Amarr offers is child care. The company partners with the City and the Chamber of Commerce on 24-hour child care facilities, where employees can leave their children during the workday no matter what shift they work. Finding affordable daycare is hard, and even harder for night-shift workers, so Amarr subsidizes child care funding for its workers and takes the cost pretax directly out of workers' paychecks. "Basically, we just take it out of the paycheck, so they quit worrying about paying their child care," he explains.

Because it's manufacturing, Amarr doesn't have a lot of women in leadership, but changing that is a priority, Bernholtz says. "When I started out, I had one. Now I've got four in supervisory and leadership roles that we've put through training, he says. The company also offers seminars and classes to women on leadership, as well as some corporate-level connections so they can get into some of the bigger leadership roles. "So just a lot of different avenues and opportunities."

Finally, comfort is big at Amarr. "It's a different kind of job. It's not a clean-room environment. They get to wear their favorite comfy jeans here and a T-shirt or sweatshirt with some steel toes and some glasses on," he says. "You know, safety glasses and gloves. It's just comfortable."

The company plays music, so employees listen to different varieties of music while they're working every day. They have massage chairs for break times. There's foosball and other games onsite. "You know, the little things make the biggest difference," Bernholtz says. Outdoor barbecue huts with grills are also available to employees. "Downtime is as important as our uptime, but I want them to feel valued. That's the most important thing. We value the people that we have here. They're our greatest assets."

He believes there are some good opportunities for Amarr to grow in the future. "So that's really my goal, is to grow the business enough that we're forced to build," Bernholtz explains, saying the company has an opportunity to expand here in Lawrence if it continues at the pace it's at now. "There are some really good opportunities for us to grow and consolidate, and to further add more jobs to the community."

"It's a team effort here," he continues. "I think that's the most important thing to say. We're giving people opportunities to have a good life and make a good living."

Making Connections

Maintaining a strong workforce is important to any town, and it's extremely important in keeping businesses running at their prime. In Lawrence, most local businesses know this and support one another along with the community to maintain longevity and growth. These local businesses—Amarr, Grandstand and Maceli's—recognize the importance of this collaboration and embrace it within their businesses.

"One of the things I really value after being here is just the welcoming nature and the connection that I've been able to make with other local businesses," Bernholtz says. "You've got the college here with KU, and it's very attractive, the city has a lot to offer. It's a beautiful, very quaint downtown. We are offering so many more things here now, and we bring a lot of big businesses here. The relationships with other businesses and companies have grown over the years, and we support them." ▲

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