
Retired executives know the score

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Local entrepreneurs and new business owners are getting free, personalized advice on everything from properly starting a business to remaining competitive. The Service Corps of Retired Executives, or SCORE, provides confidential business advice and mentoring to citizens at no cost. The Small Business Administration partners with local organizations to offer SCORE services nationwide. In the Mid-Columbia area, five business counselors conduct from 80 to 140 individual sessions annually in the Tri-Cities and Prosser.

In January, the Small Business Administration chose Business LINKS of Washington State University Tri-Cities as the regional one-stop shop for business counseling. "We recruited additional business counselors and set up more meeting times at specific sites," said Susan Sande of Business LINKS. The local chambers of commerce continue to partner with Business LINKS to support SCORE.

SCORE volunteers are available by appointment at chambers of commerce offices in Kennewick and Richland, the Business LINKS offices at WSU, or at the owner's place of business. Locations in Pasco and Prosser are expected to open this summer.

Don Wick of Pasco is a ten-year SCORE veteran who specializes in economic issues. Wick found he was restless after retiring as director of finance for Richland schools in 1980. After an eight-year stint as a stockbroker, he began volunteering with SCORE. "I help people think through financing, business liability insurance, tax forms and other startup necessities," Wick said. In addition to his finance career, Wick draws from his experience as a high-school economics teacher and accountant for his wife's fabric business in Kennewick.

One person who benefited from Wick's expertise was Ray Wells, owner of Northwest Mediscript in Kennewick. "When we first started in 1993, Don helped me think through the pros and cons of decisions such as equipment purchases," said Wells. The medical transcription business has since outgrown two facilities and expanded its staff to more than 30 people.

Dale Bartholomew of Richland began volunteering with SCORE in December. "Most of my clients have a hot new idea that they envision transforming into a successful business," he said. "I provide suggestions on available startup resources, business planning, possible funding sources and ways to infuse quality standards into operations."

One of Bartholomew's clients was Ed Wells, president and CEO of the Richland-based startup company The e-NURSE Group. Partnering with Lotus and IBM, the Richland-based company will enable patients and healthcare providers to use the Internet to share medical information including data from home medical monitors for diabetic, cardiovascular and pulmonary patients.

"Dale and the staff at Business LINKS helped us refine our business plan so it would be more attractive to venture capitalists," Wells said. "Our original plan was heavy on the technical aspects, but we needed a broader perspective, especially on finances, market analysis and competition."

Bartholomew's advice, like Wick's, is highly credible and practical. Since 1976, he held a series of technical and management positions at Hanford, including ten years as director of an 800-person production and operations division. Bartholomew's true calling in community service emerged when his company loaned him to the United Way and the Tri-City Industrial Development Council in the 1980s. Now retired, Bartholomew has since advised organizations ranging from Ben-Franklin Transit to the Kennewick School District.

What motivates SCORE volunteers to donate dozens of hours every year to aspiring business titans? For most, it's the desire for local enterprises to succeed. "I get to see some of these people get started and stay established," said Wick.

For Bartholomew, business consulting is motivated by his faith: "You glorify God by helping others," he said. He cites a sobering statistic: "Eighty-five percent of small businesses fail in the first five years because they aren't adequately prepared. We want to help them prosper instead."

All SCORE volunteers are experienced in the daily operations of running a business. Volunteers also complete training in business counseling, including a mentoring phase with another experienced counselor. Counselors often refer clients to other Mid-Columbia resources for specific training and assistance.

The local SCORE program is seeking additional business counselors, especially women and minorities. To be considered as a SCORE counselor, or to make an appointment to see a business counselor, contact Business LINKS at 372-7142. For more information about the regional SCORE program, see the web site www.tricity.wsu.edu/links/score.