

Small Business Administration
Ron Johnson's Interview With James O'Connor

Ron Johnson: The current slowdown in our economy has many small business owners worried and wondering what to do next and where to turn for assistance. The SBA stands ready with resources and tools to help small business owners more effectively manage their companies in the current economy.

Hi, I'm Ron Johnson with the Small Business Administration, Your Small Business Resource, and with me today is Jim O'Connor. He is Director of the Small Business Training Network, SBA's online training environment. It's good to have you on the program, Jim.

James O'Connor: Thank you, Ron. It's great to be here.

Ron Johnson: Jim, the SBA offers a variety of online courses to help you start, grow and succeed in business. What is new on the SBA's website that could help small business owners weather the current economic storm?

James O'Connor: Well, first of all, Ron, let me just give you a little background information about our online training environment. We, currently, we have 23 business courses that are available, free, to small business clients. And to put that into perspective, we get some 700 to 2,600 people, a day, that register and take these courses. So, it's an environment that sees an awful lot of client activity.

With regards to the slowing economy, recently, SBA added several new courses specifically designed to help small businesses in the current challenging economy. These new courses include: Downshifting in a Slowing Economy, Strategic Marketing, How to Prepare a Loan Package and Business Opportunities: A Guide to Winning Federal Contracts. We also added a couple of new electronic tools, specifically, an automated business plan template, as well as a checklist and business strategic tool.

Ron Johnson: Now, Downshifting in a Slowing Economy, an interesting title, but what does the course offer for a business owner?

James O'Connor: Ron, it's a business planning guide. Planning is important to any business but it's particularly important in helping a business survive. When sales have slowed and credit markets are tough, it's easy to become overwhelmed and to view planning as a great idea but something that you just don't have time for. On the contrary, business planning is a constructive and necessary tool. It will help you assess the current status of your business, assist you in analyzing what has worked and what has not and most importantly, help push you in new directions and that's what this course is all about. It's a business planning course but

it's a course designed for an existing business, to help push them in new directions.

Ron Johnson: Now, there's a lot of uncertainty, Jim, as to where our economy is going. What other related business tools are available to help business owners prepare for the worst but be ready for new opportunities?

James O'Connor: Well, as I mentioned a minute ago, we recently introduced an automated business plan template, and this is one of the, in my opinion, coolest new things that SBA has introduced. It's an online application that walks an individual through the key components of a business plan, asking specific questions and letting the client respond. At the end, the client has a foundation for a business plan. But the best part is, is that the client can click a submit button at the end of the tool and all of the entered content is formatted and saved in a Word document with a cover page and a table of contents. This saved document then can be used as a final product or it can be later improved upon at the client's leisure. It's a tool to help someone through the business planning process. And we've never done anything quite like this and we've had a lot of online tools and applications but this tool will walk someone through the steps but at the conclusion, let them save the document as a Word document, fully formatted as a business plan.

Ron Johnson: Jim, can you tell our listeners where to find the resources and what kind of time commitment will they have to make? And is there a cost?

James O'Connor: First of all, all of our online courses and tools are free. And they're available at sba.gov, so if you go to www.sba.gov, which is our home page, and you look at the navigation bar on the left, you'll see a big icon that says "Free Online Courses," click on that, you will come to a menu of all of SBA's free online courses. That menu will help guide you through what courses and tools are currently available.

Ron Johnson: Now, in closing, in addition to SBA's online courses, what are other kinds of resources available?

James O'Connor: SBA has a lot of resources to help small business and we're very proud of the fact that we work with resource partners around the country. We have over a thousand Small Business Development Centers at community colleges and universities, and economic development organizations around the country. We have over 10,000 SCORE counselors, and these are individuals that volunteer their time to help people start and succeed in business. We have over a 100 Women's Business Centers, and we have over 60 district offices around the country. In addition, we have a very powerful web presence at sba.gov.

Ron Johnson: Our thanks to Jim O'Connor, Director of the Small Business Training Network for highlighting the many resources and tools the SBA has to offer business owners as they prepare to downshift or redirect their business strategy in our slowing economy. You can learn more about all of SBA's resources at www.sba.gov. Until next time, this is Ron Johnson with SBA's Your Small Business Resource.

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