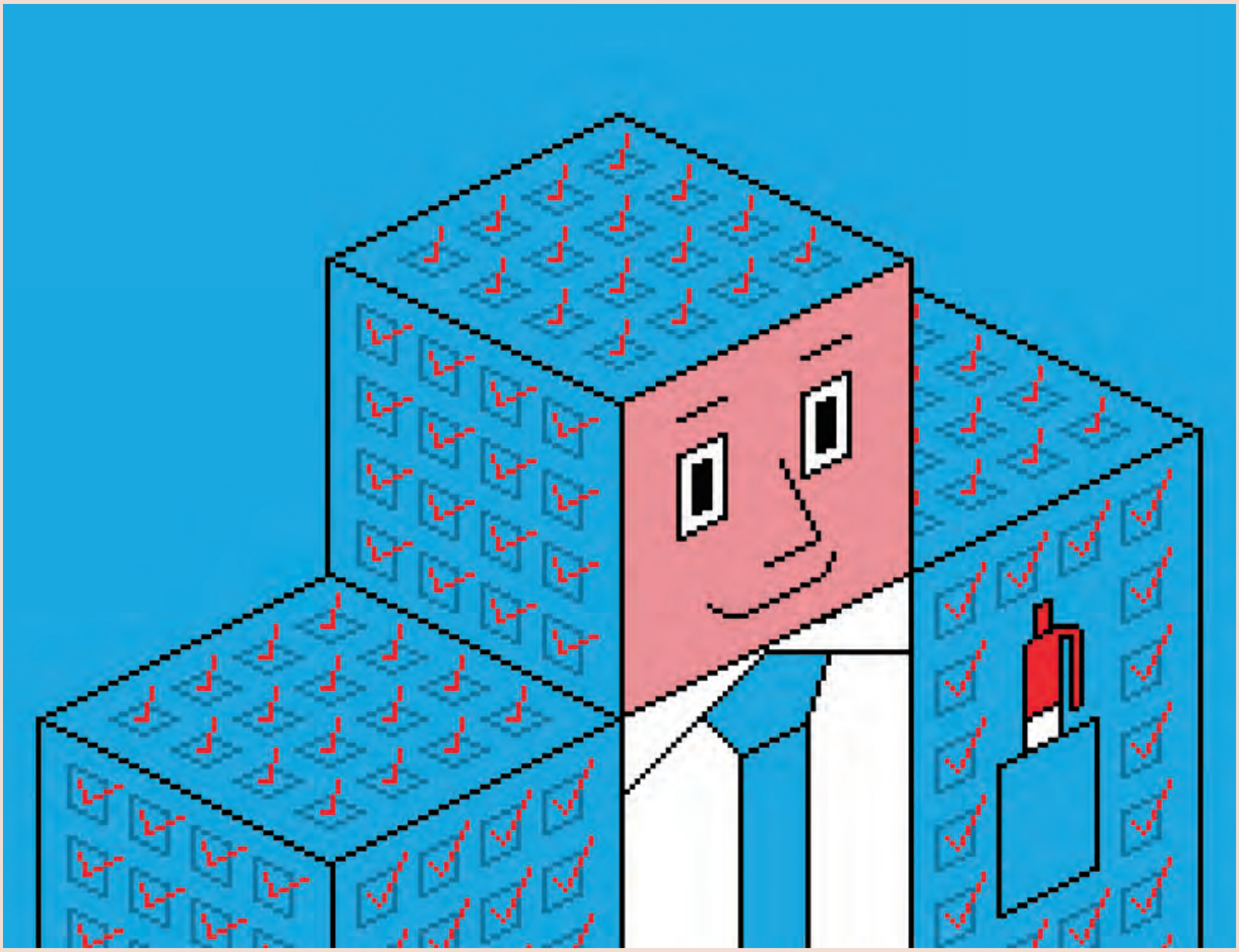
ACTION *items*

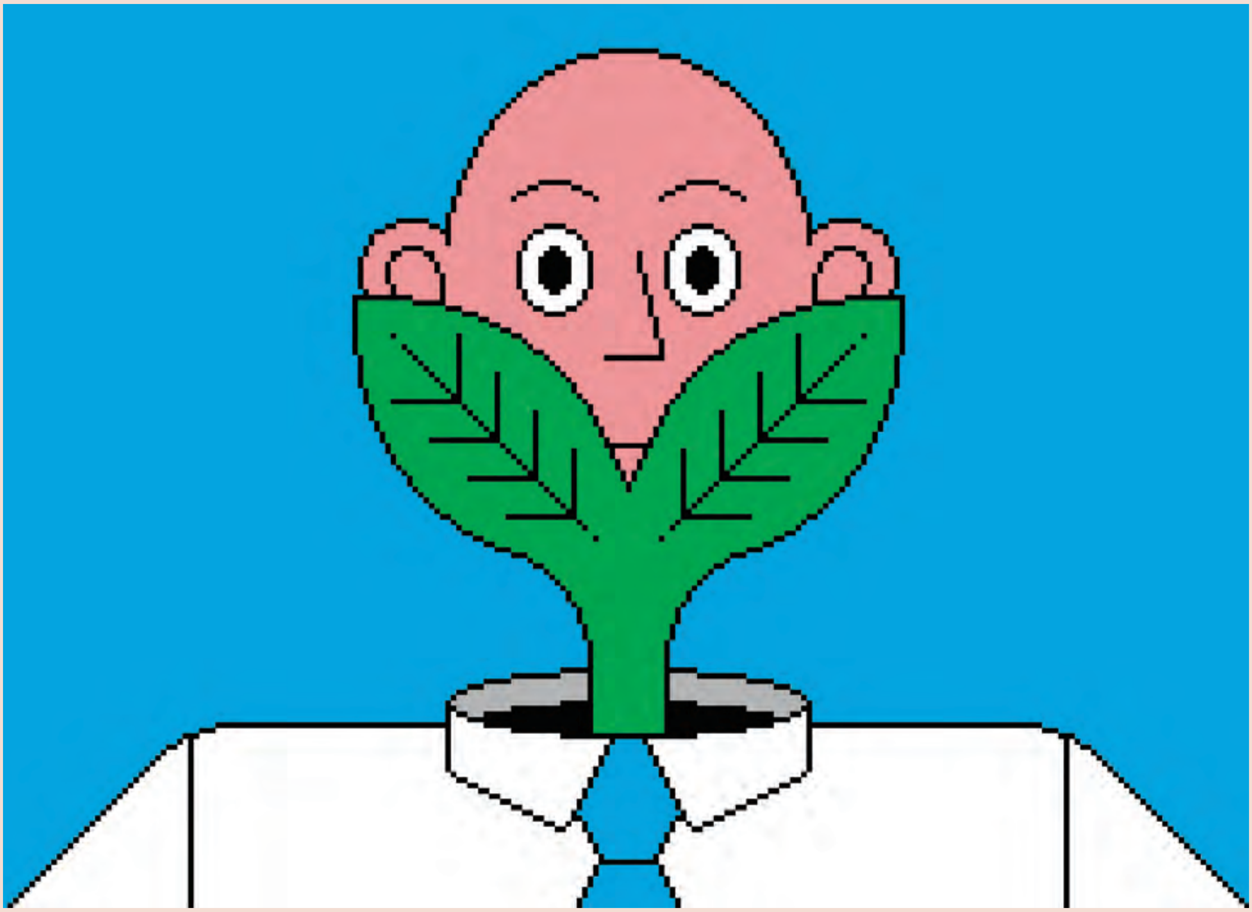


Busy is an understatement, right? You're running a company, after all, with everything that entails. That's why we're launching Action Items, a distillation of the most useful instructional content, tips, tricks, and strategies published by Inc. each quarter. Think of it as a handbook, a field guide to entrepreneurship. Whether you're a solopreneur chasing invoices (check out the Starting Up section), or a CEO optimizing your hybrid schedule (Leadership/Workplace), there's something in here for every business owner, big and small. In this issue, be sure to head over to the Business Productivity section to learn how you can cut back on your SaaS subscriptions. Meanwhile, the Sales & Marketing section has advice for selling your ideas from Bozoma Saint John—a marketing guru for big names like Netflix and PepsiCo—and Tech has a guide to picking the right generative AI model to help with basic tasks. Finally, you'll want to stop by Money/Finance to learn how to deal with flaky investors and track funding trends. And if you find our advice helpful, share it on social media. All the Action Items you see here will also be available on Instagram and LinkedIn.

WITH REPORTING FROM: SAM BLUM, MICHA BREAKSTONE, JENNIFER CONRAD, BRIAN CONTRERAS, SARA DEETER, ALI DONALDSON, SARAH LYNCH, BEN SHERRY, AND SYDNEY SLADOVNIK.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NICK LITTLE

STARTING UP

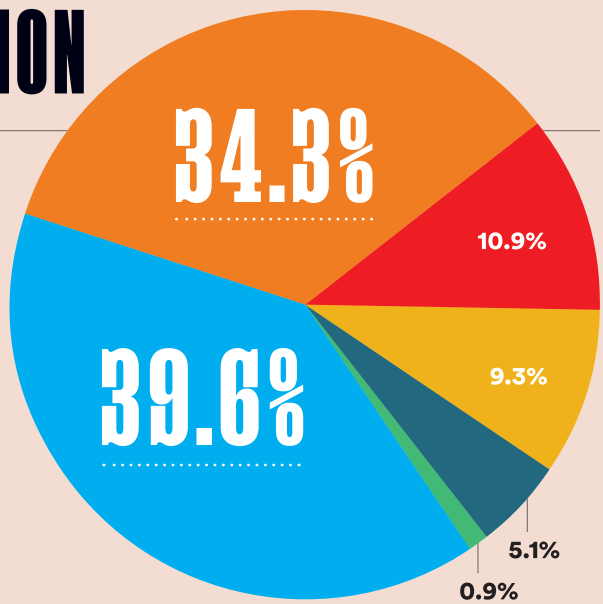


1 Find your inspiration 2 Launch a DTC brand 3 Thrive in the age of AI 4 Get your invoices paid

1 Find Your INSPIRATION

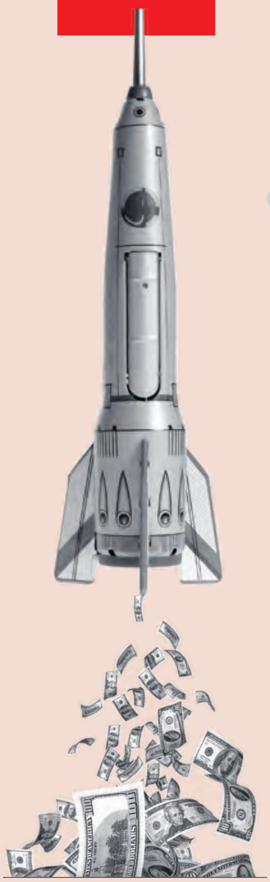
WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO BECOME AN ENTREPRENEUR?

- I HAD A GREAT IDEA AND BELIEVED I COULD MAKE IT HAPPEN
- I WANTED TO LEAD MY OWN COMPANY
- I ADMIRED ENTREPRENEURS AND WANTED TO BE LIKE THEM
- I SAW A WAY TO BENEFIT SOCIETY
- STARTING MY OWN BUSINESS WAS A FINANCIAL NECESSITY
- I WANTED TO GET RICH



Source: 2024 Inc. 5000 CEO Survey

2



Launch a **DTC BRAND**

The golden age of direct-to-consumer businesses may be over, but these DTC brands have found success in increasingly competitive markets.

GETTY IMAGES (ALL IMAGES)

"To succeed in the direct-to-consumer world, you used to just need a pretty product and a nice-looking website," says Lauren Kleinman, founder of the performance PR firm Dreamday and co-founder of the media company the Quality Edit. "Now that is the very minimum you need. It's table stakes." To stand out in crowded markets, she says, businesses need the full package: compelling founder stories, great creative assets, *and* smart marketing. And they need to do it amid uncertainty about the role of third-party cookies—tracking codes that helped companies inexpensively target customers—since new regulations and restrictions have come into play. There's also the increased price of targeted ads. "The cost that we might have to pay a distributor to get us into an individual store is usually far less than what we would have to pay to acquire a single direct-to-consumer customer," says Jonah Reider, founder of energy spray brand Pzaz.

Overcoming this collection of challenges isn't for the faint of heart. "People have been forced to think about their businesses more fundamentally," says Andrew Benin, co-founder and CEO of the olive oil brand Graza, which began as a DTC brand in January 2022. "But for those that really have product-market fit, the upside is the biggest it's ever been." Here's how to get started.

START A CHAIN MESSAGE

Stephanie Kimel, who co-founded the dorm decor brand Dormify in 2010, got the idea for her new business, Tulip, from her father-in-law, who wanted a better way to safely store cannabis flower and maintain its freshness. Kimel launched Tulip in 2021 with a unique preorder model: She sent an email to about 200 people—largely friends and family, rather than business connections—telling them about the new company. This, she says, started a chain message of people forwarding the preorder announcement to their friends and family who would appreciate the brand. "From my initial send, about 300 people purchased. We knew the chain worked, because it wasn't just my people who were placing orders," Kimel says. With no marketing budget, Tulip generated $75,000 in gross sales in its first month, which enabled the brand to fund its first significant inventory order.

GIVE YOUR PRODUCT AWAY

An alum of Casper, Warby Parker, and Magic Spoon, Andrew Benin is deeply familiar with DTC businesses. So when he had the idea for his olive oil brand, Graza, he knew he'd need to stand out. Graza's product—a squeezable bottle of high-quality olive oil with playful branding—is distinctive. But Benin knew he also needed to get the product into the hands of potential customers. And so, since its launch, Graza has sent 30 to 40 units of olive oil per week to content creators—first to those in various culinary spaces, and then to those focused on lifestyle. Some of those creators are now brand ambassadors who earn commission on products they promote. Benin says that Graza's product-seeding strategy has been instrumental to growth. Whole Foods reached out on day two post-launch, because the brand had grown its exposure so rapidly.

CONSIDER A HYBRID SALES STRATEGY

While Pzaz does offer its breath spray directly to consumers on its website, Jonah Reider took a hybrid approach when he founded the company in 2022. "I thought it would be very unexciting to launch a company that was only direct to consumer," Reider says. So, at the start, he hand-bottled a couple hundred units of Pzaz and placed them in 40 to 50 bodegas around New York City, where the company is based. "I had visited them months before and said, 'Hey, every single energy shot here has dust on the cap. Would you be interested in something totally different that you could slide onto the checkout counter?' " It worked: Pzaz is now sold in more than 150 bodegas and convenience stores in New York City, and in Urban Outfitters nationwide. Reider also plans to expand into gas stations and convenience stores, which he considers an oft-ignored market.

Inc. 5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

STEMREGEN®	NO 1765 2024 Ranking	2016 Year Founded	2021 Launched in the U.S.	297% 3-Year Growth

A Scientific Discovery that Unlocks Your Body's Healing Power

The founder of Stemregen, a company that creates powerful supplements that stimulate the body's natural repair system, explains how a "fringe idea" opened up a new world of stem cell therapy.

STEMREGEN.CO

Nearly 30 years ago, when Christian Drapeau first shared his hypothesis that stem cells are the body's repair system, and plant extracts can stimulate your stem cells, most of the medical community thought he was nuts. But Drapeau stayed the course and discovered existing, long overlooked scientific studies that supported his hunch. "A voice kept telling me, 'Stick with it. It's just a matter of time,'" he recalls. Eventually, the world caught up. Stemregen, the company Drapeau founded in 2016 to pioneer a plant-based approach to supporting stem cell function and cellular regeneration, after decades of studying the impact of plant extracts on stem cell stimulation, is a 2024 Inc. 5000 honoree.

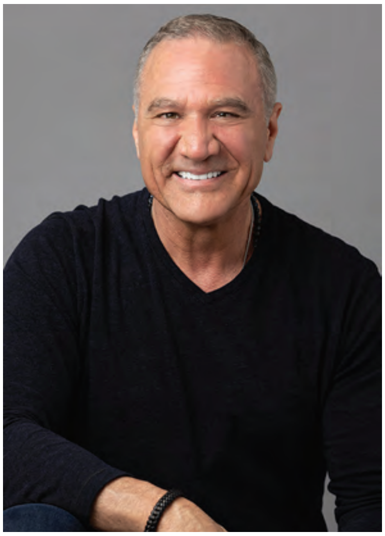
Steeped in history and research

Drapeau's journey began in 1995, when a company hired him to study the healing properties of blue-green algae from Klamath Lake in Oregon. His observations inspired a "fringe idea." Stem cells were more than blood cell precursors; they constituted the body's innate repair system, and this algae was stimulating stem cell release. In 2005, he launched a plant-based supplement and achieved $400 million in sales during a 10-year period. Doctors and naturopaths reported profound impact on patients with a range of conditions, from heart disease to Alzheimer's and emphysema, he says. The results inspired Drapeau to look for other medicinal plants and create a more powerful version of the supplement to target medical professionals. Stemregen's core product is comprised of five plant extracts, including aloe macroclada from Madagascar and sea buckthorn berry from the Tibetan Plateau.

In 2021, after 5 years of R&D, he launched a direct-to-consumer business in the U.S. Maybe it was the pandemic, or Tony Robbin's popular book, *Life Force,* which helped to demystify stem cell science—but something happened in early 2023. In six months, Drapeau received funding he had sought for years, along with invitations to speak at and sponsor conferences that had previously snubbed him. Since January 2024, sales have increased by roughly 20 percent each month.

Evolving preventative health to health preservation

Stemregen products are popular with athletes, who observe how the capsules help them recover after intense workouts. "They see how much better they feel after thrashing themselves in the gym when they are taking Stemregen capsules. They will say, 'It feels like I didn't do anything yesterday.' Or at least they feel better, and less sore, than they usually would. They have seen what stem cells can do." he explains. The company is on a mission, though, to educate a wider audience about plant-based stem cell support. Drapeau is also talking to several enterprises about providing the product to employees to improve health care options, thereby lowering health care costs. "We are going beyond prevention. We are saying the health that you have today—you can preserve it, by every day putting a little more stem cells in circulation. Then you can keep the health you have today for decades to come," he says.



→ **Christian Drapeau, founder and CEO, Stemregen**

3

Thrive in the AGE OF AI

To compete with large brands using AI, startups should leverage uniquely human strengths. Here's how.

Don't view AI as a competitor. Use it as a tool to augment your capabilities, freeing up time for high-level strategy.

Focus on uniquely human problems and solutions. Look for opportunities where human insight and empathy are crucial. AI can't feel.

Cultivate your creative thinking skills: This is your key differentiator in a world of algorithms.

Build diverse teams that bring varied perspectives and experiences to the table.

Stay agile and be prepared to transform as the AI landscape evolves.

4

Get Your INVOICES PAID

Owners of every business, big and small, need to get paid. What happens if your invoices are ignored?

Getting paid is hard work; Fortuna founder Jack Smith knows that frustration firsthand. His IT government consulting company enjoys a monthly run rate of about $2.2 million, and yet the company struggled to convert about $8 million in outstanding invoices earlier this year. Smith and other entrepreneurs spoke with Inc. and offered their best tips for getting paid fast.

REQUIRE DEPOSITS

After nearly two years working as a solopreneur, dealing with last-minute cancellations, and chasing down clients for overdue invoices, Serena Huang, founder of the consulting, training, and speaking business Data With Serena, discovered the best way to get paid on time—particularly as a consultant—is to require deposits. Huang learned this the hard way. "You'll get cheated at least once. If you haven't, you probably haven't been in business long enough," she says. "Someone will fail to pay, or to do what they said they would do, and you need to be prepared." With her expertise in data and AI so in demand right now, Huang charges 30 to 50 percent of her fee up front and tells potential clients that, until payment is secured, others are welcome to book her services on that date—which, she says, "usually gets people motivated."

BE RELENTLESS WITH REMINDERS

Lauren Raimondi, founder of All Aces Promotional Staffing in Long Island City, New York, suggests using invoicing software that automatically nags customers. She uses Senegal Software, and sets her system to send "a friendly reminder" a week before her company's invoices are due, on the due date, and once they are late. "The reminders have been a big help in getting timely payments from most people," she says.

MAKE PAYMENT EASY

To expedite invoices, make the payment process as painless as possible. Phil Pallen, founder of the branding agency Phil Pallen Collective, offers an autopay feature, which he encourages customers to sign up for. For his international customers, which span more than 30 countries, the Orlando-based founder allows clients to pay in their home currency. That means absorbing higher fees and exchange rates, but Pallen says the added expenses are offset by faster payments.

SCREEN FOR PUSHOVERS

Fortuna's accounts receivable department once accepted client excuses without pushing back or explaining what each late payment would mean for all the people depending on Fortuna to make payroll. To find a payment representative who isn't a pushover, Smith suggests role-playing client conversations during the interview process to see how they respond. "We were looking for somebody who was tenacious, relentless, and persistent, but friendly at the same time," he explains. That hire has decreased Fortuna's average days outstanding for payments by 35 days, from around 95 days to less than 60.

GETTY IMAGES (ENVELOPE, MONEY); THE NOUN PROJECT (ALL ICONS)

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

AWESTRUCK	NO121 2024 Ranking	2,811% 3-Year Growth	$17.4M 2023 Annual Revenue	60 Employees

Transformative Growth: Agency Masters the Art of Evolution

As a destination marketer, Awestruck has mapped out a journey to success by constantly developing its services and its staff.

AWESTRUCK.AGENCY

Making its second consecutive appearance on the Inc. 5000, the destination marketing agency Awestruck has had a three-year growth rate close to 3,000 percent. Co-founders and co-CEOs Ryan Sprance and Dave Marcy, who have been friends for more than 25 years, say a big reason for that success has been their close alignment as business partners. They share the same business instincts but bring different experiences and skill sets to the table. Marcy has a more extensive history in advertising sales, while Sprance has a deeper background in corporate structure and operations.

"We teach each other every day, which lends to the strength of this organization" Marcy says. "At the same time, we're great friends, and we make each other laugh constantly. We have to enjoy what we're doing if we expect to succeed."

The other major factor in the rapid growth of this Bethlehem, Pennsylvania-based agency has been the continuing evolution of both its capabilities and its workforce.

Unyielding innovation

Since buying out a third partner at the end of 2023, Marcy and Sprance have begun expanding the business into new directions. "This past year, we have definitely focused on product expansion and adding more things to our list of core services," Sprance says.

One example is a product called Awestruck Streaming. This programmatic advertising campaign management system is designed to bring to the hospitality sector what Marcy and Sprance call an "audience-first and content-agnostic" approach to Connected TV and OTT advertising. The agency had long championed OTT branding as a critical element to an effective media mix, and the development and utilization of this streaming product has significantly moved the needle for Awestruck's clients. In fact, Marcy and Sprance say Awestruck Streaming

→ Members of the Awestruck leadership team at the company's Bethlehem, Pennsylvania headquarters.

provides such a fresh and translatable approach to the programmatic landscape that it has started to garner interest from a wide variety of advertising verticals, even outside of the destination category.

We teach each other every day, which lends to the strength of this organization . . . And we're great friends, we make each other laugh. We have to enjoy what we're doing if we expect to succeed.

— Dave Marcy, co-founder and co-CEO, Awestruck

The rise in OTT campaigns has increased the need for high-end commercial production. This summer, Sprance and Marcy announced the development of Awestruck Productions, a full-service video production studio that will work alongside Awestruck's existing creative department.

"We're expanding operations to build out a full production studio that services everything we do in the destination sector," Marcy says. "We represent the most beautiful properties imaginable, and we want our spots to fully telegraph the destination experience to prospective guests."

Looking ahead, Awestruck is launching a proprietary SaaS platform called Sugarcane. The company has recognized a void in the creator market it hopes Sugarcane can fill. Hospitality clients are always in need of high-quality content, but the process of securing superior content creators at scale is incredibly costly and challenging to navigate. Sugarcane connects a database of vetted creators with clients who run campaigns under a monthly subscription, for a fraction of the cost of existing influencer marketwing programs.

→ Dave Marcy (left) and Ryan Sprance (right), co-founders and co-CEOs, Awestruck

Industry-savvy staff

With a total staff of 60, Awestruck has added 15 new employees in the last year. From the start, the company has prioritized recruiting people with hospitality industry experience, especially for client-facing roles.

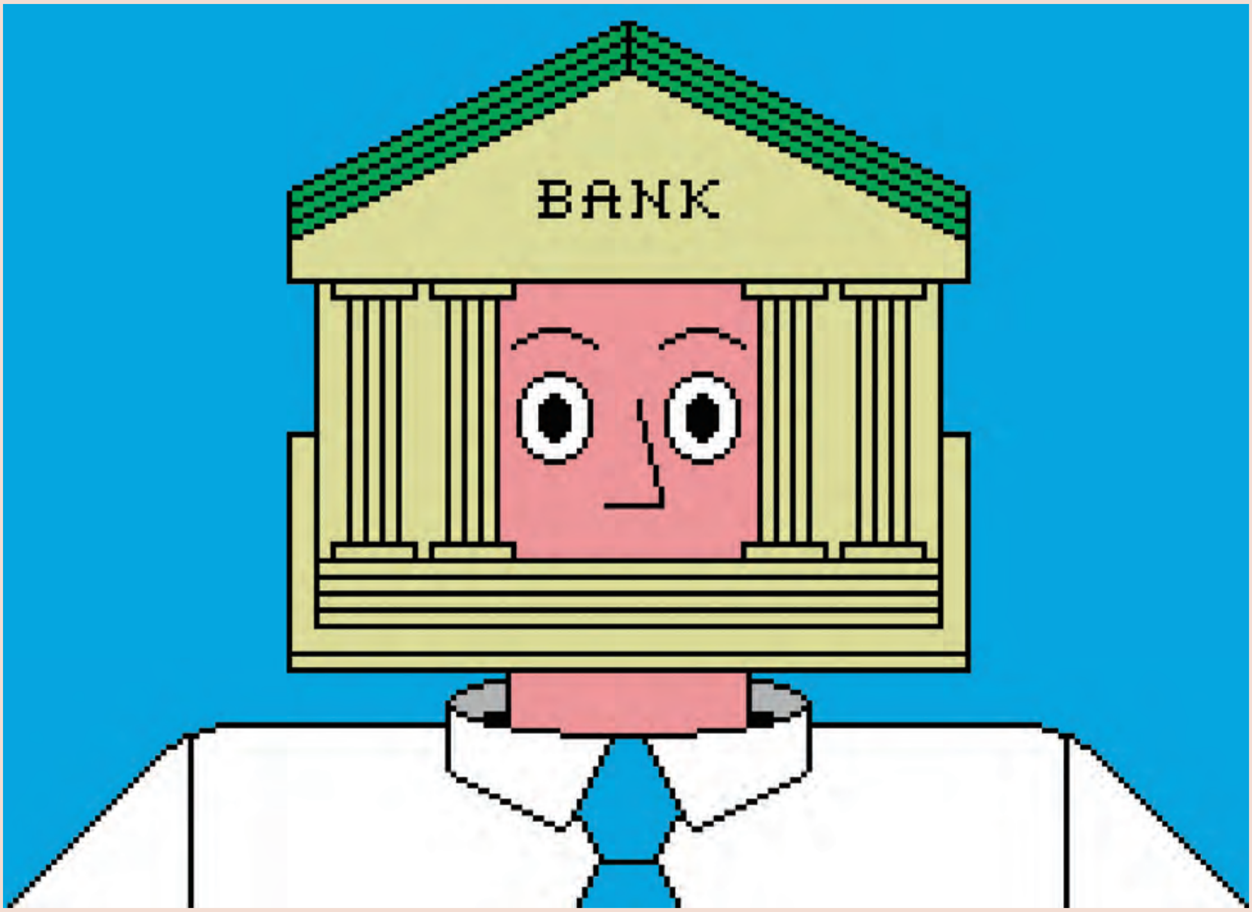
"Hiring people who have worked at hotels and other properties as directors of sales and marketing ensures that they're aligned with the client," Sprance says. "Neither Dave nor I come from a hospitality background, so it has always been a focus of ours to ensure that our strategies are being developed by a curated team that has thrived in this industry."

Everyone at Awestruck has the option to work remotely, and the agency has expanded its global workforce, especially in Latin America. The move has enabled the company to scale rapidly by tapping the high-level technical and campaign management skills available in those near-shore markets.

Awestruck takes pride in promoting from within, fostering a core executive team that has risen through the ranks thanks to years of dedication and hard work. Marcy finds the most rewarding aspect of the company's success to be watching employees grow and advance.

"It's not just growing financially and getting more clients," Marcy says, "it's watching these amazing young professionals become better and better and succeed within our company."

MONEY / FINANCE



1 Hone your pitch 2 Follow the money 3 Apply for grant funding 4 Deal with flaky investors 5 Locate the exit

1 Hone Your PITCH

"Investors like to fund strategy," says Sarah Dusek, founder of Inc. 5000 honoree Under Canvas and Enygma Ventures, a venture fund that invests solely in female-led businesses based in southern Africa. Her new book, *Thinking Bigger: A Pitch-Deck Formula for Women Who Want to Change the World*, offers actionable insights on raising money for female founders. Much of the book's advice is drawn from her own journey with Under Canvas. One key takeaway? Show your strategy.

Though she told Inc. that some investors might go purely off vibes and instinct, those instances of blind faith are rare. Instead, Dusek says, most "like to think about what it is that we're backing, and what's the plan we want, what we want you to execute. They don't like to fund, you know, thin air."

GETTY IMAGES (MEGAPHONE)

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

DJB Hospitality	NO3624 2024 Ranking	5X Inc. 5000 Honoree	131% 3-Year Growth	17 Locations

For the Love of the Restaurant Experience

The founder and CEO of DJB Hospitality shares his passion for the challenging and uniquely rewarding hospitality industry.

DJBHOSPITALITY.COM

Chat with Dennis Barbaro about his business, DJB Hospitality, and you will leave the discussion hungry, thirsty, and ready for a night on the town. Because Barbaro's business is restaurants—and his passion is infectious. "I love the energy in a restaurant," he explains. "And we don't know why guests come in. It could be for a happy occasion. It could be for a sad occasion. It could just be because it's a Wednesday. I love that for many people, going to a restaurant is escapism." And Barbaro gets to curate that escape.

A concept with legs

2024 marks DJB Hospitality's fifth Inc. 5000 honor. A key to its success is a focus on people: guests and employees. This commitment was crystal-clear during the Covid-19 pandemic. Barbaro offered employees, including servers and bartenders, a guaranteed hourly wage. If they didn't hit their number with tips, then the company paid the difference. "Our employees are number one in our company. We pay our people well. And we don't have a lot of turnover. That's an important aspect of a successful restaurant," he explains.

Successful restaurants also have great concepts, of course. Sedona Taphouse, founded in 2011 in Midlothian, Virginia, reflects Barbaro's extensive industry experience, including leadership roles at national restaurant chains. His idea was to couple a robust beer menu with fine food, including lighter fare, elevated cocktails, and an inviting ambience, to appeal to women as much as men. After some menu tweaking, Barbaro opened a second location. In 2014, he began franchising the restaurant. Many of the franchisees are people Barbaro worked with previously. "There are so many restaurant managers out there who are so talented, and they just don't have the resources to open their own restaurant. I tried to create a system that could help people fulfill their destiny," he says. Thirteen of Sedona Taphouse's 17 locations are owned by franchise owners, with additional restaurants set to open next year, plus another NAPA Kitchen and Wine location, DJB Hospitality's second dining concept.

The gift of experience

Another reason Barbaro loves his job? It creates chances to give back. Through its charity initiative, Dine Out for Charity, DJB Hospitality has donated more than $1 million to local nonprofit organizations. Next year, he will bring back a beloved tradition he had to stop during the pandemic: opening his restaurant on Thanksgiving to feed those less fortunate. He always gets more volunteers than needed. He says it is heartwarming to see how people in need arrive wearing their nicest clothes, "whatever that might look like."

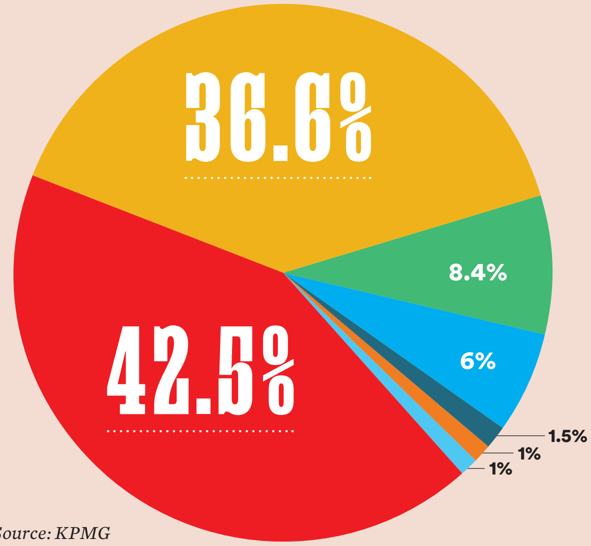
→ **Dennis Barbaro, CEO, DJB Hospitality**

They are dressing up because eating out is a special experience—no matter the occasion. "The restaurant industry really is thrilling," Barbaro explains." I have gotten to meet so many interesting people, both who work for us and who come into the restaurant. I have been in the industry for a very long time but for me, it's still very exciting." To that, we say, cheers!

2 Follow the MONEY

According to KPMG, the majority of investments made by corporate VC firms in Q2 2024 went to pharma, biotech, and software companies in the Bay Area, New York, Boston, and Los Angeles.

- BAY AREA
- NEW YORK
- BOSTON
- LOS ANGELES
- PHILADELPHIA
- SEATTLE
- DENVER



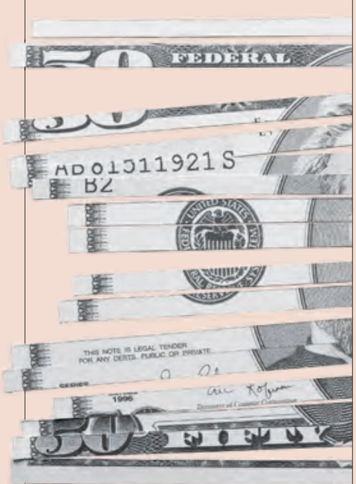
Source: KPMG

3 Apply for Grant FUNDING

We raise only when we need to and we focus on nondilutive capital first. I did a lot of pitch competitions. I took a class on grant writing. Thus far, we've raised a little over $2 million in both nondilutive and dilutive capital and I own the majority of my company. **I've given away no more than about 15 percent, and I've gotten very far with that."**

Margo Jordan
Co-founder and CEO of Houston-based edtech company Enrichly

4 Deal With FLAKY INVESTORS



Investors flake "more often than we know," says Matei Psatta, co-founder and chief marketing officer of Blindspot, a platform for digital billboard creation. "I guess a lot of times, people don't want to talk about it," he adds, "because they want to stay in the good graces of potential investors."

Six years ago, when Blindspot was on the hunt for seed funding, Psatta says, "we actually had a signed shareholder agreement and everything, and the investors pulled out at the last second. From what we can figure out, they just ran out of capital at some point."

Though it might be tempting to blast a VC on social media, doing so can have serious repercussions—namely, burned bridges. Prerna Gupta, co-founder of storytelling app Hooked, ran into a similar situation when an investor showed interest in leading her company's Series A—and then turned around and led the Series A for a carbon copy of Hooked. Though she was tempted to publicly shame the VC, Gupta's mentor, Ron Conway, an early investor in Google and Airbnb, talked her down. "He told me, 'Nice people win bigger in the end'—and to keep in mind that my relationship with this investor might prove useful later on."

For his part, Psatta says Blindspot was OK after its seed funding deal fell through. Staying lean and not growing too quickly was key in the absence of the money. "We basically put all our angry feelings aside for a while and just focused," he says. "But we're pretty lucky to not have suffered more drastically as a result of the collapsed deal."

GETTY IMAGES (MONEY); COURTESY SUBJECT (JORDAN)

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

COMPEO	NO17	10,915%	HQ	2017
	2024 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Dania, Florida	Year Founded

Custom PEO Solutions for Blue-Collar Industries

COMPEO is an HR management solutions provider with a jaw-dropping five-figure growth rate.

COMPEO.IO

When COMPEO, a provider of cost-effective, customized HR management software platforms, entered the scene in 2017, most, if not all, of the professional employer organization (PEO) software-as-a-service (SaaS) solutions on the market were designed for people behind a desk, says COMPEO CEO and co-founder Oscar Montenegro. These solutions won't work for the on-the-go business owner, specifically those in blue-collar industries, like contractors in construction.

COMPEO's proprietary underwriting platform and mobile app make it simple for business owners to obtain workers' compensation and manage HR processes from the palm of their hand—a game changer when you're jumping from job site to job site. By filling a need for a previously overlooked market, COMPEO has achieved astronomical scale, landing the No. 17 spot on the 2024 Inc. 5000 with a 10,915 percent three-year growth rate.

→ **Members of the COMPEO leadership team at Inc 5000 event**

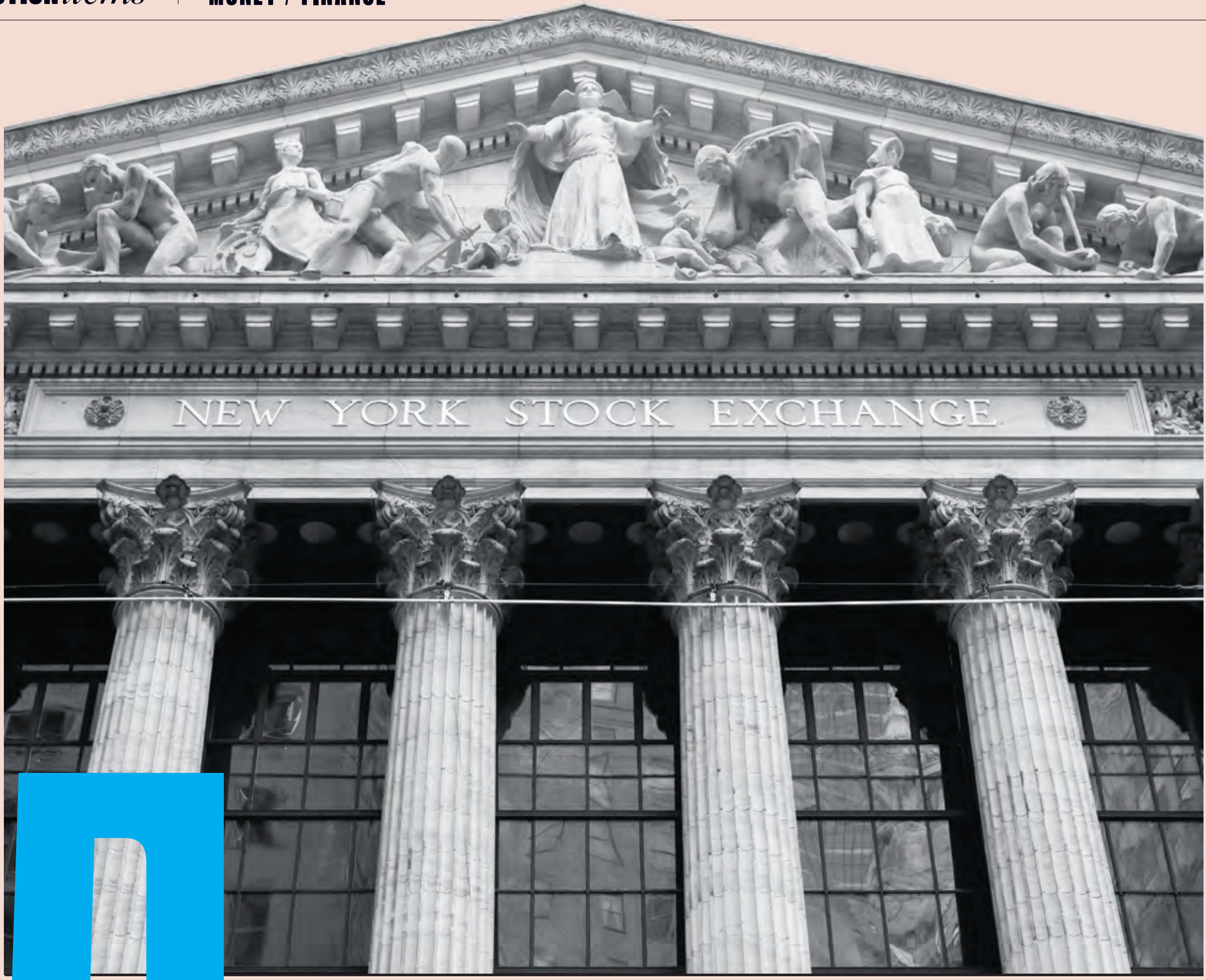
Mobile-friendly HR processes

With the COMPEO app, business owners easily report payroll and request a proof of insurance certificate. Text message reminders help busy entrepreneurs stay on top of backend processes. "When it's time for a business owner working at a job site to submit their employees' hours, it is so helpful for them to get a text that says, 'Would you like to submit your hours for the week?' Within a matter of 10 seconds, they can confirm and submit payroll so their employees can get paid," Montenegro explains. COMPEO also offers a geofencing solution that automatically clocks workers in and out as they enter or leave the job site. Their text-message onboarding for new employees also eliminates the need for paperwork.

Strategies for continued growth

Many blue-collar companies struggle to obtain affordable workers' compensation, as large insurers often categorize these businesses as risky. COMPEO's proprietary underwriting platform can provide an underwriting score in a matter of seconds, and Montenegro says that 98 percent of applications are approved for affordable workers' compensation. COMPEO's offerings are piquing the interest of some state governments, including those of Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana. These states want to be able to offer a business owner a solution if a stop-work order is issued from the state due to lack of insurance. That way, a business can get back to work quickly.

"Our goal is to align ourselves with the insurance departments of each state, so states can notify companies within these industries that there is accessible, affordable workers' compensation," Montenegro says. In addition to educating state governments, the provider is expanding its partnerships with brokers and agencies, so that they can provide their clients with its solutions. These strategies—along with a high client retention rate and a dedicated customer success team who takes the time to train and follow up with new users—will build upon COMPEO's success and fuel its next wave of growth.



5 Locate the EXIT

It's no secret 2024 has been a dismal year for dealmaking, with less M&A activity and fewer IPOs. Add to that the record number of boomer entrepreneurs set to retire and (attempt to) sell their businesses, and the market for exits remains murky. Moreover, companies may wait on the sidelines until the 2024 presidential election is over and the regulatory landscape becomes clearer. So how should you think about a potential liquidity event, if that's what you want, in the next few years?

Let's start with the sexiest option, an IPO. It's a lofty goal for any company, and those that are considering going public soon should know that they'll be held to a different set of standards than their predecessors. Jason Corsello, general partner at Acadian Ventures, a VC fund focused on future of work startups, tells Inc.: "It used to be this bar where you had to have $1 billion in revenue to go public. I don't know who set that bar, and I don't know how it got made up."

Sky-high valuations drove the IPO surge of 2021, when 787 unicorns emerged, but valuations have now settled. They're more reflective of the kinds of numbers seen in 2018 and 2019, Colin Stewart, Morgan Stanley's global head of technology equity capital markets, explained to CNBC in April: "We're not back to the levels of 2021, but we are getting a fair price for growth."

Four months later, Corsello agrees. And his thinking might be of interest to entrepreneurs contemplating their own exit strategies, whether through a public listing, a merger, or an outright sale.

Instead of valuations, fundraising numbers, customer growth, or even beefy revenue, it seems a path to profitability, competent management, and robust revenue growth will be key factors for companies looking to make a deal.

Corsello points to Rippling, a maker of technology for HR departments, to illustrate his point. The company has a $13.5 billion valuation, ample VC funding—and dim prospects of going public any time soon. "There are a lot of well-managed companies that have raised less capital that are going to be very appealing," Corsello explains. What makes them appealing? They "may be at between $250 million and 350 million in annual revenue, but they're still growing at 40, 50, 60 percent."

GETTY IMAGES (NYSE)

Inc. 5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Cecilian.	NO 1033	492%	2024	2019
	2024 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Inc. Best Workplaces Honoree	Year Founded

Homebuying Was Broken—Meet the Founders Here to Fix It

Cecilian Partners is a fast-growing technology firm providing end-to-end solutions for production homebuilders and land developers.

CECILIANPARTNERS.COM

John Cecilian Jr.'s initial pitch to his brother-in-law and co-founder Philip Worland wasn't in a boardroom–it was in the MetLife Stadium parking lot, during a family tailgate in 2017. The unlikely setting didn't diminish the impact. Cecilian's vision for a new venture was so compelling that Worland, who was then thriving in a client advisory and digital innovation role at Accenture, found himself at a coffee shop two years later, laying the groundwork for what would become Cecilian Partners. This Inc. 5000 honoree is now bridging the digital divide between homebuilders, community developers, and home buyers with a multi-patented technology platform.

It starts with a vision

Their first brainstorming session was electric. "We sat there for two-and-a-half hours, and we talked about John's vision for the business, the research he'd done, and the conversations he was having," Worland recalls. The vision was to improve the homebuying experience, which was somehow more frustrating and less personalized than buying a pair of sneakers online. Buying a home "should be at some level joyous, instead of making you afraid, sad, or mad," Worland says. The amazing thing, the partners agree, is that most of what they jotted down at that early meeting came true. Products and concepts that didn't exist are now in use by industry leaders.

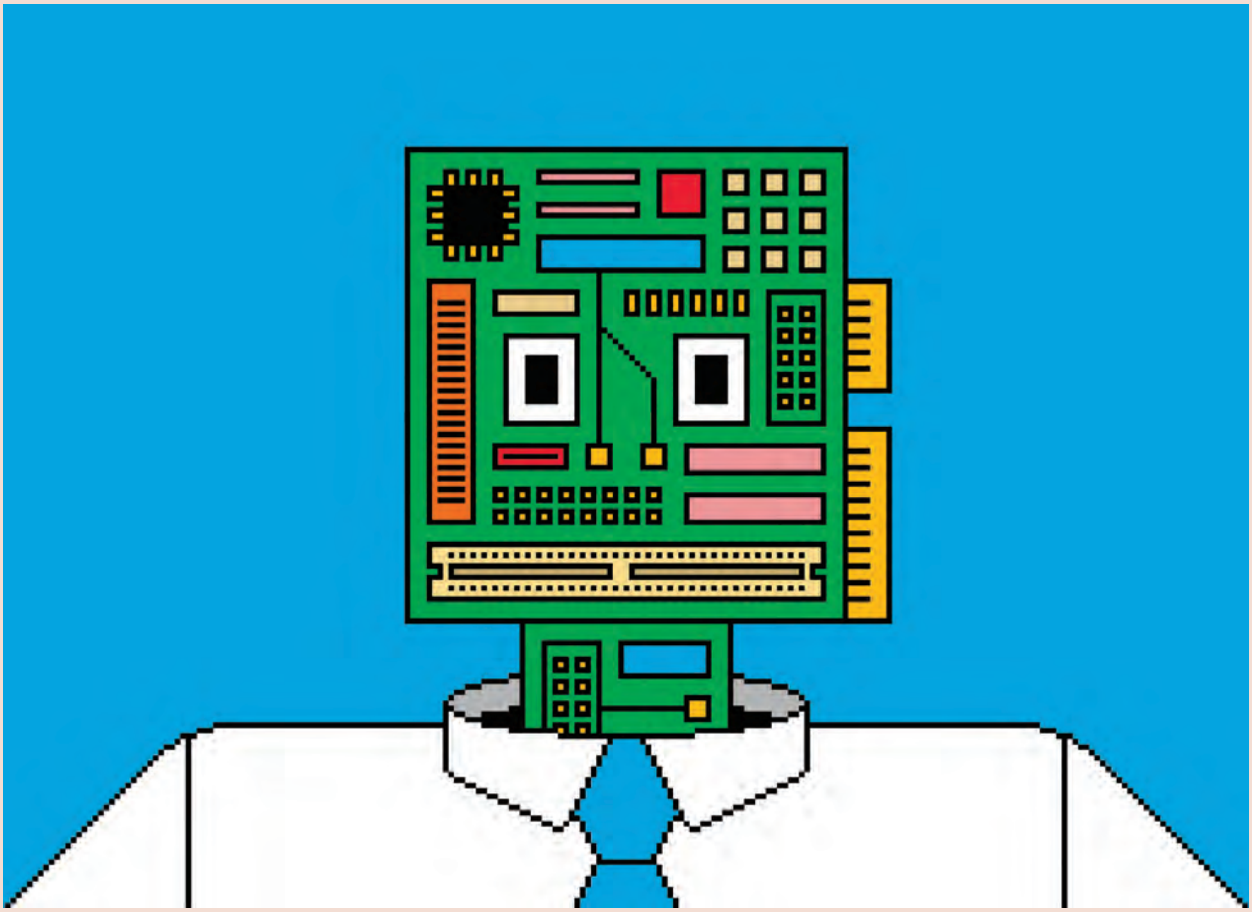
It continues with execution

Cecilian Partners's success is the result of technology: five core applications that give builders and community developers a comprehensive view of their business. But just as crucial is the service component, something that Cecilian knew would be a make-or-break factor, having seen his mother, Kathleen, run a marketing consultancy for homebuilding and land development companies. "In this industry, it's not about the next, best, slick product. It's about earning trust first, listening and understanding the pain points of these organizations, and then coming up with the digital solution to solve those pain points. That is what we've been working on tirelessly for the last five-and-a-half years," Cecilian explains.

Service means people, and Cecilian excels at building exceptional teams and rallying them around a mission, Worland observes. Worland's special skill, as Cecilian sees it, is the ability to break down an amorphous concept—digital transformation—into realistic, understandable steps, for companies still storing data in binders and on sticky notes. A 98 percent client retention rate suggests that clients see the value. Another vote of confidence was a successful Series A round, led by Resolve Growth Partners in Q2 2023, a time when investment was hard to come by. Cecilian describes the partnership "as a gift." The co-founders are using the capital to invest in technology, build their team, and advance their mission of transforming the homebuying experience for customers and companies alike.

→ **John Cecilian Jr. (left), CEO, and Philip Worland (right), CPO, Cecilian Partners**

TECH



1 Choose the right generative AI tool 2 Take these steps if you've been hacked 3 Shrink your LLM

1

Choose the Right GENERATIVE AI TOOL

For entrepreneurs looking to use generative AI tools in their business, few choices are more important than picking the right model. To help you do that, Inc. conducted tests of our own, challenging four of the most popular large language models currently available to complete four routine tasks that entrepreneurs commonly need to do: summarizing a lengthy document, rewriting a letter from a CEO, helping to analyze market environments, and writing an elevator pitch based on a deck.

Typically, engineers use scientific benchmarks to describe how effective models are at certain tasks, but these benchmarks aren't exactly self-explanatory. For example, Claude 3.5 Sonnet, the flagship model from AI startup Anthropic, scored a 59.4 percent on the GPQA, a series of questions designed to test graduate-level reasoning. But what does that mean in practice?

Instead of grading the models by how many questions they can answer correctly, we've chosen a winner for each task by subjectively deciding which model completed each exercise most effectively. To keep things relatively fair, we tested the free versions of the four most popular models: OpenAI's GPT-4o mini (which powers ChatGPT), Anthropic's Claude 3.5 Sonnet, Meta's Llama 3.1-70b, and Google's Gemini 1.5 Flash.

Here are the tasks we threw at the AI models, the winner of each bake-off, and our pick for the AI provider that we think truly takes the cake.

TASK 1: SUMMARIZE A DOCUMENT

We asked each service to summarize the Federal Aviation Administration's 31-page Roadmap for Artificial Intelligence Safety Assurance. In 192 words, Claude produced the best and most concrete summary of the document, accurately pulling out recommendations. The other bots were too vague, summarized the document inaccurately, or produced a link to an unrelated doc.

The Prompt: *Create a 200-word summary of this document, including its top three recommendations.*

TASK 2: REWRITE A LETTER

We asked the AI models to rewrite an infamously low-EQ letter from Wayfair CEO Niraj Shah, in which he basically told employees they needed to work longer hours. Like ChatGPT, Claude emphasized gratitude for the Wayfair team in its rewrite, while Llama's letter encouraged work-life balance, and Gemini took a neutral approach but also suggested revisions to the letter.

The Prompt: *Rewrite this letter from a CEO to his employees to be more emotionally intelligent.*

TASK 3: RESEARCH A TOPIC

It seems conducting market research is still a human task. The chatbots all struggled with synthesizing available data and making recommendations. Gemini avoided offering hard numbers but hit on all the major points related to regulation, inflation, and the risks associated with integrating cybersecurity firms.

The Prompt: *Analyze the current macroeconomic and regulatory environment to determine if now is a good time for a merger or acquisition in the cybersecurity industry.*

TASK 4: WRITE AN ELEVATOR PITCH

We gave each model an early pitch deck used by Airbnb and asked it to create a short and sweet elevator pitch to sell potential investors and customers on the company. Claude was the only bot to deliver a legitimate pitch, immediately spelling out Airbnb's value proposition and highlighting the upside of investing in the business. The other models' pitches were too generic or confusing.

The Prompt: *Write a 30-second elevator pitch based on the information in this deck.*

AI TOOL	TASK 1	TASK 2	TASK 3	TASK 4	SCORE
ChatGPT	☹	☺	☹	☹	1/4
Claude	☺	😐	☹	☺	2/4
Llama	☹	☹	☹	☹	0/4
Gemini	😐	☺	😐	☹	1/4

GETTY IMAGES (ALL IMAGES); THE NOUN PROJECT (ALL ICONS)

Inc. 5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

NCG	NO1706	305%	50	3
	2024 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Employees	Locations

A Focus on Complete Solutions for Regulatory Environments

The Northcross Group develops sustainable processes for clients with compliance needs.

NORTHCROSSGROUP.COM

Christopher Bender takes pride in competing against the big consulting firms to help clients with compliance and growth efforts. As founder and president of the Northcross Group (NCG), a professional services and advisory company, "we try to put ourselves in our clients' shoes" to determine what needs to happen for success. NCG works with companies in highly regulated environments, like banking, health care, transportation, manufacturing, and the federal government. They often help with mergers and acquisitions integrations or implementing compliance programs.

"What makes us different is that we take a client-centric look at challenges for a complete solution perspective," Bender says. "Others like to specialize in either programmatic steps, pure compliance, or tech." With NCG's model, the company avoids templates and cookie-cutter approaches, instead listening to clients and tailoring solutions specific to their business space.

"There are similarities between one bank and another or one airline and a competitor, but they have their differences in how they get things done. You need to be cognizant of that," customizing the approach, Bender says. He points out that the NCG team supplements its broad range of capabilities with partners, as needed.

→ Christopher Bender, founder and president, Northcross Group (NCG)

→ NCG has grown primarily through relationship-building.

Technology as an interactive tool

Since its 2006 founding, NCG has used technology to engage and interact with clients at all organizational levels. For a hospital client with patient data privacy needs, the company skips the spreadsheet. "They fill it out and off it goes—it is not controlled," Bender says. Instead NCG provides tools like secure apps to manage and track patient data. These tools can ensure proper data collection and guide users so they realize "these are things that I must do to ensure we're keeping our patients' data secure and private," he says.

Technology use is one reason clients and partners like working with them. "We bring our tools and skills to the table."

NCG also focuses on tech and cybersecurity with high school and college students through educational and internship programs, showing how technology affects different industries. Since its founding, NCG has had academic partnerships with universities and works with about two dozen interns annually. In addition to giving back to communities where NCG works, the programs help with recruiting.

> What makes us different is that we take a client-centric look at challenges for a complete solution perspective.
>
> —Christopher Bender, founder and CEO, Northcross Group

Client-first perspective

NCG's organization is relatively flat. "We interact as peers," Bender says. The company empowers its team members and has a client-centric culture, committing to bringing the best and brightest to every engagement.

"That's not my job" is not part of NCG's vernacular, and there is an internal expectation to ensure client success and that the developed solutions are sustainable for the organization. They also take the approach that whatever is needed to provide a complete solution, they will make it happen.

This approach has resulted in NCG growing its own business almost exclusively through relationship-building. NCG's first client from 2006 is still an active client and their largest revenue source. The company also gains clients when client contacts move on to other jobs, bringing in NCG to their new companies for projects.

Clients appreciate that the NCG team spends a lot of time listening, to understand. "That's not always billable time, but it gives us the perspective and context to do things properly," Bender says. Many in consulting and advisory spaces hurry through the information-gathering process. They have solutions and are looking for the problems. "We want to understand the problem and then help craft a solution that makes sense for that particular problem and client.

2

Take These Steps if YOU'VE BEEN HACKED

Vishaal Hariprasad, a former Air Force cyberoperations officer and co-founder and CEO of cybersecurity company Resilience, spoke to Inc. about the first steps business owners should take if they're subject to a cyberattack or breach. While it's best to have an action plan ready in advance, quick thinking can help mitigate the damage. He says that hackers will often leverage small companies to access larger companies they do business with. "Especially on the small- or medium-size business side," he says, "a small outage could become very material very fast."

STEP 1: CUT OFF ACCESS

A decade ago, if a company faced a virus or a breach, the advice might be to run around unplugging computers to keep an issue from spreading. That no longer works in our cloud-based world, but you should still lock down important systems ASAP. Start with administrator access for any email addresses that have been compromised and change the admin passwords for other accounts.

Many common software suites offer options to lock down a system until an incident is resolved, including preventing new accounts from being created and data from being exported. Says Hariprasad: "Start with the systems that are most critical to your business or that hold sensitive info—an attacker will likely go after those first so you're compelled to pay a ransom—and work your way down the line." For small businesses, he says, some of the most important data is stored in databases like HubSpot CRM or Salesforce.

STEP 2: GET ON THE PHONE

If you have cybersecurity insurance, phone the claims hotline right away. "Their claims person should literally be the quarterback for their next steps," says Hariprasad. The insurance company should be able to provide resources, contacts, and advice—and it's in the insurer's best interest to make sure you recover as quickly as possible. If you don't have cyber insurance, there are incident management companies that you can engage. Otherwise, if you use an outside vendor for IT services, that should be your first call.

Many companies spend too much time trying to clean things up in-house. Or they call law enforcement first, hoping for an immediate incident response and recovery—something authorities are generally not equipped to provide. In most cases, a call to the police or FBI should be the third or fourth call a company makes. "The mistake most people make is that they reverse that order," says Hariprasad.

3

Shrink Your LLM

"After initially building these large language models, companies didn't see much ROI in terms of accuracy, efficiency, and overall impact. So there's been a shift to building small language models. These are very domain-specific, or for a specific purpose, such as HR. Companies can cut costs in terms of the computing power because of the size of the model that's needed. And they can assure higher data quality, because they're feeding only very specific data sources and information into the language models. What we're looking for now is for AI not to be a shiny-new-toy technology. It's going to be embedded into everyone's responsibilities."

Peggy Tsai
Chief data officer at BigID, a data intelligence platform

COURTESY SUBJECT (TSAI); GETTY IMAGES (ALL IMAGES)

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

laurel	NO700	35	679%	HQ
	2024 Ranking	Employees	3-Year Growth	San Francisco, Calif.

An AI Startup That Sanctifies Time

Created around the idea that time is sacred, Laurel helps clients reclaim it so they can make more money in less time.

LAUREL.AI

The business Ryan Alshak started up in 2018 began life as Time by Ping, the trailblazing creator of AI time software for professional service firms. Six years later, the company has raised $55 million in venture funding, undergone a complete platform rebuild, and rebranded to a new name.

Now known as Laurel, the San Francisco-based company has clients that include a Big Four accounting firm and one of the world's top five law firms. It has an average contract value of ~$200,000, with multiple contracts topping seven figures.

Alshak's inspiration for the business came when he was a corporate litigator who abhorred the manual logging of his time required for billing.

"I was billing out $650 an hour and yet was being asked to manually record every six minutes of my time," Alshak says. "I had a very strong thesis that in the future machines would remind humans what they did at work versus humans reminding machines."

→ Ryan Alshak, founder and CEO, Laurel

Return time to the world

It was six months after he quit the legal profession to start the company that Alshak says Laurel's true mission began to gel. He had moved back home to Los Angeles to care for his mother, who was terminally ill with a brain tumor.

"The minutes with her at the end were worth a million minutes of doing anything else," he says. "At that point, the business became a purpose, and that purpose is to ensure that people spend their time in the highest-leveraged way possible."

Alshak cites research showing that while the average knowledge worker puts in nine hours a day, only three of those hours are used to create leverage. "We look at those other six hours as an opportunity to return that time back to the world," he says.

Expand machine-first timekeeping

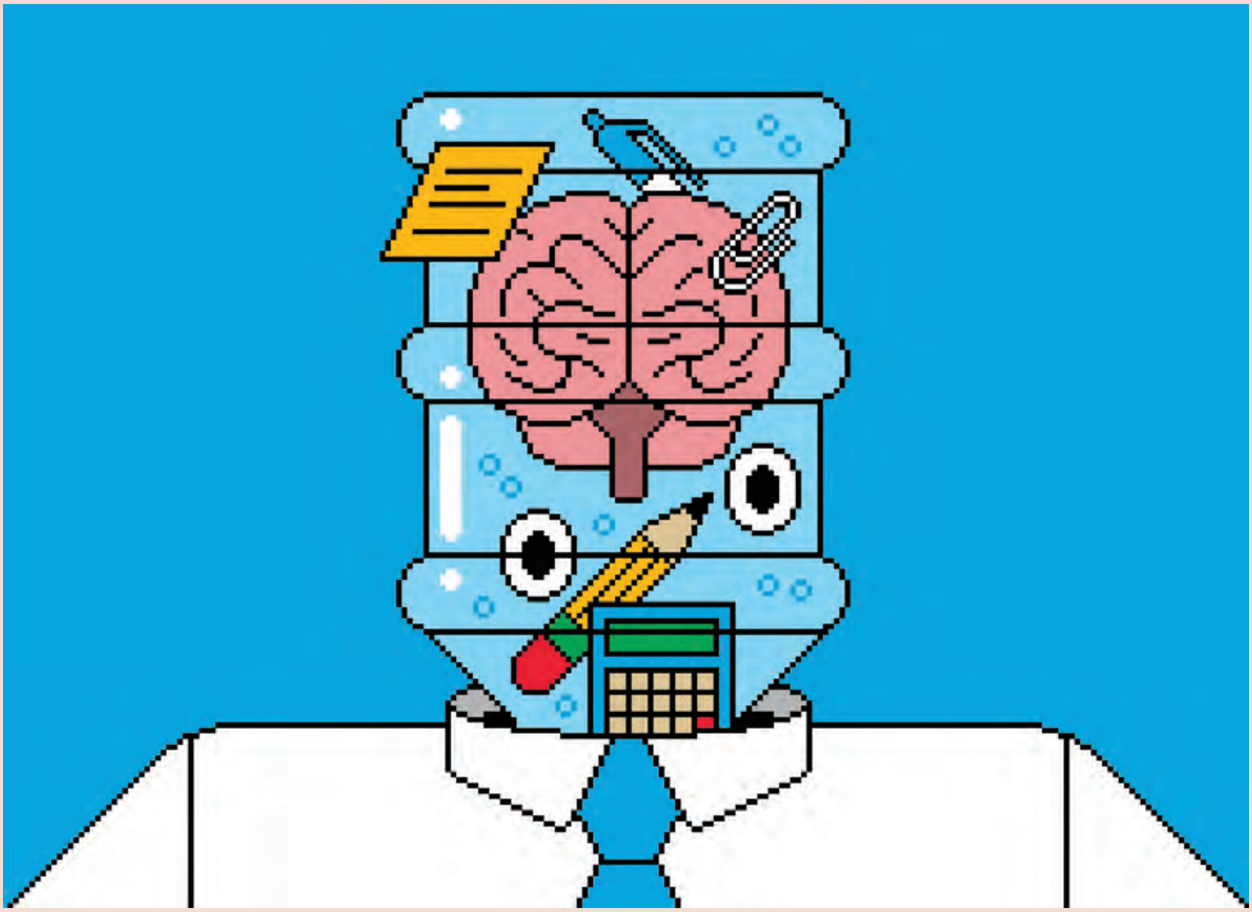
The first phase for the company was introducing the technology that proves a machine can track and bill time better than a human. Alshak says Laurel is now in its second phase, focusing on supplying professional service firms with time data so they can evolve from billing time to billing outcomes. The third and final phase will be to expand the adoption of machine-first timekeeping to all one billion knowledge workers globally.

In the meantime, Alshak applies the principles he hopes will revolutionize those industries to the operation of Laurel itself—for example, adopting outcome-based management. And his employees have embraced the mandate to always honor time belonging to their clients and their co-workers.

"Our mission will be achieved only when the world realizes that minutes are more valuable than dollars," Alshak says.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MEGAN ELMASSIAN

LEADERSHIP / WORKPLACE



1 Get vulnerable 2 Rethink your approach to hiring
3 Benchmark your benefits 4 Tighten that HR budget

1 Get VULNERABLE

In early 2023, Kelly R. Culhane, co-founder and chief growth officer at Culhane, a Dallas-based law firm, noticed that one of her executive assistants was falling behind.

Instead of bluntly telling her that the higher-ups were frustrated, Culhane took the assistant out to dinner and shared some of her own struggles: Two of her children had recently graduated, and her work-life balance had gotten out of whack.

That "opened up the door," Culhane says. The assistant shared concerns about her own child and family issues that were distracting her at work. Right there at the table, they worked out a plan to redistribute some tasks and adjust deadlines. Culhane also pointed the employee to resources for stress management.

"Whether it's a dinner or a coffee or just a phone call," says Culhane, "if you start by sharing what's going on in your world and be a little vulnerable, that goes a long way in people sharing what's going on with their work issues."

GETTY IMAGES (LOCK)

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Empify	NO652 2024 Ranking	712% 3-Year Growth	2017 Year Founded	HQ Atlanta, Georgia

The Former Wall Street Analyst Teaching Wealth-Building to the Masses

Empify is a fintech startup providing financial education tools and resources for the 99 percent Wall Street often overlooks.

EMPIFY.COM

Ashley M. Fox, founder of Empify—a fintech startup on a mission to revolutionize how adults and children learn how to build wealth—never wanted to run a business. She wanted to be "a profound African American woman on Wall Street." After three Wall Street internships, she landed a job in asset management at a large investment bank, working with individuals with a net worth of $25 million or more. "I saw the ins and outs of how wealthy individuals built their wealth. I was inside the bank accounts of millionaires and billionaires every day," Fox explains.

The seeds that sprouted a new approach

Fox soon found herself wanting to become the clients she served and to show the world how they could, too. She was making six figures before age 25, and her friends and family perceived her as rich. But she realized most people had no perception of what true wealth looked like.

"If you don't work in finance, you don't gain access to the things I was exposed to," Fox notes. She wondered why financial best practices weren't taught in schools, and why people from all communities couldn't obtain the knowledge to grow and preserve wealth. These questions gnawed at her, inspiring Fox to launch Empify, the merging of the words "empower" and "modify." Her vision was

> We are changing the hearts and minds of people, showing them that it is possible to create financial security and generational wealth.
>
> — Ashley M. Fox, founder, Empify

to financially empower the 99 percent of people that Wall Street often overlooks by giving them the financial knowledge and resources "to help grow both their minds and their bank accounts," she says.

Democratizing Wall Street "secrets"

After leaving Wall Street, Fox struggled financially and lost her New York apartment. She moved back to Philadelphia with her parents and lived on their couch. She used her remaining savings to start Empify, working as an independent financial advisor for low- to middle-income clients on the side. In 2017, she went all in on Empify, providing financial education to a growing number of schools, prison systems, municipalities, and companies and scaling her team.

During the pandemic, Fox got the idea to expand their reach by launching a membership-based app, the Wealth-Builders Community. The app provides on-demand content about stock market investing, retirement planning, money management, legacy planning, and more. Three thousand members across 24 countries have collectively invested $6.1 million in the past two years. Fox believes the app will surpass 10,000 members by 2025 and reach $20 million in investments. Long-term, she believes Empify can become the No. 1 producer of investors of all ages, races, and genders. "We are changing the hearts and minds of people, showing them that it is possible to create financial security and generational wealth. This is a space everyone belongs in. And we are going to help them understand it," she asserts.

→ Ashley M. Fox, founder, Empify

PHOTOGRAPHY: GUY X PHOTO

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

CANCER & BLOOD SPECIALITY CLINIC	NO3309 2024 Ranking	144 Employees	8 Locations	HQ Los Alamitos, Calif.

Delivering Care That Always Puts Patients First

At Cancer and Blood Specialty Clinic, a physician-led team provides patient-centered care through an agile approach prioritizing excellence.

CBSCLINIC.COM

When the doctors at Cancer and Blood Specialty Clinic founded their Los Angeles-area practice in 2009, they had a clear vision: to create a health care environment where patient care is the absolute priority. Drawing from diverse backgrounds—including large health care corporations and venture capital-funded entities—these physicians were united by a common goal: to establish a practice driven by compassion, excellence, and ethical integrity.

Cancer and Blood Specialty Clinic is not just another health care group; it's a physician-led team that operates with a flat organizational structure. This streamlined approach to decision making allows the group to remain agile, efficient, and deeply focused on what matters most—patient care.

"Our flat structure means we can make decisions quickly and efficiently, without the layers of bureaucracy that often slow down larger organizations," says Vu Phan, M.D., CEO of Cancer and Blood Specialty Clinic.

Values-driven success

The success of Cancer and Blood Specialty Clinic is a direct result of its intentional, values-driven model. By focusing on patient-centered care and ethical practice, the group has attracted some of the most talented and like-minded professionals in the field.

"Our model allows us to bring in the best people—those who are not only highly skilled but who also share our commitment to putting patients first," Phan explains. "This alignment of values is what makes us successful and allows us to deliver exceptional care."

The group's unique Management Services Organization (MSO) model provides operational support while giving physicians the autonomy to manage patient care in their own way. This fosters a sense of ownership, commitment, and accountability among the physicians, as every doctor becomes an equal partner in the practice.

"With the MSO model, physicians can focus on their office teams and deliver care that's tailored to their patients' needs," says Phan. "This autonomy, combined with the trust and accountability that comes from being equal partners, is what sets this model apart and ensures continued success."

A second home for staff

Looking to the future, Cancer and Blood Specialty Clinic remains committed to fostering an environment where every team member feels that CBSC is their second home. The goal is not just to provide excellent care but to create a supportive and collaborative workplace where everyone feels valued and motivated to contribute.

Through physician leadership, a flat organizational structure, and a values-driven approach, Cancer and Blood Specialty Clinic is showing what it means to put patients first. With a model that prioritizes excellence, integrity, and autonomy, the group is setting a new standard for health care—one that's built to last.

→ Members of the Cancer and Blood Specialty Clinic team

2

Rethink Your Approach TO HIRING

For founders, the hiring binge is over. After years of being propped up by cheap capital and hefty financing rounds, the growth-at-all-costs mindset has crumbled—and with it, so has the habit of aggressively increasing head counts ahead of expected growth. Instead of hoarding talent, entrepreneurs are now embracing a leaner approach.

“In the zero-interest-rate days, there was a glut of hiring and discipline around teams disappeared. Companies were raising money for the sake of supporting their rapidly growing head count, which is completely backward.”

Nelson Chu
Founder and CEO of the private credit marketplace Percent.

“Over the past four years, we have learned valuable lessons from overstaffing. Pre-pandemic and at the height of the pandemic, this was just what companies did to show growth and keep things moving forward. Looking back, it was usually done without a sharp focus on the specific needs and experiences required.”

Kenzie Biggins
Founder and CEO of Worxbee, a staffing firm that provides virtual executive assistants.

GETTY IMAGES (MAGNIFYING GLASS); COURTESY SUBJECTS (CHU, BIGGINS)

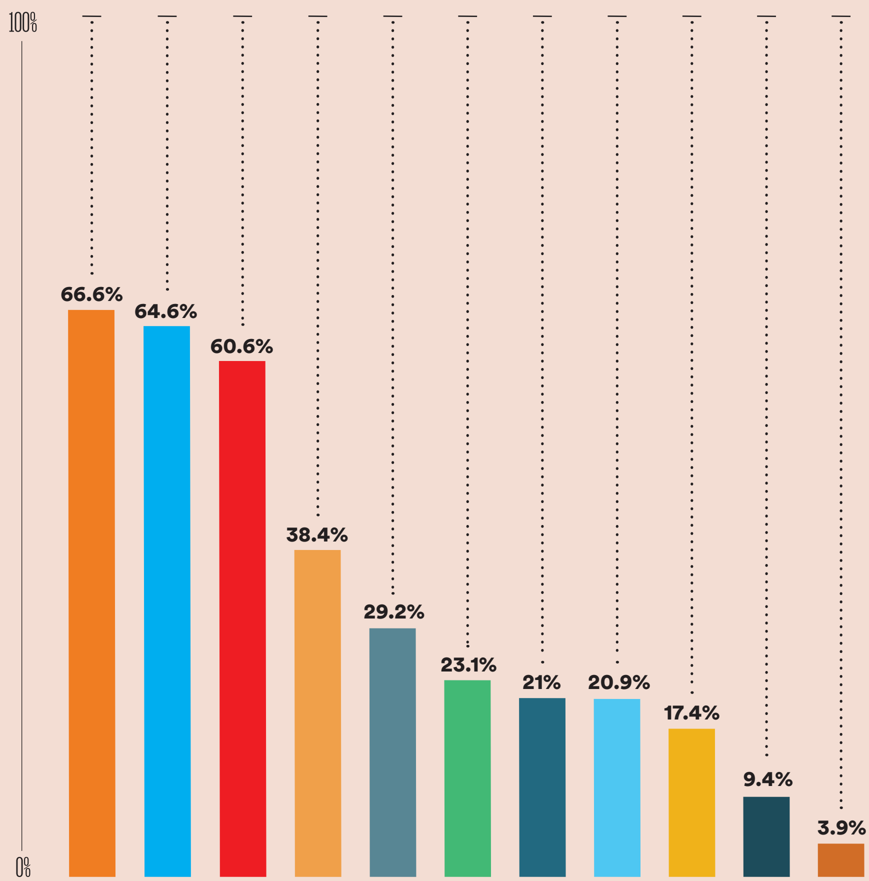
“It’s heartbreaking whenever people’s lives are IMPACTED BY THE LOSS OF A JOB.”

Elix founder and CEO Lulu Ge approaches hiring with the precision of a management consultant, the job she performed for years before becoming an entrepreneur. Her New York City-based startup provides personalized, traditional Chinese treatments for menstrual health and hormonal imbalances. Every time Ge brings on a new employee, she writes out a business case for the job, detailing its cost and the key performance indicators that the role is expected to generate. Even with that degree of diligence, Ge says she still prefers to “test the waters” with part-time contractors before hiring on a full-time basis. That’s because she doesn’t want to find herself in the same hire-then-fire mode that she’s watched tech companies fall into, where “people were thrown at problems” before being laid off later. “As founders, we really want to be intentional about when we craft full-time roles,” she says.

3 Benchmark Your BENEFITS

WHAT BENEFITS DOES YOUR COMPANY OFFER EMPLOYEES?

- WORK FROM HOME OR REMOTELY
- FREE FOOD, OTHER IN-OFFICE PERKS
- 401(K) MATCH
- EDUCATIONAL STIPENDS/SUPPORT
- EXTENDED PAID MATERNITY LEAVE
- OTHER RETIREMENT PLANS
- EXTENDED PAID PATERNITY LEAVE
- UNLIMITED VACATION
- TUITION REIMBURSEMENT
- SABBATICALS
- CHILD OR ELDER CARE



Source: 2024 Inc. 5000 CEO Survey

COURTESY SUBJECT

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

GROUNDGAME. HEALTH

GROUNDGAME. HEALTH	NO447 2024 Ranking	$20M+ Revenue in 2023	993% 3-Year Growth	145 Employees in 2023

Connecting People and Local Organizations to Solve Social Needs

GroundGame.Health provides a holistic solution that scales one person at a time through human-to-human connection.

GROUNDGAME.HEALTH

When Susan Rawlings Molina and Sri Akula were looking to start up a company around 2020, they knew they wanted to combine Molina's health care and Akula's product and technology backgrounds. They found the perfect combination in an existing startup, GroundGame.Health. The company's technology and services solution helped reduce emergency room visits by identifying and solving health plan members' social needs locally. Some of the most common social needs included food, transportation, housing instability, and financial assistance.

"And we were getting paid for it," Molina says. GroundGame.Health brought in $1.5 million in revenue that year. In 2021, Molina joined as CEO and Akula as president, raising money to stabilize and grow the business.

The hourglass

They continued delivering better health outcomes for health plans by working with local community-based organizations (CBOs) to identify members' unmet social needs and solve them by removing the barriers that were preventing people from getting the care they needed.

Picture an hourglass with health plans and providers on top and CBOs on the bottom. GroundGame.Health sits in the middle, using technology and services to connect the members flowing through.

One member in rural Louisiana needed in-home care, and the Managed Medicaid health plan contracted with GroundGame.Health to identify and meet these needs. The person had a hoarding issue and health care providers would not enter the home. The GroundGame.Health care coordinator connected this member with college students needing community service hours. They reduced the clutter, cleaned the home, and stocked it with food, allowing the member to receive in-home care.

GroundGame.Health is now in 50 states, "scaling one person at a time," Molina says.

Deliver a holistic solution

Success requires a holistic solution to identify and address the barriers, pay for them, and document everything in one HITRUST-certified platform. GroundGame.Health also developed a network of CBOs across the country, enabling the company to solve complex social needs at a hyperlocal level. "We have all the pieces of that puzzle, which allows us to sell an outcomes-based solution," Molina says.

The model positively impacts the communities served because approximately 70 percent of the revenue flows downstream to the CBOs, advancing their missions. The effects also ripple in concentric circles around members and their families. Molina is proud that GroundGame.Health makes a difference for the companies it partners with and that they are meaningfully impacting people's lives by solving social needs that were preventing them from leading healthier lives. "GroundGame.Health actually can pay for itself and make a difference in communities across the country, one person at a time," she says.

→ Susan Rawlings Molina, cofounder and CEO, GroundGame.Health

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

MAIN ELECTRIC SUPPLY	NO4631	87%	621	HQ
	2024 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Employees	Santa Ana, Calif.

An Independent Electric Supply Powerhouse

Main Electric Supply Co. has vaulted to be one of the nation's top independent distributors of electrical materials by empowering its skilled employees.

MAINELECTRICSUPPLY.COM

From 1946 to 1999, the year now-principal and CEO Scott Germann joined as a salesperson, Main Electric Supply Co. was a one-location supplier of electrical material to the construction industry. But Germann immediately saw that the business had greater potential.

Within a year of being hired, Germann conducted an audit of the company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. He wrote up what he found and called his report, "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly of Main," sharing it companywide. This vision for what Main Electric could grow to become earned him a promotion to manager in 2000.

Germann understood the assignment from the outset, starting with converting the operations from an outdated paper-based system to a high-tech forerunner. "At that time, Main didn't have a computer; they didn't have a receptionist; there was no voicemail, and of course, no email," he recalls. It is a testament to the work ethic of Main Electric employees they were able to provide exceptional service despite this. With investments in technology, the potential would be limitless.

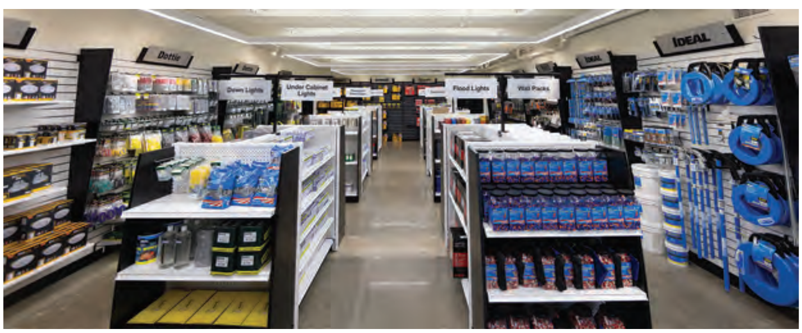
"If someone called to ask if something was in stock, you had to run to the warehouse to see if it was there and run back to tell them." Germann knew that in order to gain a competitive advantage, Main Electric needed a technological transformation. Ultimately, his plan landed the company atop several national lists of independent distributors.

Giving employees a voice

The plan that began with state-of-the-art technology, including computers, automation, and a sophisticated inventory management solution included an even more essential component—talented employees. Although there were only 16 drivers and 16 trucks when Germann started, those numbers have mushroomed through the years, and today the total company head count exceeds 600. That single location in 1999 has grown to 16 locations across California and two in Nevada.

It is the people at Main who have made the company's growth possible, Germann says. "There are no egos in this company . . . We are all equal. The driver has a voice as much as I have a voice," he says, which means they provide constant feedback. He regularly hears about "what we're doing well, what we're doing wrong, what they're hearing, and what they're seeing," which enables Main to continuously evolve, continuously improve. "It's critically important to me that our people are happy."

Proof of this invested corporate culture is found in its numerous Top Workplaces awards.



→ **Main Electric Supply Co. has become a top independent electrical materials distributor.**

Partnering with contractors

As Main Electric looks ahead, Germann says the company's mission is to "give contractors a real choice—real options in their business—to help them be more efficient and more profitable by partnering with us. Main is really on a mission to be the voice and representative of independents."

Tighten That **HR BUDGET**

Offering good benefits doesn't need to break the bank. Here are some solid—and relatively cheap—ones that can keep employees happy.

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

Almost two in three workers surveyed by the Conference Board ranked "workplace flexibility options," in terms of location or hours, as more important than offerings like bonuses. Even in-person workers want more flexible benefits, as Gallup found. For employers, "it can cost you nothing," says Chantel Sheaks, vice president of retirement policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Granted, with smaller companies, it may take some more coordination to ensure "you have the right coverage at the right time," Sheaks says, but it could be a big differentiator.

EMERGENCY SAVINGS FUNDS

Many benefits providers offer emergency savings funds, which allow employees to build up a nest egg over time that they can pull from without needing to dip into their retirement savings, says Sheaks. Employers can decide whether to match contributions up to a certain amount; she says it's likely workers will be more encouraged to contribute with a match. Access to emergency funds has wide appeal, Sheaks says. "We're actually seeing, across the board, that these benefits are appreciated even by people with six figures," she says. "You'd be surprised at who needs it."

TIME OFF ... FOR EVERYONE!

Something that's making a "bit of a comeback," says Jim Link, chief human resources officer at the Society for Human Resource Management, is paid company-wide shutdown periods. Twenty-six percent of small businesses that offer benefits offer this, according to Gusto's data. Liz Wilke, a principal economist at Gusto, says these can be popular in slower times of year, like the holidays. "Nobody has to check emails. Nobody has to worry that they're missing something. That can be especially valuable in a small business where one person can wear many hats," Wilke says.

GETTY IMAGES (ALL IMAGES)

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

THE SCIENTIFIC GROUP	NO406 2024 Ranking	210 Employees	1093% 3-Year Growth	10K+ Client Locations

One-Stop Facilities Management Services

The Scientific Group develops and leverages technology systems to deliver a high level of responsiveness to its corporate clients.

THESCIENTIFICGROUP.COM

The Scientific Group stands out in the building services industry as a rare self-performing provider. The company is adept at delivering comprehensive solutions for commercial building management without relying on subcontractors.

"A building is a living, breathing thing," Jeffrey Kaufman, CEO of The Scientific Group explains, with a multitude of interconnected systems. When one system fails, it frequently impacts others. His firm's unique approach addresses this complexity through a diverse portfolio of 12 in-house service providers handling nearly every aspect of building maintenance and management.

Kaufman highlights how common building amenities like automatic doors, elevators, climate control, and clean carpeting are often taken for granted. The Scientific Group ensures these elements are always operational by offering a one-stop self-performing solution for property managers.

Instead of juggling multiple service providers, clients can make a single call to access a full range of services, from engineering and electrical work to life safety, elevator repairs, specialized culinary janitorial services, appliance maintenance, and HVAC and refrigeration solutions. This not only simplifies the process but also enhances efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

On top of these coordinated services, The Scientific Group practices proactive problem solving by taking measures, when onsite, to deal with issues before they can become problems.

→ **Jeffrey Kaufman, CEO, The Scientific Group**

Self-performing not subcontracting

Kaufman learned firsthand that relying on subcontractors can lead to inconsistent service and competing client priorities. "You're only as good as your subcontractor," Kaufman discovered, which is why he purposely decided against outsourcing.

Although most facilities management companies rely on other independent service providers for support, Kaufman believes the only way to ensure clients receive fast solutions to problems is by employing skilled tradespeople. This self-performing business model eliminates the possibility of competing client priorities and improves the quality of service.

In his company, "each of the verticals operate independently, but work collaboratively to deliver the best product with minimal interruption and hassle for the client, at competitive pricing," Kaufman says.

Cultivating relationships

Central to The Scientific Group's success is its dedication to building, nurturing, and protecting strong client relationships. "We are relationship-driven," Kaufman confirms.

With a nearly 90 percent client retention rate, the company's focus on nurturing these connections is evident. Its client list is a who's who of corporate powerhouses with exacting standards and high expectations. The company's growth. Kaufman underscores that the company's ability to guarantee both the quality and delivery of service stems from its dedicated employees and proprietary technology.

According to Kaufman, "The Scientific Group's self-performing model, client-centric approach, and comprehensive service offerings position us as a leader in commercial building management, providing a reliable, efficient, and cost-effective solution for our clients."

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

Already Autism Health	NO132 2024 Ranking	2607% 3-Year Growth	367 Employees	$11M+ 2023 Revenue

Help for Families Who Need Comprehensive Autism Care

Already Autism Health strives to provide fast access to services for families with special needs children, increasing successful outcomes.

AUTISMTHERAPYUSA.COM

Derek Bullard, CEO of Already Autism Health, unwittingly followed in his mother's footsteps when she left the banking industry to pursue her dream of becoming a foster parent for a child with special needs. Bullard wanted to be a "big brother" and help his parents care for their 15-year-old foster son, going so far as to receive official training.

That action triggered far-reaching ripple effects.

About a week after earning his license as a foster parent, Bullard received a call from a social worker asking if he would consider temporarily taking in a 14-year-old boy named James. That placement lasted four years and shifted Bullard's entire career focus.

From employee to entrepreneur

The experience Bullard gained while serving as a foster parent became a passion, which lead to Bullard to launching his own organization in 1999: Access Family Services. Access Family Services was dedicated to serving children and adolescents with mental health issues. Access experienced significant growth during the next 14 years, twice making the Inc. 5000 list. In 2012, Bullard sold the company to a private equity group and retired two years later.

However, retirement didn't stick. Bullard missed the leadership team that made Access Family Services so effective. He missed the successes they achieved together, the challenges, and the camaraderie they developed. In 2020, he asked eight of them to join him in a new venture, Already Autism Health. They had built a mission-based company before, and he believed they could do it again.

More than just therapy

From the outset, what set Already Autism Health apart from its competition was its "comprehensive model," says Bullard. "From diagnosing to care management to ABA therapy," he says, "We aim to be a trusted partner for parents of children with autism." Several Already Autism Health staff are parents of children with autism or special needs. He explains, "They've navigated the system and understand the barriers to access to care." They also want to be helpful to families of children with autism and understand the unique challenges they face."

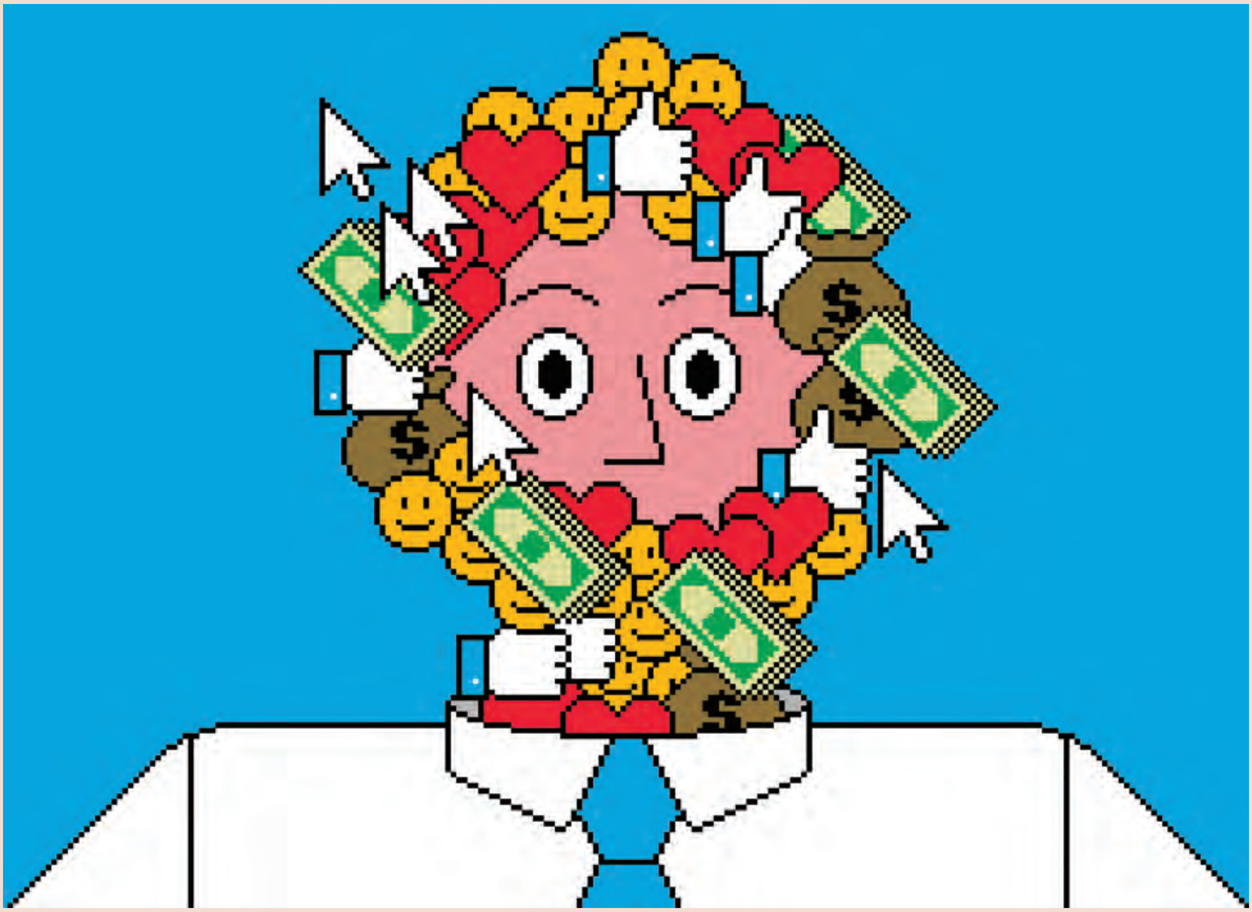
The health care landscape surrounding autism has changed dramatically in the last decade. There are now more advanced diagnostic tools, and every state now mandates autism treatment, Bullard explains. Consequently, "There is a huge need in the states we serve."

Although demand for the company's services has skyrocketed, for the immediate future the plan is to saturate Already Autism Health's existing service areas in North Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, and South Carolina.

→ **Derek Bullard, CEO, Already Autism Health**

"What makes our company so special is our team," Bullard says. "Our depth of experience, compassion, and that we are all willing to knock down barriers to ensure children get timely access to high quality care" is what differentiates us.

SALES & MARKETING



1 Formulate your talking points 2 Start selling faster 3 Pick a social platform
4 Grow your community 5 Survey smarter

1 Formulate Your TALKING POINTS

"If you're creative and you're not quite sure how to sell your idea, you have to make the rounds. You have to do the one-on-ones and figure out how people need to see the information. Then you reverse engineer it so you can hit the points they're looking to hit. **If you're able to come up with big, creative ideas, you should be able to sell the idea in bite-size pieces."**

Bozoma Saint John
Former marketing executive for Uber, Apple, Netflix, and PepsiCo

Inc. 5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

TACTACAM	NO352	1,244%	322	800K+
	2024 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Employees	Customers

Trailblazing Outdoor Camera Technology

Originally developed to give hunters an edge, Tactacam cameras are now used in a wide variety of outdoor video applications.

TACTACAM.COM

The hunting community is close-knit, so in 2013 when husband-and-wife hunters Jeff and Tara Peel set out on a weekend trip in Wisconsin and met fellow hunter Ben Stern, they became fast friends.

Stern had developed a new hunting camera to allow his aging grandfather to share the experience. Branded as Tactacam, the point-of-view camera could be mounted to a bow or rifle to record a video of the hunt, which could then be shared with his grandfather to allow him to see what Stern saw out in the woods. Stern gave one to the Peels to try; they were immediately impressed.

A few months later when word got out that Stern wanted to sell Tactacam, the Peels proposed working together. The Peels, Stern, and a fourth partner, Ben Thorud, then united to scale the outdoor camera business.

Disrupting the market

It was clear that Tactacam was going to be big when the Peels went to their first weekend trade show and sold out of the 200 cameras they had in stock.

The Peels actually spent their first summer with Tactacam hopping from trade show to trade show across the U.S., four kids and a dog in tow. They attended trade shows on weekends, and at night Peel would go back to the hotel room and pack up cameras to ship out the next morning.

"You hear stories of entrepreneurs building a business out of their garage, and we built Tactacam out of a trailer," chief operating officer Tara Peel says.

Once the camera had proven itself in the hunting market, Tactacam began exploring other applications. Trail cameras were the natural next step, which was launched as the Reveal Trail Camera line in 2020.

What distinguished Tactacam, explains Peel, is that "With cellular technology, your camera can take pictures, and you don't have to go out into the field to retrieve the SD card—it just gets sent to your app."

Next, the team heard from customers that a remote security camera was also needed, so Tactacam developed the Defend line. The company's smart bird feeder, FeatherSnap has been the most recent addition to the line. Retailers including Walmart, Bass Pro, Cabela's, and SCHEELS currently stock Tactacam products.

Customer service focus

Although Tactacam gained attention with its state-of-the-art technology, its customer service has won loyal customers. "One hundred percent of our customer service agents are U.S.-based, and they're passionate about the outdoors and our products, so they can talk the talk with our customers," Peel says.

"We get excited about connecting people to the outdoors, whether it's fueling your passion with trail cameras, protecting your passion with our security line, or opening your window to the wild with our bird products," Peel says.

→ **Tactacam gained attention with its state-of-the-art technology.**

2 Start Selling FASTER

“Sales is the number-one thing you need to learn as a business owner.” That’s according to Brian Town, a fractional CMO and serial entrepreneur who is the owner and CEO of Michigan Creative, a Lansing-based creative agency. It’s not enough to have a great product or service, Town says, entrepreneurs must prioritize sales skills to succeed. Here’s what he says to focus on.

STOP TALKING—JUST LISTEN
Let customers bring up problems or objections that can be individually addressed.

FIND THE FACTS BEHIND THE FEELINGS
Resonating with emotions is a useful sales tactic when trying to land a new client.

BREAK DOWN THE NUMBERS
Arrange money conversations into brackets. Offer up ballpark numbers tied to deliverables and ask what’s doable.

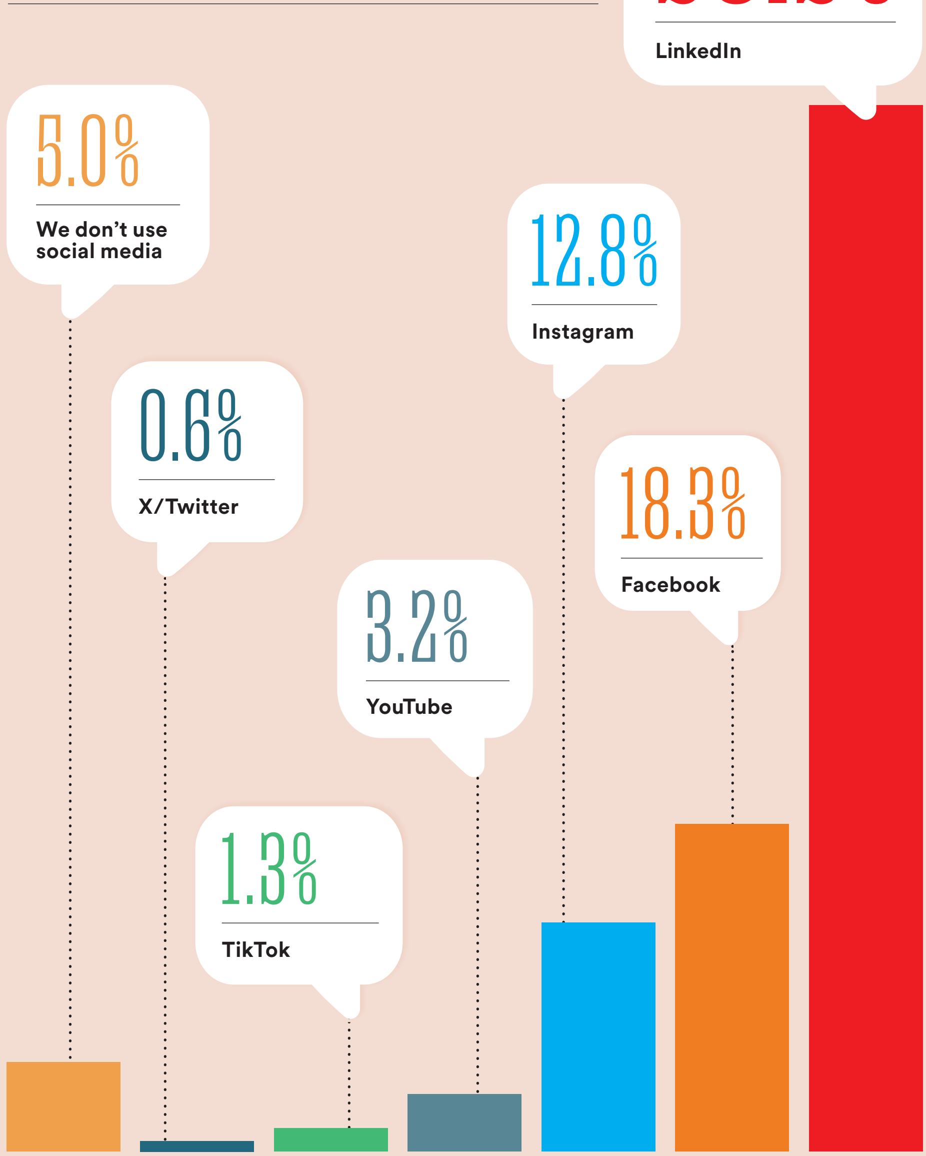
MENTOR YOUR SALESPEOPLE
Record sales conversations and have your salespeople listen and respond to them.

EMBRACE THE WORD NO
The faster a customer says no (and really means it), the more time salespeople can save versus waiting for those who say, “I’ll think about it.”

3 Pick a SOCIAL PLATFORM

According to Mike Fiebach, founder and CEO of Philadelphia-based e-commerce service Mainfactor, a 2024 Inc. 5000 honoree, the most important part of a social media strategy is being thoughtful about whom you’re trying to reach: “I think it’s better to be excellent at one platform than mediocre at three.”

The most important SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS to Inc. 5000 CEOs



Source: 2024 Inc. 5000 CEO Survey

COURTESY SUBJECT (SAINT JOHN); GETTY IMAGES (HANDS)

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

CABINET RESTYLERS	NO 2311 2024 Ranking	226% 3-Year Growth	60 Employees	HQ Ashland, Ohio

Cabinet Door Maker Views Challenge as the Doorway to Growth

For Cabinet Restylers, a nearly 60-year-old family-owned business, a dedicated workforce and manufacturing process improvement fuels growth.

CABINETRESTYLERS.COM

Based in Ashland, Ohio, Cabinet Restylers provides custom kitchen cabinetry to the remodeling industry across the United States. Along with earning a spot on this year's Inc. 5000, the company ranked No. 56 on the magazine's list of the fastest-growing businesses in the manufacturing industry.

The family-owned business got its start in 1967 as a retail cabinet restyling provider but no longer sells directly to homeowners. Nevertheless, Eric Thiel, who took over as president 27 years ago, says: "We have the end user in mind every day."

Besides making sure everyone at Cabinet Restylers stays laser-focused on satisfying those who will have the products installed in their kitchens, Thiel points to another key reason for the company's rapid rise.

"The most important factor in being able to grow our company is that we continually challenge our processes and our people," Thiel says.

Processes and planning

Along with Cabinet Restylers's fast growth came the realization that manufacturing processes can break down when volume goes up. That's why company leaders are constantly monitoring and investing in improvements in the way things are done. "We put our processes on trial every six months," Thiel says.

Those upgrades in operations have enabled Cabinet Restylers to fill orders in seven to 10 days, compared to the three to six weeks Thiel says is the typical turnaround in kitchen remodeling. The company also guarantees that if a customer reports a problem with any of its doors by 10:30 a.m.—no matter the cause of the error—it will have a replacement shipped the same day.

Thiel also credits the company's ability to self-fund its improvements with helping to accelerate its growth. Company leaders turned to that financing method after their bank called in the note on a building loan during the 2008 recession, when lenders were wary of being involved in the homebuilding and remodeling industries.

"That's when we decided that we needed to become better money managers and better planners," Thiel says.

Better workplace, better world

Thiel proudly shares that employees at Cabinet Restylers embrace its mottos: Do the Right Thing. Pursue Excellence. People Matter. Create Urgency. In return for that dedication, the company is committed to providing employees with the tools they need to succeed, Thiel says.

Cabinet Restylers is also committed to sharing its prosperity with others through charitable donations and service.

"We believe in giving back to our community and organizations throughout the world," says Thiel. "We believe we're called to help others because we have been blessed by so many people."

→ Eric Thiel, owner, Cabinet Restylers, in one of the company's remodeled kitchens

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

ROYALTY LOGISTICS	NO 3381 2024 Inc. 5000 Ranking	20 Employees	144% 3-Year Growth	2018 Year Founded

Automation and Customer Attention Drive This Company's Growth

Royalty Logistics regrouped during the pandemic to work on scalability and is now reaping the rewards.

ROYALTYSHIPS.COM

Rachel Blatt had the seed of entrepreneurship planted at a very young age. Her father was the first employee at Compuware, a startup that later became a billion-dollar publicly traded company.

After watching Compuware grow as she herself grew up, she also landed her first corporate job with the company. There, she began to learn the art of sales. When she stepped into the auto industry she incorporated her tech knowledge, becoming a top performer.

Blatt had the opportunity to work for three different companies before deciding to do it better on her own. In 2018, she founded Royalty Logistics. "I fell in love with the industry, the customers, and saw tons of opportunity," she says. The company focuses on moving vehicles, working primarily with dealers and original equipment manufacturers, but is working on expanding its offerings.

Get to know yourself

During the pandemic, Royalty hit a pothole and business ground to a halt. Blatt says she learned a lot about herself and the needs of the company. She dedicated herself to rebuilding a company that could scale. Royalty is a certified woman-owned business with deep resources and support. She invested time and money in training through the Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC), learning from sales consultant Grant Cardone, and implementing the Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS).

Because finding the right talent is challenging, Blatt is working to make the company more reliant on technology, including adding automation and finding ways to use artificial intelligence (AI) effectively. "When you're small like we are now, you can make the changes quickly without the red tape," she says. The multimillion-dollar company operates as a lean 20-person operation where each person knows exactly what's expected of them, allowing them to flourish.

Accountability and AI have been the key contributing factors to Royalty's success. By sharing responsibility and leadership, she has time to create new systems and develop training that allows employees to perform with excellence. She's worked with her team to get clear on the vision and developed more structure where everyone can thrive.

"We are getting systematic so that every single aspect of our business becomes scalable," she says.

Differentiate through service

Another growth factor is Royalty's customer attention. "We give them what they want and what they didn't know they wanted," Blatt says. That means communicating with customers and spending time with them and implementing world-class technology to ensure they get the best value, with all shipments delivered safely and on time.

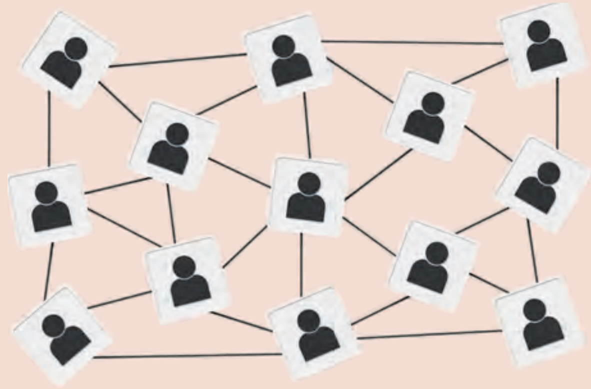
→ **Rachel Blatt, founder and CEO, Royalty Logistics**

For Blatt, success comes down to attention to detail and understanding what customers want. "We stay with our customers through the entire process and are attentive," she says. "We're always getting better, and customers can expect that."

4 Grow Your COMMUNITY

The secret to a successful company? Get customers talking to one another, says Gina Bianchini, co-founder and CEO of Mighty Networks. Her Palo Alto, California-based software company, which has raised over $50 million in funding since its founding in 2017, allows creators, brands (including Inc.), and nonprofits to build bespoke online communities, content, and courses for their customers.

Last December, Mighty's data science team started digging into the numbers to predict whether companies using the platform will successfully monetize their communities. They found, with 93 percent accuracy, a single determining factor: whether members were connecting with one another through comments, DMs, or group chats. So how do you get your audience to do that?



FIND COMMONALITIES
Too often, online conversations are dominated by a few loud voices, making it less likely that others will connect. At the start of the year, Mighty launched tools to enhance collaboration, like conversation starters and AI features that help members discover other people they might have things in common with.

MAKE SMALL TALK
Asking deep or involved questions of your following can overwhelm them. Instead, ask a very concrete question that someone can answer in less than 15 seconds. What's the first app you open in the morning? In a restaurant, do you order sparkling, still, or tap water? It's a stress-free way to get the conversation started.

FIND PEOPLE IN TRANSITION
People who are going through life changes are often most interested in trying new things, and they're often looking online for information and support. "People don't pay for content—they pay for progress," says Bianchini. "We define an ideal member as somebody in a transition."

GETTY IMAGES (WEB, CLIPBOARD)

5 Survey SMARTER

Surveys have become much cheaper—and faster—to create than ever before, making them one of the best ways for companies to gain insight into how their products are landing with customers, and to make data-informed updates.

But consumers report high levels of dissatisfaction with the length and frequency of surveys, which, of course, tends to hurt participation. Here are suggestions from experts and business owners who've learned how to gather data without alienating customers.

DECIDE IF THE JUICE WORTH THE SQUEEZE
Like a lot of organizations, Kruze Consulting was initially motivated to capture every ounce of data from its clients—a roster of 580 venture-backed startups—sending surveys after nearly every interaction. When clients started complaining, the company toned it down. It now sends out only two surveys a year. "We have so many customers, I can kind of spread them out and get some good data," says Healy Jones, VP of finance.

LEAN ON AI
Some companies are, unsurprisingly, leaning into artificial intelligence to glean more insights into their customers' tastes. The Los Angeles-based startup Crate uses AI to build customer personas—based on interviews with actual customers—that it claims predict what customers want before they express it. "Now you can talk to five people, put it in a model, and it can spit out 100 different personas," Crate founder Anna Bofa told Inc.

STICK TO JUST ONE QUESTION
For Keap Candles, surveys are typically brief and casual. "We do short, one-question surveys," says founder Harry Doull. "'What do you think about this?' Or 'What do you prefer among these options?'"

DON'T MANIPULATE
Andrea Godfrey Flynn, a marketing professor at the University of San Diego, sees companies request feedback in a manipulative way, "like, 'Please give us a 10 out of 10.' Or, 'If there's any reason you wouldn't give us a 10 out of 10, let us know.'" She says this tactic defeats the purpose of feedback: "If you're just manipulating customers to give you a perfect score ... you don't really want honest feedback. You're just wasting everybody's time."

Inc. 5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

MONTWAY AUTO TRANSPORT	NO4643	86%	6X	100K
	2024 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Inc. 5000 Honoree	Online Customer Reviews

A Leader in Auto Transport Builds on a Proven Strategy

Here's how Montway Auto Transport, a six-time Inc. 5000 honoree, drives continued growth across its retail and business-solutions sectors.

MONTWAY.COM

Thomas Gartland, chairman and CEO of the top-rated auto transport company Montway Auto Transport, makes being a six-time Inc. 5000 honoree sound almost simple. First, you develop a strategy and continually refine it. Next, you get the right people in the right jobs and execute together.

"Inspect what you expect. Manage the execution. When I get up in the morning, I go through a whole set of KPI documents to understand 'What happened yesterday?'" Gartland shares. While the approach is straightforward, every business owner knows the magic—and the challenge—lies in the execution. Montway's focus on customer service, smart strategy refinements, and clever ideas for driving sales amount to yet another Inc. 5000 honor for the category leader and lay the groundwork for more growth.

Building on a reputation of customer satisfaction

Montway has provided automotive transport services to more than one million individuals since its launch in 2007. The company's Net Promoter Score of 78 far surpasses the industry average. Google searches for "Montway" are up over 20 percent year-over-year thanks to repeat business and referrals. Gartland and his team leverage their reputation to forge partnerships with organizations that recommend Montway to their clients or members. Two exciting partnerships are nearly finalized and will be announced later this year. "These partnerships are unique," Gartland says. "No other company in the industry has these relationships. They will serve as exciting new ways of reaching consumers and be a huge growth lever for us next year ."

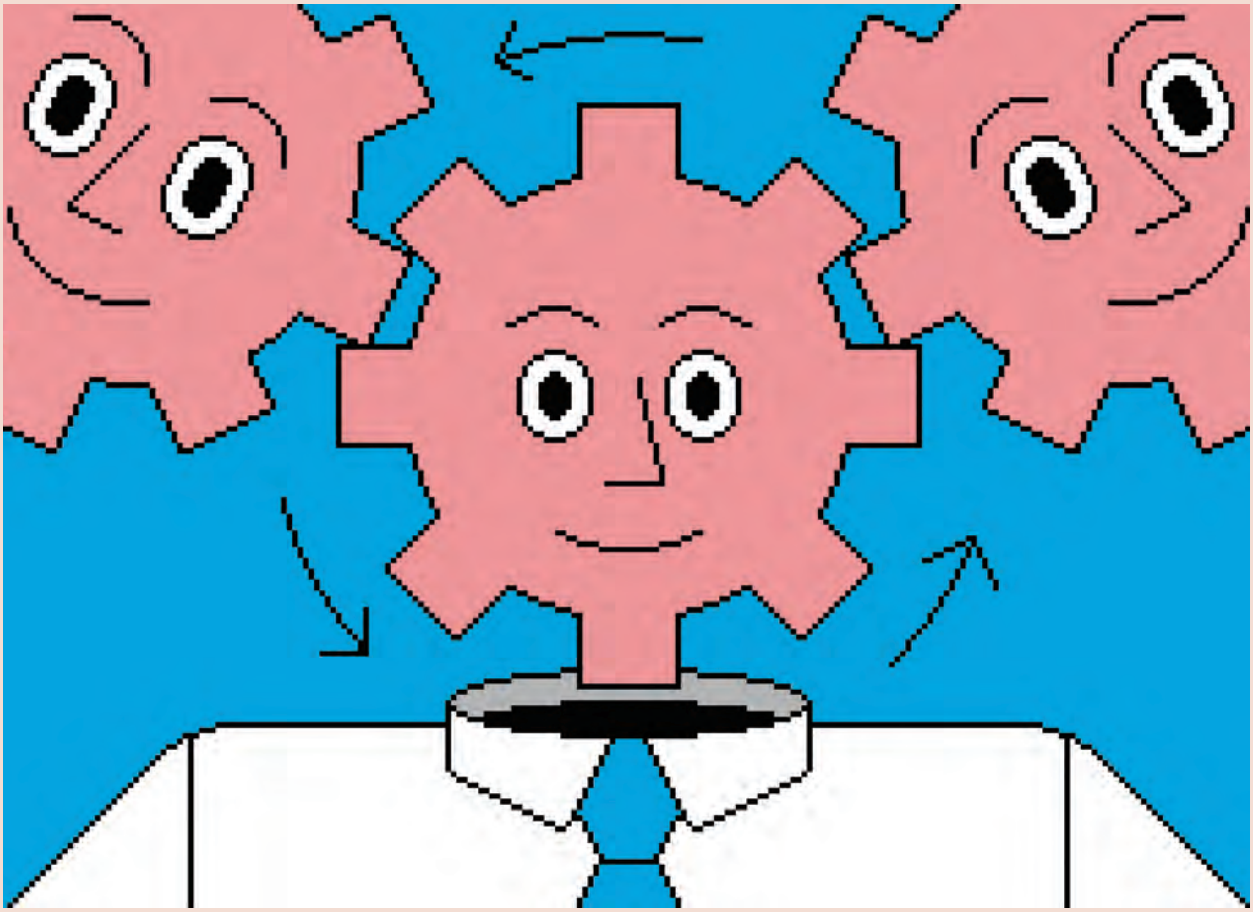
A bright future for the business-solutions sector

Montway serves business clients in numerous industries, including automotive sales, remarketing, manufacturing, moving and relocation, and finance. This year, the company integrated one-click transportation booking into the EDGE Pipeline platform, an online marketplace. In 2023, Montway's business solutions sector grew by 40 percent year-over-year. Half of this growth was through mergers and acquisitions. For example, Montway acquired an automotive transport company that provides lower-cost services to customers who may not have the budget for Montway's differentiated five-star experience. Organic growth, particularly a field sales initiative launched in 2023, fuels the other 20 percent. "Starting a national field sales team was a significant investment. Now that we have momentum, we've added over a thousand new business customers and generated millions in revenue," Gartland explains.

→ **Thomas Gartland, chairman and CEO, Montway Auto Transport**

As part of its strategy, Montway continues to invest in technology. It recently launched real-time vehicle shipment tracking to provide retail customers with more visibility, in partnership with the technology provider Ship.Cars. Montway also remains committed to preserving its Great Place to Work Certification. Gartland notes that the company's 400-plus employees have fun while delivering best-in-class service to individuals and business customers. Montway not only has the strategy in place for more growth, it also has the people.

BUSINESS PRODUCTIVITY

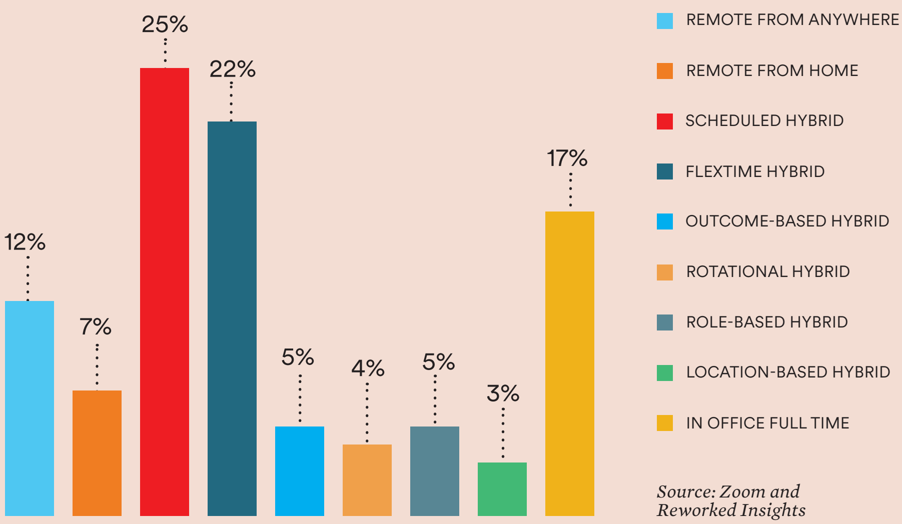


1

Gauge Your WORKPLACE

1. Gauge your workplace
2. Manage remote workers effectively
3. Optimize for hybrid work
4. Audit your SaaS contracts

BREAKDOWN OF WORKPLACE MODELS



Source: Zoom and Reworked Insights

THE WISER AGENCY	NO1686	308%	2X	HQ
	2024 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Inc. 5000 Honoree	Austin, Texas

The Unconventional Founder Shaking up IT Services

The Wiser Agency is making IT service business millionaires with progressive thinking, purposeful execution, and no-nonsense communication style.

THEWISERAGENCY.COM

There's a Reddit channel devoted to talking trash about Chris Wiser. People have posted that he is cocky or selling results that are too good to be true. But Wiser doesn't mind. In fact, his company sells "Chris Wiser Sucks" T-shirts. "You get polarizing when you are dealing with an industry that has never changed," he explains. Some IT services professionals cling to how things have always been done. Most are introverted and risk averse, Wiser says. That's the opposite of his approach.

His coaching program, 7 Figure MSP, a Wiser Agency brand, challenges entrepreneurs to think bigger, expand their mindset, and, ultimately, increase sales. A few of its clients earned their first Inc. 5000 win this year. This is The Wiser Agency's second Inc. 5000 designation. This one is more significant than the win in 2022, because triple-digit revenue growth is harder to achieve as your annual revenue increases, Wiser explains. "We are five-times bigger than we were two years ago. Being on the list again shows the continued stability, the continued growth, and the continued success of the program."

→ Chris Wiser, founder and CEO, The Wiser Agency

Creating riches in niches

Wiser isn't concerned with the digital naysayers, although he does enjoy it when doubters become believers. "But purpose is more important," he says. His drive is to change an industry and help clients become millionaires. He will continue to add services to solve different challenges for managed service providers (MSPs). The Wiser Agency is comprised of six brands, including a law firm, and will soon launch an accounting business catering to IT services companies. Wiser understands this space intimately, having launched a PC store right out of high school, followed by an IT services company that he grew into a seven-figure business and sold in 2015. "I had a natural propensity towards technology; I was just good at it," he explains. He was also good at growing the business, deploying unique tactics that he later packaged and "productized" for IT business leaders. These strategies can be applied to any industry, he says. "The overall rule of thumb is riches in niches. It's just a matter of focusing on a specific vertical."

Give 'em cars, not horses

Much of the IT industry dismissed Wiser's strategies five years ago, he says. His strategies included deploying virtual services and digital technologies to expand a company's pool of prospective clients. While IT firms have historically operated as regional businesses, Wiser helps clients become national or even international firms. He believes cybersecurity companies can charge ten-times their current rate by evolving from a break-fix approach—where they reactively address problems and charge for time or per computer—to a managed services approach—where they charge an ongoing fee and provide preventative services. In addition to earning rates previously unheard of in some cities and countries, this progressive approach also leads to better protection for clients—an important point given the rise of cyber threats.

> The overall rule of thumb is riches in niches. It's just a matter of focusing on a specific vertical.
>
> —Chris Wiser, founder and CEO, The Wiser Agency

Wiser pushes mindset changes, too, urging business owners to be leaders, not doers, and to focus on revenue and scale above all else. One thousand clients could sign up tomorrow and 7 Figure MSP wouldn't skip a beat, he says, because of its delivery model, which includes providing coaching in group settings rather than through one-on-one sessions. "That was not what clients wanted. But you know the Henry Ford quote, 'If I asked the people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.' They wouldn't have wanted a car. As entrepreneurs, we can't be afraid to be visionary or to be polarizing," he says.

→ **Wiser wants to change an industry and help clients become millionaires.**

Deliberate execution

Despite his conviction in his strategies, Wiser is quick to share credit. Talented employees are crucial to the company's success. "I consider myself a master delegator. I put a system in place, then pull myself out. I let my team run their show. With high-level performers, you have to throw them in the deep end of the pool and be like, okay, you're supposed to be here, you better start swimming."

Once someone joins the team, they see how much thought goes into every decision. Wiser's communication style is straightforward and casual, but he is relentlessly focused on execution. He brings new ideas to life quickly and embraces calculated risk. "Most people think that it's all luck, when in reality it's so much about execution," he explains. "It is about making a plan and not being afraid to stray from it, but always moving forward."

2 Manage Remote Workers EFFECTIVELY

"When our work is more complex, measuring productivity is difficult," says Chris Bailey, an author focused on productivity. Even the various apps that claim to gauge it likely won't give you the full picture, he adds: "Productivity is not busyness. So many of these measures of productivity are one-dimensional." When remote work is added to the mix and managers lose touchpoints, it becomes even more difficult to keep teams on track, says Robert C. Pozen, senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Yet effective remote management can be as simple as following two rules.

SET CLEAR PRIORITIES

The first step for company leaders in improving productivity should be developing clear priorities, says Maura Thomas, an expert speaker on corporate productivity and time management—not just any priorities, but "the highest and best responsibility" for each role in the company. That way, Thomas says, employees can come to their leaders and say: "You've told me this is the highest and best use of my time. So, these are all the things on my plate. These are the most important. This is what I'm going to work on this week." In developing those priorities, consider input from team members themselves, Pozen says: "They may, in fact, have a very different view of what good customer service is," for example, and thus what the top priority for a customer service representative should be. Taking in these additional insights will help leaders better "understand and clarify" what the team should be doing.

KEEP PEOPLE ON TRACK

Once leaders and employees align on priorities, check-ins from leaders should be pointed and minimal. Bailey cites advice from J.D. Meier, the former head coach for Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella's innovation team, and posits that leaders who ask team members about their top three projects will help those employees better prioritize. Just try not to disrupt the remote workday unnecessarily with these check-ins. Thomas notes that remote workers often feel pressured to be immediately responsive lest they be perceived as slacking off. That pressure can distract them from their work, and if you've set clear priorities, this kind of micromanaging will be redundant, Pozen says. Indeed, says Bailey, it's as simple as assessing "whether people were able to do what they intended to do. That's my personal definition of productivity—when we achieve what we intended to achieve."

3 Optimize for HYBRID WORK

It might mean rethinking processes and old habits, but a hybrid schedule can offer real benefits.

When it comes to workplaces, the new normal is hybrid. On average, companies in the U.S. require two to three days of in-person work per week, which workers seem to prefer. Research from Harvard Business School found that employees who spent two days a week at the office reported "greater work-life balance, more job satisfaction, and lower isolation from colleagues."

Creating a hybrid routine that works efficiently, however, might require some workflow updates and mindset shifts: "It's really important for organizations to not focus on how many days a week they're in the office, but what types of activities you should do when you go to the office," says Naomi Titleman Colla, founder of Toronto-based talent consulting company Collaborativity. Follow these hybrid best practices to get optimizing.

BE INTENTIONAL

In-person workdays should be grounded in social interaction, collaboration, and relationship building, say experts. Take advantage of being in the same room to work on things like trainings, onboarding new employees, mentoring junior workers, and brainstorming new projects. "That makes people feel like their office trip was worth the commute," says Rob Sadow, co-founder and CEO of carpooling app Scoop. Remote days, then, should be for heads-down work such as reading, writing, research, and analysis—activities best done in a quiet place with few disruptions, says Collaborativity's Titleman Colla.

CUT BACK ON MEETINGS

To combat meeting creep, companies can trim down the number of virtual meetings, empower employees to decline invites to certain meetings, and set boundaries for when meetings can be held. At Scoop, Sadow implemented a no-meeting Wednesday rule and found that carving out time in the middle of the week was an effective way for people to knock out their priorities, which were set on Monday and Tuesday.

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GETTY IMAGES (BULL'S-EYE, COMPUTER)

Inc. 5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

LEGACY	NO 1106	463%	45	3
	2024 Ranking	3-Year Growth	Employees	Locations

Meet the Consulting Firm Ushering in a Retail Renaissance

Headquartered near the home of the world's largest retailer, Legacy Retail has driven growth for its advisory services by focusing on the essentials.

LEGACYRETAIL.COM

The largest retailers are only getting bigger and more complex. Each retailer's approach is different and requires deep knowledge of their merchandising strategies and process. Legacy Retail has grown its business on this knowledge, landing a spot on the latest Inc. 5000 list for the second year in a row.

Founded in Rogers, Arkansas, near one of the most prolific retailers, Walmart, Legacy's location has helped the company develop its capabilities and understand how to create value for its clients. The region's retail ecosystem helped it attract cross-functional teammates including some of the most talented people working in retail. Offices in Issaquah, Washington, Costco's home base, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, which boasts Target headquarters, helped the company grow its expertise as well as its head count.

Building long-term relationships

Today, Legacy Retail works with both retailers and manufacturers, helping develop great product designs and identifying the best manufacturers for private label brands. Leaders at Legacy Retail point to three primary factors in the company's success: client retention, strong financials, and a high-performance team, says co-founder JD Hayes.

"We don't have a lot of churn," says co-founder Clint Lazenby. "Like a marriage, we are looking for the right partners and clients, then we work alongside them to make it happen and grow their businesses, creating long-term client relationships," he says. Part of that "client stickiness" is rooted in the company's pivot to a true consultancy, helping clients solve their most pressing challenges and providing strategic insight and advice.

→ **Clint Lazenby (left) and JD Hayes, co-founders, Legacy Retail**

Hayes and Lazenby also have learned important lessons from Walmart, adopting a disciplined approach to their own company's financials. "Having strong financials allows our organization to control our own destiny," Hayes says. "We're not beholden to banks, private equity, or other investors. We have been able to build this business in a sustainable way by focusing on doing the right thing."

Cultivating outcome-driven teammates

The firm's hiring strategy focuses on finding people who can deliver the outcomes the company needs to achieve, rather than focusing on academic credentials. "We attract a lot of incredible people who often are overlooked. Our philosophy enables them to accomplish their dreams and makes them incredibly passionate about what we do," Lazenby says, adding that some teammates (the term the company prefers to employees) will even occasionally show up dressed as mascots for the brands they're assigned to work with.

The company aims to foster a work environment encouraging fun and culture where honest communication is encouraged, and all ideas can be presented or challenged. "We want to attract amazing humans, people who are passionate about their work, their community, our industry, the brands, and the clients we work with," Hayes says.

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

STAR	NO1936	271%	$52M	229
	2024 Ranking	3-Year Growth	2023 Revenue	Employees

An Exhibit in Success

How Minneapolis trade show company STAR went from an idea to a $70-million business by putting clients and staff first.

ENGAGESTAR.COM

When Mark Johnson founded STAR, a Minneapolis-based trade show company, in 1993, there wasn't much outside-the-box thinking in his industry. Agencies would ask clients for the date of their trade show and the size and color of their booth, and that was about it.

Johnson saw an opportunity to be different.

People-first vision

"We wanted to be the Nordstrom of the trade show industry," says the company co-founder and CEO. "We wanted to have customer intimacy as our No. 1 business model, by asking our clients about their ideal customer, find out what made them different, and ultimately become an extension of our client's marketing departments."

That vision has been central to its success. During the last 31 years, Johnson, along with his growing team of 229 employees across four offices in the U.S., has gone from building trade show exhibits to creating retail store and corporate interior environments to delivering experiential marketing, strategy, and activations that build brands and grow business. One memorable campaign was with the power tool company Craftsman. They developed a tool-themed superhero character and comic book and erected an elaborate green-screen booth at the New York Comic Con, all to target a younger, untapped demographic.

That kind of creativity has helped STAR generate $70 million in revenue in 2024, up from $28 million in 2021.

Perseverance is paramount

STAR's rise hasn't been linear. Crisis first hit a few months after the company launched, with Johnson tragically losing his business partner to cancer. There have also been economic downturns, changes in trade show trends and the debilitating effects of Covid. Yet, STAR persevered—attracting clients like 3M, Pella, Red Wing Shoes, and Sherwin-Williams—always emphasizing close client relationships and transparency in pricing.

Most important to STAR's success, though, is its team. "The mission of the company from the very beginning was to take care of its people," he says. "In turn, we can provide innovative and cost-effective solutions for our customers."

Johnson wants to push growth even further before he eventually retires. The company has started acquiring other businesses, including Featherlite Exhibits, a portable and modular exhibiting solution, and Exhibitor Media Group, the publisher of *Exhibitor Magazine.* He wants to further expand STAR's global presence within the next two years, which could help it reach $100 million in revenue.

→ Mark Johnson, CEO, STAR

Ultimately, the company's entire mission is to make every client "a star," says Johnson. "That really ties it all together. When you think about how we're building trust with customers, our transparent pricing, our culture of service, the family feeling—we're trying to make clients stars and our team members stars, so the mission always rings true."

Inc.5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

MARCELLA NEW YORK	NO577 2024 Ranking	780% 3-Year Growth	61 Employees	3X Inc. 5000 Honoree

The Fashion Business Model, Reimagined

Marcella is disrupting the designer fashion industry with its unique blend of timeless aesthetics, near-zero textile waste, and social impact.

MARCELLANYC.COM

Leaving corporate America to bootstrap the women's designer fashion brand Marcella, husband-and-wife duo Andy and Siyana Huszar quickly recognized that they would need to reimagine the entire fashion business model.

Adopting a conventional approach couldn't be profitable while still being ethical, sustainable, and socially impactful. As a result, Marcella rethought the fashion process from top to bottom, shrinking the time to market, minimizing textile waste, and boosting profitability, all the while advancing women and girls across the brand's every aspect, says Siyana, co-founder and chief creative officer.

Minimalist designer fashion with a mission

Marcella's distinctive "minimalism with an edge" clothing, shoes, and accessories are designed in New York City and handcrafted in Europe's traditional textile hub, Bulgaria.

Siyana initially launched the brand on Etsy in 2011, following in the footsteps of her grandmother Marcella, the brand's namesake and a famous fashion designer in Bulgaria. A part-time hobby grew to become Etsy's number two top-grossing clothing brand, out of 2.5 million sellers, by 2017, when co-founder and CEO Andy convinced Siyana that they should both quit their finance jobs to create America's next big-impact fashion brand.

One of the main ways that Marcella differentiates itself, says Andy, is that "we really only make what we can sell." The combination of timeless essentials and a "just-in-time" supply chain enables Marcella to sell more than 90 percent of its production at or near full price, a figure no less than 50 percent higher than the fashion industry average.

→ **Co-founders Andrew Huszar (left), CEO, and Siyana Huszar (right), chief creative officer, Marcella**

The result of thoughtful bootstrapping, "Marcella has become so effective at eliminating inventory risk that it's able to keep prices at 25 percent to 75 percent less than the competition and still invest fully in social motivation," says Andy. This highly customer-resonating value proposition has allowed Marcella to grow its sales 24 times in the last 56 months.

Fueling an impact brand

Marcella's holistic approach to sustainability drives its profitability and mission. Relying on sophisticated forecasting algorithms and dynamic vertical integration for supply chain management, Marcella dramatically reduces the company's ecological footprint while achieving exceptional capital savings for the fashion industry. The resulting profits ensure that every Marcella garment worker enjoys a truly living wage, generous benefits, and free health care.

For every sale, the company additionally supports three days of school for a marginalized girl in partnership with the nonprofit organization CAMFED. Since 2021, Marcella has funded more than 900,000 school days for girls.

"Andy and I are both people who believe that business today can't just be about a product, no matter how good," Siyana says. "It has to be about something more—about making a larger impact in society."

Inc. 5000
COMPANY SPOTLIGHT

CEDAR GATE TECHNOLOGIES	NO 427 2024 Software Ranking	116% 3-Year Growth	1036 Employees	$124M 2024 Revenue

This Technology Company Wants to Improve Health Care

Cedar Gate Technologies' data-rich platform is helping industry players provide better care and making value-based care easier to manage.

CEDARGATE.COM

Ever since David B. Snow Jr. launched his career in the 1980s, the veteran health care executive has wanted to fix what he viewed as a broken system. "I saw how perverse fee-for-service incentives were and how they contributed to poor clinical and financial outcomes," says the chairman and CEO of Cedar Gate Technologies.

Since then, Snow has advocated for a value-based health care system, which encourages proactive care to keep patients healthy versus the existing model, which focuses entirely on volume, without accountability for patient outcomes.

In 2014, as health care shifted to a value-focused approach, Snow launched Cedar Gate Technologies. The Connecticut-based software platform offers health care analytics, care management, and payment technology. At the time, payers, providers, and self-funded employers that wanted to pursue value-based care (VBC) were using point solutions to address various aspects of care, but Cedar Gate offers an all-in-one solution. "I wanted to build an end-to-end platform that did it all, with an underlying data management system built over a single source of truth," he says.

→ **David B. Snow Jr., chairman and CEO, Cedar Gate Technologies**

Helping clients help themselves

Cedar Gate was early to the VBC game. With the federal government, commercial payers, and self-insured employers seeking more affordable health care, the company's services are increasingly in demand. Today it has more than 1,000 employees and expects to hit $124 million in revenue in 2024. "We skated to where we thought the puck was going," David laughs. "And now, the puck has arrived."

Cedar Gate's platform analyzes an array of data points to improve patient care and performance. For example, by looking at a surgical outcome, a hospital can spot outliers—such as doctors with avoidable complications or high readmission rates—that indicate why someone is underperforming. The data also surfaces opportunities to improve care quality and lower costs.

Clients can use the platform to forecast performance and build successful lines of business in alternative payment models, such as prospective bundles and capitation, which show promise to reduce total cost of care without sacrificing quality. "We are the great enabler for those who want to succeed at value-based care," Snow says.

Embracing an AI-powered future

Going forward, Snow says the company is implementing generative AI to find patterns in the petabytes of data within its database. The company has remarkably accurate AI models that predict which patients will be diagnosed with four chronic diseases within a year. "There's so much more you can do to avoid the acute onset of disease," Snow says. "You can avoid diagnosis for some of the costliest chronic conditions patients manage today, with the potential to save billions in health care costs."

While some are still reluctant to embrace this shift to VBC, change is coming, and Cedar Gate is leading the charge. "We're change agents," says Snow. "We're trying to make a difference."

MIND THE MEDIUM

Virtual meetings are more productive for one-way communication, like a presentation or even a Q&A. Meanwhile, in-person gatherings are better for collaboration, two-way engagement, and fostering social engagement. "There should be a point in the agenda that allows for relationship building," says Titleman Colla. "It may feel unproductive, but it's exactly what needs to be done when you're together."

BUDGET FOR FUN

One of the ways to make the most of your in-person time is to organize regular events together outside of the workplace. For most teams, budgeting for fun every 90 days, or once a quarter, is the happy medium. "Just getting to know one another as human beings—that's the currency that you don't get the same way if you're not in the office five days a week," says Sadow.

4 Audit Your SAAS CONTRACTS

If you need to cut costs fast, take a good hard look at your SaaS subscriptions.

When Birju Shah unexpectedly had to cut costs a Loam, his AI-powered sustainability startup, he didn't have much wiggle room on head count. So he looked at his SaaS contracts. At the time, he was spending around $70,000 each month on software subscriptions. "Every time I hire an employee, besides the typical thing where you're thinking about their salary and benefits, you're now thinking about the SaaS licenses," like Gmail and Slack, says Shah, who teaches at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. He adds that by ditching or renegotiating unnecessary licenses, he was able to cut his SaaS expenses in half—to $35,000 a month—and bought Loam an extra six months to chase financial stability. His tips:

CONDUCT AN AUDIT

The first step to reducing SaaS expenditures is to conduct an audit. At Loam, Shah says, he often thinks of SaaS products through the framework of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: They're sometimes a high-level luxury, not a low-level necessity. He gauges how often each product actually gets used. If it's only a few times a month or year, Shah says, "I'm paring those back to lower-tier versions, or actually cutting them overall."

SHOP AROUND

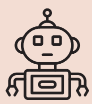
Some tools are too important to cut out completely. With those, Shah says, he'll buy a cheaper alternative, or figure out which workflows depend on a particular B2B platform, then hire international developers to build him a cheap, custom version of a tool he would otherwise need to license. He recommends looking for developers formerly employed at the international branches of big American tech firms.

RENEGOTIATE

If Shah's experience with a platform has been underwhelming, he'll ask for a discount. "I'm pretty ruthless with negotiating," he tells Inc. "I've received HubSpot free for two years, just by saying I'm going to switch." He will also switch to a lifetime license of a platform if it creates a cost savings, though a provider may want a cut of the profits if its product helps improve your performance.

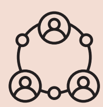
SELL YOUR DATA

"If you have some unique data set that you're giving to these SaaS platforms, it is actually not the hardest thing in the world to call your rep, get to a general manager of the region who understands their AI roadmap, and say, 'I know you're using my data for this AI; I want to renegotiate our contract,'" Shah explains. He's done this with AWS, Google Cloud, and Salesforce, which offer such deals through their startup programs.



BUILD YOUR OWN

Shah has saved about $2,800 a year by replacing Salesforce with Excel. After breaking down what the sales platform did for Loam into a few key workflows, he and an MBA intern rebuilt those functions in Excel, using Python scripts generated by Microsoft's Copilot AI. Payment company Klarna also just moved to replace Salesforce and Workday with custom AI-based apps, though skeptics warn many SaaS features aren't so easily replaced.



PARTNER UP

There's strength in numbers—and a lot of small businesses are in the same boat when it comes to onerous SaaS fees, which is why Shah has been forming a cooperative. "For Loam, I've contacted I think 12 regenerative agriculture companies, and we've been basically renegotiating as a bloc with big companies, like Microsoft for our cloud licenses," Shah says. "We're saying, 'Listen, there are 12 of us now. We want this flat fee for a five-year license.'"

GETTY IMAGES (LAPTOP); THE NOUN PROJECT (ALL ICONS)