

VOL 6 ISSUE 2

2009

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By
Kerry MartinLOCAL BUSINESSES
TAKE FLIGHT.

» Inside the walls of the University of Central Florida's (UCF) Technology Incubator, nascent companies are learning, growing and maturing into full-fledged business ventures. Meet three business leaders who led their companies through the hatching process to see their ideas take flight.



Cliff Ingari

Cliff Ingari, AVT Simulation

A pioneer in the simulation industry, AVT Simulation provides commercial and government clients with realistic training software to recreate virtual environments.

"Twenty-six years ago when I began my career in the simulation and training industry, it was a challenge explaining what a

simulator was and what it was used for," says Vice President/COO Cliff Ingari. "But with the current popularity of gaming technology and sophisticated theme park rides, it is a lot easier to explain what we do. While the objective of companies like Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft is to entertain, our objective is to train the war fighter."

In 2004, Ingari, president Robert Abascal and their three-person team applied for the UCF Technology Incubator's 21-hour Excellence in Entrepreneurship course.

"In the UCF Incubator, the staff is there to guide you and provide expertise in business operations on anything from accounting, to HR, to tax issues. Not only was it great having other companies in the same stages

of their business, but you couldn't beat the location," says Ingari.

Centered in the heart of the 23-county Florida High Tech Corridor (www.floridahightech.com), Metro Orlando has attracted and grown some major leaders in technology innovation, especially in the defense industry.

"Having most of our customers in our own backyard provides many advantages for us. With nearly every branch of the military represented in Central Florida's Research Park, there's no better place to be than Orlando if you're in the Training and Simulation Industry," says Ingari.

AVT Simulation set up its corporate offices in a 12,000-square-foot facility in Research Park for its 60-person staff. Revenues last year topped \$12 million.



Mansooreh Mollaghasemi

Mansooreh Mollaghasemi,
Productivity Apex

Realizing opportunities in Orlando’s market for advanced engineering solutions, UCF professor-turned-entrepreneur Mansooreh Mollaghasemi took a shot at growing her company in the UCF Incubator. Productivity Apex, Inc. is a modeling and simulation company that helps commercial enterprises and government agencies improve productivity.

“I always had a love for solving problems, but as a professor, sometimes it felt like my work was being done in a vacuum,” says Mollaghasemi. “I wanted to serve a broader audience by using state-of-the-art tools and techniques in solving different, real-world, complex problems.”

As a UCF insider, Mollaghasemi was already familiar with the UCF Incubator from its Director and Associate Vice President for the Office of Research & Commercialization, Tom O’Neal.

“Even though we had clients that were very pleased with the work we were doing, we were almost a ‘best-kept secret’ to other audiences. The Incubator gave us the backing of the best in the industry: Tom, and Site Managers Carol Ann Dykes and Gordon Hogan. They were out there in the community, giving us the exposure through their networks of business contacts.”

What is her number one piece of advice for budding entrepreneurs? “Manage your finances very effectively.”

While there is truth to the saying ‘you’ve got to spend money to make money,’ Mollaghasemi urges new business owners to learn how to spend it the right way. “And if you’re unsure, ask someone who has been through it.”



Helene Abrams

Helene Abrams,
eprentise and FlexField

For entrepreneurs, the lure to start a company that addresses real-world problems is like “having a puzzle sitting on your dining room table.” So says serial-entrepreneur Helene Abrams, founder of the software development companies FlexField and eprentise.

Abrams tackled a problem she saw in the management systems used by major corporations who were going through changes, such as mergers or acquisitions. She engineered software that restores flexibility to the Oracle E-Business Suite program, which can be difficult and costly to change or re-implement.

Referred to the UCF VentureLab and Incubator by the Orlando-based Disney Entrepreneur Center, Abrams became a virtual client. That association kick-

started her product line, FlexField, which she brought to market in just five months. Business continued to boom as she gained widely-known customers such as Yahoo, Experian and the U.S. Department of the Interior.

“Since my customers are on five continents, I haven’t met with many of them face-to-face. But that’s the beauty of Orlando — they eventually come to me. I meet my clients when they take a trip to Walt Disney World or attend a meeting at the Orange County Convention Center. It’s one thing that makes Orlando a great place to start a business.”

Abrams credits much of her early success to the counsel she received from the UCF Incubator. “The advice, the contacts, the connections ... it was like having my own personal business-in-a-box.”

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