

Good morning, I am Brent Peacock. I am the director of the Veterans Business Outreach Center serving the state of Florida which has one of the largest concentration of military bases and veterans in the US. The Veterans Business Outreach Center or V-BOC is the Small Business Administration's program that provides business training, counseling and SBA resource partner referrals to active duty service members, National Guard & Reserve personnel, veterans, and military spouses interested in starting or growing a small business. The SBA funds 20 V-BOCs centers across the US and in Hawaii. We certainly appreciate Representative Al Lawson's invitation today to introduce you to the V-BOC's mission and how we use technology to educate our core clients in the basics and best practice of business ownership to help them succeed in today's business environment.

VBOCs primary mission is to conduct entrepreneurial development training dealing specifically with the key issues of self-employment, meaning owning and succeeding in a business of their own. Usually service members meet the VBOC during their transition from the military service in a training program called Boot to Business. This is a two-day training workshop to introduce our target audience – transitioning military, spouses and veterans - to the idea of entrepreneurship.

Our second core mission is business counseling. Our business counselors and SBA resource partners including Small Business Development Centers, SCORE volunteer mentors, and Women's Business Centers help our clients in assessing their entrepreneurial needs and requirements. We help them validate their business concept through extensive market research, develop a viable business plan using a variety of online tools and SBA resources, help them prepare business loan packages, as needed, and connect them with the outside resources like lenders to launch and grow a business of their own in the civilian world.

Research is an essential element of this process and VBOCs provide more than just industry specific data. Our clients are very often high tech warriors. They are familiar with state of the art technology, weapons systems and the like. What they don't know is how to deploy their skills in the civilian business arena. Their business concept may use what they know from their military service. But oftentimes, service members choose to go in a completely unrelated field, turning their swords to proverbial plowshares. No matter what their choice, VBOC's are there to guide them through the entrepreneurial maze. From understanding their ownership options – direct ownership or a franchise, to understanding who their customers will be, what options they have in organizing and running their business, getting funded, and becoming operational and competitive and cash flow positive, this is our mission.

Your interest is in the role technology and online business tools play in today's small business arena. For us, it begins with our delivery of training and business counseling. VBOCs, working with other SBA resource partners, can target entrepreneurial training projects and counseling sessions tailored specifically to address the needs and concerns of the veteran entrepreneur with a wealth of online tools. VBOCs help our clients with feasibility studies, business plan assessments, reviews of financial statements, and assisting with strategic development such as identifying new markets. From franchising to Internet marketing, from electronic sales with Square and small business record-keeping like QuickBooks, to the nuances of international trade and government contracting, all of these resources are now online tools we can use every day to help your constituents and our clients. Not that long ago, we were limited to face-to-face meetings and hard cover books. Thanks to the rapid pace of technology and online learning, we can Skype, use webinars, and employ online resources to help dozens of clients in a

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day. Technology has made a significant impact on our productivity and effectiveness as a government funded entity.

The SBA's Office of Veterans Business Development maintains a webpage that allows us, the VBOC and other instructors the ability to access Boots to Business instructor tools and training videos online to stay current with ever-changing materials and resources. The Boots to Business curriculum is also offered online for attendees. They can download the materials before attending class or revisit the materials whenever they wish after class.

For deployed service members who do not have access to a military installation offering transition programs, the Department of Defense (DoD) provides the Joint Knowledge Online resource, J-KO for short, for continuous, career-long development of joint knowledge and readiness for military personnel, including Combatant Commands and Combat Support Agencies abroad. Without online training, these service members might be left behind.

Websites are a critical, no-cost resource for our civilians and military clients. *SBA.gov* is an outstanding website and learning tool. It's a wealth of information on all aspects of business from start to growth, that is well organized and easy to understand. Its Learning Center has over 50 topics that anyone can view whenever and as often as they like. For active duty personnel and busy aspiring entrepreneurs, this flexibility is critical. Think of the troops deployed abroad with ambitions of entrepreneurship when they turn home, like Vil who when she returns from Afghanistan will open that coffee shop and bakery, and spouses like Torrance who are keeping the home fires burning and running a home-based business of their own. Both need online tools like the SBA website and ours, *VBOC.org*, for resources whenever and wherever they want to access them. Our *Florida Start-up Checklist* is a step by step guide on our website for aspiring entrepreneurs in my home state of Florida, a Microsoft Word document with live links to the

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websites every business owner will need to get their business off the ground, from the IRS to website domain names to the Secretary of State's offices and to local resources. Having these electronic resources not only helps your constituents, it saves operational costs to our organizations. In the past, we would have spent valuable funds on printing and mailing. Now we can "force multiply" with a website at with greater reach at minimal expense to the tax payers!

Market research is critical in assessing the feasibility of one's idea and in creating a viable business plan. The days of pouring over books in the library are long gone. Today's warriors expect to access data from their smart phone and tablets, untethered from the restraint of library research and outdated intel. The use of data from the U.S. Census, the SBA's Size -Up Tool and online business plan development tools, both commercial and on SBA resource partner websites are valuable technological research methods. Bryan, former Army and now military spouse, is launching an online business. His is a cutting-edge platform but he still needs that data to understand and identify his market, locate and cultivate key resources and partners before he spends a lot of money. All this intel was readily available at no cost through our office, SBA resources and the public library which itself is riding the wave of electronic research tools like Reference USA.

Like many small business, government agencies, from the local to the federal level, use technology to manage operations, tracks activities, and use this data to expand its reach and increase its efficacy. Our organization uses an electronic client management system called Neoserra. Through this client management and performance system, we can track our interactions and communication with our clients, set performance goals, scheduling, and sign up for training events. Using the private sector's best practices, the V-BOC network has just implemented Salesforce, a powerful CRM or Customer Relationship Management system to

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schedule training events, register and communicate with clients, and input data about attendance and post-training contact.

In V-BOC 2.0's Initiative by the SBA's Office of Veterans Business Development, we will pilot two business plan online platforms, LivePlan & GrowthWheel. The goal is to facilitate the flow of information and track the assistance a client may receive from multiple SBA resources. Not only will we be able to counsel clients remotely in real time, we can share, co-counsel and track clients with other SBA Resource Partners like SCORE, Small Business Development Centers, and Women's Business Centers. For example, if a client was referred by a V-BOC to a Women's Business Center, these platforms will allow us to track that referral and work together seamlessly to help our client. Then, if the same client was referred to a lender, and that referral resulted in the client receiving a business loan, we'll be able to track that outcome too.

Lastly, social media platforms have become an essential means of communicating and delivering information at any time to our increasingly tech savvy clientele. Of course, our websites are a repository of news and information. But we also take advantage of the power of Facebook and Twitter. The SBA and the Office of Veterans Business Development (OVBD) are active on both platforms. The OVBD uses Facebook to promote both national and local events, and cast a spotlight on veteran entrepreneurs with its Success Stories blog. Many V-BOCs use email platforms like Constant Contact, to maintain communication with our widespread clientele.

I could continue but you understand how important technology and online communication has become and how essential it is for elected officials like you and government agencies like ours to embrace it and use it to its fullest potential in service to our constituents.

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Information and business now move at the speed of light because of the technology our nation has helped pioneer and that our service men and women have contributed to in years past, today and in the future, both as warriors and as entrepreneurs. I thank you for this opportunity, and welcome any questions.

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