

## Small Business Growth

By Kimberly Zeuli and Kathleen O'Shea

### A NEW PRIORITY FOR URBAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS

New research from the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City provides compelling evidence that small businesses rival, and often exceed, the impact of large businesses in terms of providing jobs for local residents. Yet, too often, city leaders and economic developers are not prioritizing small businesses in their economic growth plans. Moving beyond the attraction and retention of large businesses will require them to adopt new tools and develop a comprehensive small business plan. This article provides a snapshot of the share of small business jobs in five cities and outlines a small business growth playbook of five key strategies for city leaders and economic development professionals.

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## INTRODUCTION

Small businesses are increasingly recognized as the backbone of urban economies, especially since the Great Recession. Yet, too often city leaders and economic developers are not prioritizing small businesses in their economic growth plans, continuing to focus instead on the attraction and retention of large businesses. A new report by the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City (ICIC) may make economic development professionals consider shifting these priorities.<sup>1</sup> The report provides compelling evidence that small businesses rival, and often exceed, the impact of large businesses when it comes to providing critical jobs for local residents. ICIC is a national, nonprofit research and advisory organization founded in 1994. Its mission is to drive economic prosperity in America's inner cities through private sector investment.

Cities and states employ a variety of conventional strategies to attract and retain large businesses. The city of Boston and commonwealth of Massachusetts, for example, recently enticed General Electric Co. (GE) to relocate their headquarters from Fairfield, Connecticut, to Boston with a comprehensive package of incentives. The city of Boston offered up to \$25 million in property tax breaks over a period of 20 years tied to hiring goals. The commonwealth offered up to \$120 million in infrastructure and property improvements, including the cost of land that a state agency will own and lease back to GE. Non-monetary incentives included streamlined permitting processes, support of energy initiatives, and concierge relocation services.<sup>2</sup>

ICIC's report, *The Big Impact of Small Businesses on Urban Job Creation: Evidence from Five Cities*, sug-



A rendering of GE's forthcoming Boston headquarters.

gests that if the same level of resources and targeted support were dedicated to growing urban small businesses, especially those located in distressed inner cities, a greater number of jobs could be created. But, small businesses require different strategies than the conventional financial incentives used to attract and retain large corporations. In this article, we summarize findings from ICIC's report, which provides a snapshot of the share of small business jobs in Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., and delve into ICIC's small business growth playbook for city leaders and economic development professionals that comprises five key strategies.

## THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL BUSINESS JOBS

In each of the five cities, we analyzed the share of jobs associated with small and large businesses, focusing on three business size categories: small businesses with one to four employees (micro-busi-

**Kimberly Zeuli** is senior vice president and director of research at the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City ([kzeuli@icic.org](mailto:kzeuli@icic.org)). She has held numerous academic and research positions.

**Kathleen O'Shea** is a senior research analyst at Initiative for a Competitive Inner City ([koshea@icic.org](mailto:koshea@icic.org)). Prior to joining ICIC, she worked at The American City Coalition in Boston.

## A NEW PRIORITY FOR URBAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPERS

*New research from the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City provides compelling evidence that small businesses rival, and often exceed, the impact of large businesses in terms of providing jobs for local residents. Yet, too often, city leaders and economic developers are not prioritizing small businesses in their economic growth plans. Moving beyond the attraction and retention of large businesses will require them to adopt new tools and develop a comprehensive small business plan. This article provides a snapshot of the share of small business jobs in five cities and outlines a small business growth playbook of five key strategies for city leaders and economic development professionals.*



Barracks Row Main Street District, Washington, D.C.

nesses), small businesses with five to 249 employees, and large businesses (250 or more employees) (see Table 1).

In all five cities, the distribution of the number of small and large businesses is similar. Micro-businesses, which include the self-employed, the proverbial “mom and pop” shops, and most Main Street businesses, represent the majority (roughly 75 percent) of all businesses. Small businesses with five to 249 employees comprise about 25 percent of all businesses, while large businesses represent one percent or less of all businesses.

Not only do micro- and small businesses outnumber large businesses, but in four out of the five cities they also contribute more jobs – 53 percent in Detroit, 58 percent in Chicago, 62 percent in D.C., and 74 percent in Los Angeles. In Dallas, small businesses account for just under half (48 percent) of all jobs. Although there are nearly three times more micro-businesses than all other small businesses in all five cities, they don’t account for more jobs. Businesses with five to 249 employees create more jobs than micro-businesses, ranging from 35 percent in Dallas to 50 percent in Los Angeles.

The difference in small business job shares across the five cities suggests that some cities, such as Los Angeles, have more medium-sized businesses (those closer to the 249 employee cutoff), while others, such as Dallas, have more businesses closer to the five employee mark. This may be due to differences in each city’s small business environment or in programs that target the growth of small businesses, versus startups. The differential may also be due to the types of industries that make up the city’s economy. Small businesses within certain industries, or in industries that are part of a city’s strong clusters, may hire more employees and have greater growth opportunities than businesses in other industries.

### SMALL BUSINESSES ARE CRITICAL FOR INNER CITY EMPLOYMENT

ICIC’s report also finds that small businesses provide even more significant employment opportunities in distressed inner city neighborhoods, where poverty and unemployment are highly concentrated.

In four of the five cities studied, small businesses located in the inner city supported a greater share of jobs

TABLE 1. BUSINESS COMPOSITION OVERVIEW BY CITY

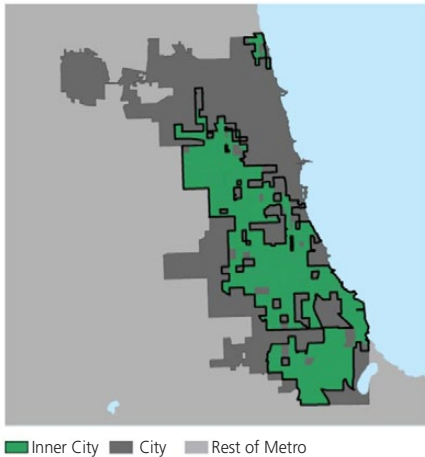
	Small Businesses		Large Businesses	
	1 to 4 Employees	5 to 249 Employees	1 to 249 Employees	250 or More Employees
<b>CHICAGO</b>				
Total number of businesses	67,738	25,228	92,966	943
	72%	27%	99%	1%
Total aggregate jobs	135,881	438,953	574,834	419,360
	14%	44%	58%	42%
<b>DALLAS</b>				
Total number of businesses	60,898	18,342	79,240	734
	76%	23%	99%	1%
Total aggregate jobs	122,681	303,412	426,093	453,119
	14%	35%	48%	52%
<b>DETROIT</b>				
Total number of businesses	14,322	4,902	19,224	134
	74%	25%	99%	1%
Total aggregate jobs	28,261	80,204	108,465	96,413
	14%	39%	53%	47%
<b>LOS ANGELES</b>				
Total number of businesses	86,506	23,817	110,323	510
	78%	21%	100%	<1%
Total aggregate jobs	171,793	366,678	538,471	193,410
	23%	50%	74%	26%
<b>WASHINGTON, D.C.</b>				
Total number of businesses	27,390	9,364	36,754	256
	74%	25%	99%	1%
Total aggregate jobs	52,053	168,732	220,785	138,107
	15%	47%	62%	38%

**Notes:** Data estimates are for the entire city, including the inner city. Business numbers represent business establishments located in the city. An establishment is defined as a single physical location where business is conducted or services or industrial operations are performed. A company may consist of one or several establishments (a company with ten branches would be recorded as one company and ten establishments). Jobs are measured for business establishments located in the city (if a business has multiple establishments in multiple cities, we only count employment from establishments located in the city). **Source:** Dun and Bradstreet Hoover’s Database (2016).

### INNER CITY DEFINITION

ICIC defines an inner city as a set of contiguous census tracts in a city that have higher poverty and unemployment rates than the surrounding MSA and, in aggregate, represent at least five percent of a city’s population. Each inner city census tract must meet either of two criteria: (1) an absolute poverty rate of at least 20 percent or (2) a relative poverty rate that is at least 150 percent or greater than that of the MSA, as long as the unemployment rate is at least 150 percent greater than that of the MSA and/or the median household income is 50 percent or less than that of the MSA. Map 1 shows the inner city in Chicago. Applying ICIC’s inner city definition to 2011 American Community Survey data for all U.S. cities with populations greater than 75,000, ICIC identifies 328 inner cities.

## MAP 1. THE INNER CITY IN CHICAGO



**Notes:** Inner city boundary was defined using 2011 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and ICIC's inner city definition. Green shows census tracts within the 2011 inner city that qualify as inner city in 2014. **Source:** U.S. Census Bureau 2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

in those neighborhoods than in the city overall: 64 percent in Detroit, 70 percent in Chicago, 74 percent in D.C., and 77 percent in Los Angeles. Dallas is distinct in that large businesses create more inner city jobs than small businesses, which suggests that inner city job creation reflects and is not distinct from job creation in the surrounding city.

The report also provocatively argues that small businesses could be an important part of the unemployment solution for inner cities:

A modest increase in small business jobs could create enough employment opportunities for all currently unemployed inner city residents. In four of the five cities, this equates to only about one additional employee per existing small business (Figure 1). Detroit would require slightly more aggressive small business growth, with each small business hiring just over three additional employees. This is not to suggest this growth is easy for small businesses, especially for those with fewer than five employees. In addition, these calculations assume that all jobs will be filled by inner city residents, regardless of where the small business is located, which is unrealistic. However, the simple analytical exercise highlights the significant impact small businesses can have on inner city unemployment and that the problem is not insurmountable. Targeted strategies to support small business growth in cities can move the needle.

The concept of helping small businesses hire one additional employee as a solution to unemployment has precedence (e.g., the National Association of Workforce

Boards' Just Add One initiative and the Association for Enterprise Opportunity's One in Three Campaign). Recent research from the Center for an Urban Future also identifies scaling small businesses into larger businesses as one of New York City's greatest opportunities to drive employment growth and the creation of middle-class jobs.<sup>3</sup>

## A PLAYBOOK TO SUPPORT URBAN SMALL BUSINESS GROWTH

The report presents five critical strategies to support the growth of small businesses, and offers best practices that city leaders and economic development professionals can draw upon to implement each strategy in their cities.

### 1. Create a comprehensive small business plan based on economic assets

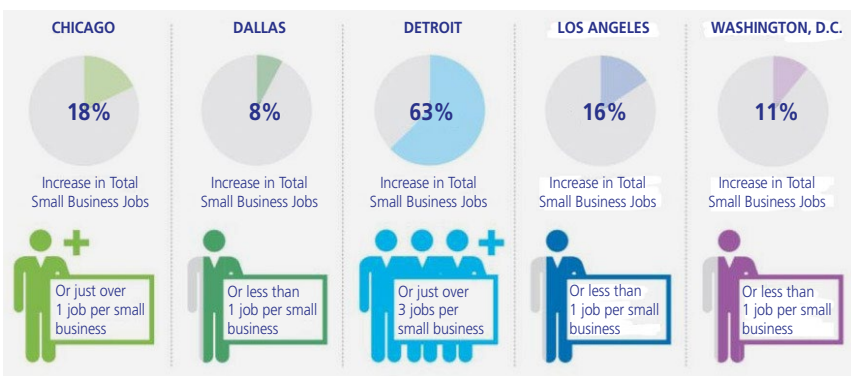
Programs that support small businesses are frequently uncoordinated, targeted to start-ups, and often focused on educating small business owners rather than on improving the business environment. As ICIC's research shows, cities need to develop a comprehensive small business plan centered on businesses poised for growth and offering the greatest potential for job creation – those with five to 249 employees.

It is critical that small business plans are linked to a city's broader economic development initiatives and aligned with metropolitan and regional competitive, economic assets. Every metro area has assets that create unique competitive advantages for certain industries. For example, Houston is known for its significant oil and gas industry, which grew out of the area's natural oil reserves. The competitive advantages are reflected in the metro area's strong clusters – groups of inter-related industries that choose to co-locate in the area. Small businesses, especially those early in their life cycle, benefit from strong clusters that connect them to research, product development, new markets, and a skilled workforce.<sup>4</sup> Focusing small business development on strong clusters ensures that resources are directed to small businesses in industries with the greatest potential for growth. Recent research also demonstrates that employment, including in the inner city, is maximized when the same strong regional, city, and inner city clusters are connected.<sup>5</sup>

Although small business plans are not yet widespread, some cities are leading the way. Early last year, the city of Boston released a comprehensive small business plan with three goals: to make the small business economy thrive, enhance neighborhood vibrancy, and foster economic and social inclusion and equity. The plan highlights nine

It is critical that small business plans are linked to a city's broader economic development initiatives and aligned with metropolitan and regional competitive, economic assets. Every metro area has assets that create unique competitive advantages for certain industries.

## FIGURE 1. GROWTH IN SMALL BUSINESS JOBS REQUIRED TO ELIMINATE INNER CITY UNEMPLOYMENT



primary gaps in the small business ecosystem including, but not limited to: support for minority-, women-, and immigrant-owned businesses; awareness and navigation of resources; access to targeted technical assistance; and availability of capital. It sets forth 20 small business solutions or “initiatives” to strengthen the overall ecosystem, including establishing a Small Business Center with a physical presence to help small business owners better navigate resources and advocate for Boston’s small businesses.<sup>6</sup>

In 2015, recognizing the importance of small businesses in creating jobs and strengthening neighborhoods, the city of Baltimore also established a comprehensive small business plan. The plan contains four key goals: increase resources for small businesses and entrepreneurs, cultivate the innovation economy, promote an inclusive economy, and make Baltimore more business-friendly. It outlines seven strategies for supporting small businesses to meet these goals, which include growing the capacity of the city’s Small Business Resource Center, developing a partnership with SourceLink (an entrepreneurial ecosystem mapping tool), and streamlining minor permitting processes.<sup>7</sup>

An oversight in both Boston and Baltimore’s plans is that neither explicitly aligns small business growth strategies with strong and emerging clusters. The strongest small business plans will outline goals related to small business growth in these clusters, which vary by region.

## 2. Expand contracting opportunities for small businesses

Contracting opportunities with government agencies and large corporations are a critical driver of growth for small businesses. They offer a guaranteed revenue stream and allow for better business planning and sustainable employment growth. Yet, procurement offices at these large organizations typically prefer contracting with large, established businesses, especially those that have a proven track record with the organization. The gains for small businesses in increasing contracting opportunities are well-documented: in Newark, New Jersey, a recent study found that a ten percent increase in anchor institution contracts with local, small businesses would result in an additional \$33 million flowing annually to these businesses.<sup>8</sup>



2016 CASE Inaugural Conference, “Driving Collective Impact through Anchor Collaboratives.”

Many cities already recognize the importance of expanding contracting opportunities for small businesses and have “buy-local” and small business preference initiatives in place. In Los Angeles County, for example, the Department of Consumer and Business Affairs (DCBA) administers the Local Small Business Enterprise (LSBE) Preference program, through which LSBE-certified businesses are eligible for a 15 percent bid price reduction so that they might compete with larger companies who can afford to submit lower bids. DCBA also operates the Los Angeles County Procurement Technical Assistance Center, which provides training on certification processes and counseling services related to securing procurement contracts.<sup>9</sup> Although programs like these make small businesses more competitive in contract bidding processes, receiving required certification can be unduly burdensome for small businesses and require submission of financial statements that they may not have or be willing to provide the government.

“Buy-local” initiatives often struggle with identifying local, small businesses that have the capacity to fill large contracts. One example of the type of program that is needed to support local purchasing is Chicago Anchors for a Strong Economy (CASE). Led by World Business Chicago, CASE includes 15 anchor institutions (universities, hospitals, government, large corporations, and cultural institutions). It seeks to increase local spending at these institutions by creating a small business supplier network and builds capacity among small businesses through workshops and training to better prepare them for contracts with the participating anchor institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Detroit Economic Growth Corporation operates a similar initiative, Detroit-to-Detroit (D2D), which works with a Buyer’s Council comprising 18 anchor institutions to increase their local contracts and help them identify local, small businesses. D2D also works with small businesses to build their capacity and identify resources to respond to new growth opportunities.<sup>11</sup> In 2015, the Buyer’s Council purchased \$856 million in goods and services from Detroit-based companies.<sup>12</sup> D2D also partners with the business-to-business matchmaking tool Pure Michigan Business Connect.



Motor City Brewing Works, a local brewery in Detroit.

As a potentially significant solution to urban unemployment, small businesses should be a key focus of workforce programs. Workforce organizations should be targeting and supporting small businesses with resources and programming to the same degree that they do with large businesses. Yet, limited resources often determine how workforce organizations are designing and implementing outreach to employers.

Innovative anchor partnerships like CASE and D2D can drive significant growth in local procurement and contracting opportunities for small businesses. Yet, a challenge of this strategy is that it can be difficult to establish and maintain consensus and enthusiasm among participating anchor institutions over time.

### 3. Design workforce programs for small businesses

As a potentially significant solution to urban unemployment, small businesses should be a key focus of workforce programs. Workforce organizations should be targeting and supporting small businesses with resources and programming to the same degree that they do with large businesses. Yet, limited resources often determine how workforce organizations are designing and implementing outreach to employers. As one workforce professional noted in ICIC's report, "With small businesses, it requires a longer engagement over time, and you see fewer big outcomes than say, connecting with Chipotle and placing 20 people." Workforce organizations need to ensure that they are meeting the needs of small businesses and that small businesses are fully aware of the resources available to them.

In a recent survey of small business owners, almost half of the respondents reported that hiring and retaining good employees is one of their top two growth challenges.<sup>13</sup> Unlike many large businesses, small businesses typically lack the internal resources to recruit and train new employees. This is especially true with respect to potential employees that lack foundational job skills.

Few federally-funded workforce organizations have targeted strategies for small businesses, although some cities are beginning to address this oversight. For example, the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership, which implements federally-funded workforce programs in Chicago and Cook County, has streamlined the processes and paperwork required by small businesses looking to engage the Partnership's resources. Popular services for small businesses include: On-the-Job Training (a program reimbursing employers up to 50 percent for job training costs for employees hired through the public workforce program), creating job descriptions, assisting with applicant interviews, and pre-screening candidates. In addition to strategic relationships with local chambers of commerce and business associations, the Partnership is also exploring a strategic association with Small

Business Majority, a national small business advocacy organization.<sup>14</sup>

Given the critical role small businesses play in the inner city, workforce organizations should be developing programs to specifically target the inner city labor force, where skill gaps may be larger and small businesses may have additional challenges attracting and retaining employees. Transitional job programs offer intensive skills training and support services, and may be an important resource for small business owners looking to hire those traditionally considered "hard to employ" (because of marginal job skills, incarceration, drug use, or homelessness).

The Los Angeles Regional Initiative for Social Enterprise (LA:RISE) is one such program. LA:RISE is funded by a grant from the Department of Labor's Workforce Innovation Fund and is an employer-driven workforce development program led by the Los Angeles Economic and Workforce Development Department. The program works with nonprofit and for-profit social enterprises to transition homeless, chronically unemployed, and formerly incarcerated individuals to full employment. Ultimately, LA:RISE hopes to transition at least 250 participants from transitional social enterprise jobs to permanent, unsubsidized jobs.<sup>15</sup>

Transitional employment programs like LA:RISE, however, are highly resource-intensive and can be difficult to scale. More research is needed to fully understand the most effective strategies for transitioning the "hard to employ" into full-time jobs, especially through programs that also support the growth of small businesses.

### 4. Coordinate resources and ease burdensome regulations

In most cities, there are dozens of public and private organizations working to support small businesses in a variety of capacities. City leaders need to take the lead in streamlining programs, eliminating redundancies, and filling in resource and programming gaps.

Mapping existing resources is a critical first step. One such effort by the Dallas Office of Economic Development is Dallas B.R.A.I.N. (Business Resource and Information



A monthly event hosted by the Dallas B.R.A.I.N. and Launch DFW, "Dallas New Tech: Dallas Startup Week Edition."

Image Courtesy of Sky San Augustin

Network), launched to provide centralized resources and information for Dallas small businesses, especially micro-businesses. Business owners answer a few key questions about their business needs, and the tool helps to match them with 127 small business assistance organizations in the Dallas area.<sup>16</sup> Dallas B.R.A.I.N. is maintained by SourceLink, which operates similar Resource Navigators in Baltimore and Kansas City, and statewide in Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, and Virginia.<sup>17</sup>

Detroit BizGrid is a similar online directory helping business owners and entrepreneurs navigate the support ecosystem, which includes 54 organizations.<sup>18</sup> Detroit Economic Growth Corporation is working to transition from the delivery of disparate programs to a more cohesive, integrated small business strategy by streamlining referral and tracking support and strengthening connectivity between small business partners.<sup>19</sup>

City leaders also need to recognize and work to minimize the disproportionate burden of regulations on small businesses. For example, hiring and contracting compliance can be especially challenging for small business owners. The city of Chicago is one example of a city that has prioritized business regulation reform and the streamlining of its small business services. The city has cut and consolidated business licenses, increased online resources, and more effectively trained staff on regulations. It also launched a Small Business Center as a “one stop shop” for business owners to access a wide variety of city services in one location. Rather than making multiple trips to different city departments, small business owners can now access services for zoning, health, fire, and licenses in one location. A report by the Harvard Kennedy School indicates the Small Business Center is a success – allowing 25 percent of walk-ins to be addressed in ten minutes or less and employing staff with regulatory expertise.<sup>20</sup>

### 5. Upgrade the inner city business environment

City leaders also need to prioritize making improvements to the overall business environment in distressed inner city neighborhoods. This includes upgrading infrastructure (e.g., buildings, technology, and transportation), reducing crime, and adding amenities such as restaurants and other retail services. The quality of inner city infrastructure is generally worse than that in the rest of the city and region.<sup>21</sup> Inner city neighborhoods may also have higher crime rates and lack amenities, making them



A Small Business Saturday event in Los Angeles.

less competitive places for businesses. Inner city business owners have cited crime, parking and traffic problems, and negative perceptions of their neighborhood as the main disadvantages of their location.<sup>22</sup> Making upgrades to this infrastructure will create a more supportive business environment, helping small businesses grow and attracting more businesses to inner city areas. As a starting point, city leaders need to identify the specific business environment improvements needed in their inner cities.

We are not aware of any city that has initiated a comprehensive plan for improving their inner city business environment. Typically, cities target certain neighborhoods as part of broader economic development plans. Dallas and Washington, D.C. are two examples of cities with specific plans for improving the business environment in their inner cities. Washington, D.C. has developed Small Area Plans for small neighborhoods or corridors in each of the city's eight wards. These plans outline opportunities for infrastructure and capital investments, including façade or streetscape improvements and commercial development projects.<sup>23</sup> The GrowSouth initiative in Dallas incorporates short- and long-term infrastructure and capital improvement projects to jumpstart the economic growth of the distressed neighborhoods in South Dallas. Included in the ten-point plan are goals related to rebranding and changing negative perceptions about South Dallas, encouraging development in key commercial corridors, and increasing connectivity to downtown, all of which could increase neighborhood amenities and improve the overall business environment. The city also spearheaded the creation of Impact Dallas Capital, a non-profit organization that will create a long-term, sustainable source of capital for neighborhood investment (primarily in real estate).<sup>24</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Growing small businesses is too often overlooked as a strategy to support urban job growth and drive the transformation of distressed inner city neighborhoods. Moving beyond a traditional economic development perspective focused on large business attraction and retention will require city leaders and economic development professionals to adopt new strategies and develop a comprehensive small business plan. The strategies outlined in ICIC's playbook as summarized here provide an important foundation for this new approach. 🌐



The DART Blue Line in Dallas, extended in South Dallas last year.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Information provided by a GE spokesperson on February 2, 2017.
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- <sup>22</sup> ICIC, 2015 Inner City 100 survey.
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