Nonprofit puts retired execs in counselor's seat to help new and old companies

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ANDREW MILLS/THE STAR-LEDGERGordhan Patel, president of J.P. Laboratories in Middlesex, turned to Service Corps of Retired Executives, SCORE, for advice on his business.

Gordhan Patel, a chemist who has run a tiny research and development company for a quarter-century, was faced with a dilemma more than two years ago.

His four-employee company, J.P. Laboratories, had created a small badge that police, firefighters and soldiers could wear to tell them if a dirty bomb had spread radioactivity in an area. He had good,

inexpensive technology but no expertise to market it.

So, he turned to the Service Corps of Retired Executives, a nonprofit association that provides counseling services to new and established businesses. A SCORE representative persuaded him to find a good distributor rather than do it on his own.

"It was good advice because it was cheaper and more effective than hiring an internal person to do this," Patel said in his Middlesex office last week.

SCORE is one of those free services that start-ups and existing companies can turn to in difficult times. The Herndon, Va.,-based group has chapters nationwide, including nine in New Jersey, and 360 members in the state who provide advice on the law, accounting, manufacturing and international trade.

To get help from SCORE:

Founded in 1964 and affiliated with the U.S. Small Business Administration, SCORE has more than 11,000 volunteers throughout the nation.

Services: Entrepreneurs can find out how to start and manage their business, develop a marketing strategy, find money to expand, obtain help in finding government contracts and grow with new products.

Programs: Counselors can help them apply for state programs such as the Main Street Business Assistance Program, which supports commercial banks that finance small- and mid-sized businesses.

Resources: Check the local SCORE website at scoremetronj.org or call the Newark office at (973) 645-3982.

Patel, for example, received marketing tips from counselor Warren Jacobs, a Maplewood resident and former marketing executive in the textile industry. Jacobs advised him against trying to form his own sales and marketing team because of the cost and the time it would take to find someone who had the right contacts.

"To try to pick somebody out of the air would have been disastrous," Jacobs said. "Either he could sell the product outright or look for somebody in marketing who specifically handles the armed forces and municipalities."

Patel found a distributor in South Carolina that is helping potential customers around the nation find government grants so they can buy his product.

"I would not have known how to do this," Patel said. "They directed me the right way."

His distribution partner is Crowe and Co. of Summerville, S.C. Fay Crowe, chief executive of the firm, is helping the South Carolina State Guard to find federal funding to purchase Patel's badges.

"Across all 50 states, if local responders properly submit a Homeland Security grant request, they can purchase it through the program," she said, adding that a local SCORE office in South Carolina reviewed her distribution plan.

SCORE attracts veterans such as Peter Fleischmann, 82, a former ad executive who retired in 1994. He works as a legislative contact to help businesses interact with state and federal lawmakers.

Fleischmann works out of the Newark chapter, which includes attorneys, accountants, marketing, advertising and manufacturing executives among its counselors.

"I'm not a golfer, and I don't play tennis, so I was looking for something to do," he said. "It keeps me active and involved in interesting situations."

In May, he arranged to set up a cooperative program with TD Bank in New Jersey that allows SCORE representatives to counsel business owners at bank branches in the evening and on weekends.

Free counseling should be a boon to small business owners who are hard-pressed to pay for an attorney or an accountant, according to Brian Ziemba, regional vice president for TD Bank in Piscataway.

"SCORE was having a problem in finding a place to meet with clients after hours, so we are allowing them to use our conference rooms, which are open until 8 p.m.," Ziemba said. "Obviously, small business is a vital component of the local economy, and we are dedicated to helping them grow."

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Julia Koleda feeds sheets of self-indicating instant radiation dosimeter (SIRAD) cards into a machine at J.P. Laboratories.