



October 25, 2016 | 🌤️ 80° | 🚗 Check Traffic

Business | Tech View

Startup community in isles has been innovation hotbed

By Sara Lin

Posted October 25, 2016

October 25, 2016

I've spent the majority of my professional life as a journalist. During my stints at the Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal and Honolulu Civil Beat, that meant a lot of time reporting about problems. My stories sometimes outlined solutions, but it was always up to someone else to implement them.

When I switched to working for state government, I suddenly became that someone, namely as it relates to growing Hawaii's tech and innovation economy.

I'm one-half of a two-person state agency called the Hawaii Strategic Development Corp. We're tasked with helping to promote Hawaii startups and encourage venture capital investment in local companies. In the past 18 months, I've gotten to know Hawaii's startup community pretty closely, learning about "the ecosystem" and what Hawaii's been doing to keep up with the rest of the country to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship. HSDC helped to set up a lot of the current startup infrastructure (accelerators, investment funds, entrepreneurial events), so I've got a somewhat unique vantage point and perspective on what's going on in the community.

The short answer is that Hawaii has a lot to be proud of. We have award-winning accelerator programs, which are like business boot camps, helping to launch new companies in a variety of industries. Additionally, experienced companies such as Hawaii Biotech, which developed vaccines for West Nile virus and dengue fever, are continuing to break new ground in the fight against the Zika virus. Local biotech entrepreneur Hank Wuh, who helms TruTag Technologies, a company that produces

microtags to help combat drug counterfeiting, was just honored by Goldman Sachs as one of the 100 Most Intriguing Entrepreneurs of 2016. In the software space, serial entrepreneur Dan Leuck's latest venture, Contix, has been engaged by Scottrade to provide real-time social media and breaking news alerts to their premium customers to inform trades.

These developments are just the latest in Hawaii's long history of producing globally significant innovations. An important building block of the internet, ALOHAnet, was invented at the University of Hawaii in the early 1970s by professors trying to share data between two islands. The leading global credit card payment terminal company, Verifone, was founded in Hawaii. One of the early pioneers in the online travel space, CheapTickets, was also started in Hawaii.

Given the strong pipeline of talent we're cultivating in the tech space with nationally recognized high school robotics teams and STEM graduates, our future is bright.

Hawaii accelerators graduate more than 70 new tech, clean energy, creative media, biotech and food product companies each year. They create a handful of high-wage jobs for workers, who in turn support other jobs, from accountants and baristas to - Realtors and personal trainers.

That's a lot of activity for a business sector most Hawaii residents haven't heard about, which is exactly why I'm excited to write this column.

Whether it's looking at how new co-working spaces are changing the face of downtown to debunking myths about growing an innovation sector in Hawaii, every month I'll take you on a deep dive into this startup ecosystem that I inhabit.

To me, supporting our burgeoning innovation sector ranks right up there with food sustainability as one of Hawaii's most pressing issues. The state recently came out with a 10-year jobs forecast, saying there will be more jobs created but that most won't be high-quality, living-wage jobs. We need to do more to create high-wage jobs.

Keep reading and I'll show you how we're succeeding - and how you can help.

Sara Lin, formerly a journalist in New York, Los Angeles and Honolulu, is now an associate with the Hawaii Strategic Development Corp. Reach her at sara.n.lin@hawaii.gov.
