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State help breeds local job growth

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How can a state economic program for business and industry, a growing Ames company and a hankering for pizza lead to new opportunities?

Ask Brandy Lewis, now working as a chemist for Advanced Analytical Technologies in the Iowa State University Research Park.

An Oskaloosa native, Lewis is a 2004 graduate of Iowa Wesleyan College in Mt. Pleasant. She came to Ames after she decided not to pursue a career as a veterinarian.

Lewis was working as a manager at the Old Chicago Restaurant along South Duff Avenue last summer when Steve Lasky, president and CEO of Advanced Analytical, came in for a pizza.

The conversation got around to Lewis' educational background, which included quite a bit of biochemistry.

Lasky encouraged Lewis to apply for a job that was opening at the company.

And on Oct. 30, 2008, she joined the staff at Advanced Analytical as a chemist and manager of the company's consumables department.

A bit of explanation: Advanced Analytical is one of dozens of examples of ISU thinking that has been turned into profit-making companies at the ISU Research Park.

The company makes and sells automated devices that perform complex chemical tests.

Advanced Analytical's customers, which include pharmaceutical, biochemical and personal care (cosmetics and related products) companies, pay upwards of six figures for the tabletop devices.

The reason? They do accurate chemical tests in minutes that used to take days and sometimes weeks.

"Here's an example," Lasky said. "Our device is used to test flu vaccine used for inhalers, to be sure there's no salmonella in the vaccine."

Making consumables

Along with the devices, Advanced Analytical also makes its own liquids (consumables) that are used in the testing. And that's the department where Lewis is now using her

educational training.

"I've made friends in Ames and Ankeny, and I wanted to stay here," she said. "This is a fabulous opportunity and a great fit for me."

Because the company needs people with college-level chemistry training, the jobs pay well, too.

In fact, the average hourly wage for newly-created jobs at Advanced Analytical was pegged at more than \$30 when the Iowa Department of Economic Development loaned Advanced Analytical \$500,000 from its Grow Iowa Values Fund in June 2006.

It was the first of two such loans the company got from the state, and Lasky said it helped attract \$5 million in private equity. Last year, Advanced Analytical moved from its 4,500 square-foot location to a new, 15,000-square-foot space in another research park building. Its work force has grown from a dozen jobs to more than 40.

One of them is Chris Foster, director of engineering for the company. He moved to Iowa from San Diego more than three years ago.

"I was already doing independent consulting work with Advanced Analytical," he said. "But I love building products."

He and his wife, Gwen, who works part-time for Farmers Union on Billy Sunday Road in Ames, live out in the country and enjoy gardening, hiking and bicycling. With their children grown, they have more time to devote to outside interests, Foster said.

Online learning adds jobs

There's been a similar experience at Phasient Learning Technologies, a six-year-old company that moved to larger quarters at 1523 Bell Ave. in March 2008.

Phasient creates online training courses for clients in business and industry, and adds tools that help the clients measure the progress that their employees are making as they go through the programs.

"We got two loans from the Iowa Department of Economic Development," said Denise Link, vice president. "One was a zero-interest loan, the other a forgivable loan based on job growth."

The city of Ames participated with its own funding in the second loan.

Link said employment had grown from about 12 full-time workers to 16.

She said the company is also developing its own "off-the-shelf, ready-to-use courses in leadership development, communication and teamwork."

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