

Navigating Business Services in North Carolina:

Your “Where to Go for What” Guide



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The Rural EDS project has begun to develop a system that has:

- no wrong door for any entrepreneur in rural North Carolina to information and services they need;
- no closed doors to racial and ethnic minorities, women, dislocated workers or any other citizen who has an entrepreneurial mindset, a market-driven product, and the willingness to develop the skillset to be a business owner; and
- keys (or information) to entering the doors most relevant to them.

The lead author, Erik Pages from EntreWorks Consulting, drafted the guide. Good Work staff led a work group that included Mountain BizWorks, the NC Rural Center, Smoky Mountain Development Corporation, and Smoky Mountain Native Plants Association. Other EDS team input came from the e-NC Authority, NC Department of Commerce, NC REAL Enterprises, Self-Help, Council for Entrepreneurial Development, Western Carolina University, and the Yadkin Pee Dee Lakes Project. Good Work also coordinated the design and production of the guide, with credit to Kilpatrick Design Studio and Hutchison Allgood Printing.

This guide is dedicated to North Carolina's many rural entrepreneurs who said our system needed to be clearer on "Where to Go for What."

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INTRODUCTION

IF YOU’RE A NORTH CAROLINA resident thinking of starting a business, or you want to grow your small business, you are not alone. Each year, more than 20,000 North Carolinians take the leap to start a business. They join 700,000 businesses that already operate in North Carolina.

Fortunately, North Carolina is home to dozens of organizations whose primary mission is to help startups and people already in business. Some of these organizations — such as the North Carolina Department of Commerce Business ServiCenter — are part of state government. Some, including the Small Business Centers and Small Business & Technology Development Centers, are linked with state-funded community colleges and universities. There are also many non-profit organizations and private service providers who work with new and growing businesses throughout the state.

These organizations want to help you to succeed in business. If you want training, technical support, advice, marketing help, or even a loan, from the coast to the mountains you can get it in North Carolina.

This guide explains how to find the services that fit your situation. To succeed as an entrepreneur, it's up to you to take charge of your dreams and take responsibility for building your business. The support organizations mentioned here, as well as those listed in the *2007 North Carolina Business Resources Directory* (<http://www.ncruralcenter.org/pubs>), will do their best to provide specialized training and assistance to help you achieve your goals — as well as refer you to experts they know in their regional business development networks. This guide is meant to be a companion to the Directory — use them both!

If you are interested in how to help youth learn about entrepreneurship, see our team's related guide called *Beyond the Lemonade Stand — Getting Youth Entrepreneurship in Your Community*, available at <http://www.ncreal.org>.

THE TYPICAL PATH OF A NEW BUSINESS

Building a business starts with an idea. After you identify and develop a focused business idea you can take the next step of establishing the business legal structure and getting the licenses you need. Once the business gets started the real work begins: creating the product or providing the service, keeping the books, hiring employees, marketing and attracting customers.

You will face different challenges and different needs at each phase of the business development process. North Carolina agencies and organizations provide support throughout the business development cycle. It can be helpful to think of the business lifecycle as proceeding through three main phases:



The Idea Phase



The Start-Up Phase



The Growth Phase

This guide describes what we have in North Carolina to help you at each of these stages. Within any of these stages you will come to crossroads where you need to make important decisions, so we are including a fourth section on Resources for Key Decisions.

You as an entrepreneur and your business will both look different at each phase in this cycle. As you start your company, you may need to find opportunities to network with other aspiring business owners. After you've been operating for several years, your needs may focus on how to set up effective human resource practices or enter overseas markets. Each company and each individual is different, so it is important to be able to access support and services that are relevant to your specific needs. This guide is designed to help with exactly that. **Feel free to flip to the section that addresses where you are now in your business journey.**

THE IDEA PHASE

IT CAN BE CHALLENGING to run a business, but the hardest part often comes before you even get started. The big challenge for most who dream of business ownership involves coming up with a distinctive idea for their business. What is your business idea? Who are your potential customers? How much of the work will you do? Who is going to pay you for your new product or service? Will you be using e-commerce? These are critical questions that must be asked before you take the leap toward entrepreneurship. The checklists (see a few options in back) could be one place to start. But if you're like most people, you probably need a few more details. While you are still developing your business idea, three tried and true options make sense:

- 1) attend a workshop or training class
- 2) explore the Internet for on-line advice, ideas, and training options
- 3) network with other new and aspiring business owners.

Many aspiring business owners do all of these during the idea stage.

WORKSHOPS

If you're looking for a workshop or training class on how to start a successful business, you may enjoy a wide range of options. Each of North Carolina's 58 community colleges, through their Small Business Centers, regularly offer classes and workshops on "How to Start a Business" or "How to Write a Business Plan." Many community colleges also offer the "REAL Entrepreneurship" course, a hands-on way to flesh out your business idea and see if it will work. Many community colleges also offer classes and workshops in Spanish.

Each public university (UNC) campus also offers a "Pre-Venture Orientation" on thinking through your business idea. Visit your Small Business and Technology Development Center (SBTDC) (<http://sbt dc.org>). **Note: Your business does not need to relate to technology but you should be ready to set a fast pace for yourself.** The Council for Entrepreneurial Development and some colleges also offer the FastTrac course. If you want a lot of help with thinking about and writing your business plan you may like the REAL course better.

Looking for a live person to answer your business questions?

The Business ServiCenter at the NC Dept. of Commerce is the "gateway" to businesses and entrepreneurs for information and assistance. Knowledgeable Business Consultants are available Monday–Friday, 8–5 to answer your questions and help you navigate through the business planning process. Toll free 1-800-228-8443. (<http://www.nccommerce.com/servicenter/blio>)

There is a Small Business Center (SBC) within about 30 minutes of everyone in the state, located on your community college campus or nearby. SBCs are a good first stop in your explorations. (http://www.ncccs.cc.nc.us/Business_and_Industry/sbcnmainpage.htm)

Also, many Cooperative Extension offices (<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu>) — there is one in every county — now have staff who can answer your basic business questions or refer you to others nearby who can.



EXPLORING THE INTERNET

As any regular web browsers know, not everything on the Internet is current or correct for North Carolina. Please use the links in this guide to browse particular websites for North Carolina organizations. Also be sure to check out the U.S. Small Business Administration's website, <http://www.sba.gov/nc>, one of the most comprehensive and current, which includes a resource guide for North Carolina, startup kits, and information about financing.

You do not need to go to a college campus to develop your business idea!

Lots of nonprofits also provide helpful workshops; please check the *2007 NC Business Resources Directory* listings for your region. You may even have a community development organization, a local business incubator, or a church that provides business assistance.

BUSINESS NETWORKS

Workshops and classes are one way to evaluate your idea before you start your business. But you can also learn from other business owners or from others thinking about starting a new business. North Carolina is full of groups that network new business owners so they can learn from and do business with one another. Most people are familiar with their local Chamber of Commerce, but that is not the only place where business folks get together. Informal and formal business networks are springing up across the state. These groups generally meet on a regular basis and usually provide training, mentoring, and coaching for new business owners. They can be an enjoyable way for someone still exploring to test the waters of business startup. For more information on how business networks work and where some of them are, see *Hello My Business Name Is...: A Guide to Building Entrepreneurial Networks in North Carolina* (http://www.cednc.org/resources/reports_and_surveys/networks_guide.pdf). The guide is another product of the Rural Entrepreneurship Development System project.

What are some of North Carolina's specialized nonprofit resources for potential and existing business owners?

- Good Work (<http://www.goodwork.org>): Primarily serves the Triangle area, offering assistance in English and Spanish.
- Mountain BizWorks (<http://www.mountainbizworks.org>), with a Women's Business Center: Serves Western North Carolina.
- NC REAL (<http://www.ncreal.org>): Web-based business operations modules available online.
- North Carolina Indian Economic Development Initiative (<http://www.ncindian.com>), statewide for American Indians, based in Fayetteville.
- North Carolina Institute for Minority Economic Development (<http://www.ncimed.com>) with a Women's Business Center (<http://www.ncimed.com/wbc>) and Minority Business Enterprise Center (<http://mbdc-nc.com>), based in Durham.
- Women's Center of Fayetteville (<http://www.wcof.org>) serves Fayetteville, Cumberland County, and the surrounding region.

THE START-UP PHASE

WANT TO TALK TO A FRIENDLY PERSON BY PHONE ABOUT YOUR STARTUP QUESTIONS?

Contact the **North Carolina Department of Commerce's Business ServiCenter** anytime between 8–5 Monday–Friday, toll free at 1-800-228-8443. (<http://www.nccommerce.com/servicenter/blio>) They know more about business structure, licenses and permits than anyone, and they can refer you to people near you for other assistance.

YOU HAVE YOUR BUSINESS IDEA and you're ready to start. Now you'll have to focus on some critical details like getting a business license and deciding how to structure your new company.


N.C. Commerce's Business ServiCenter provides a handy startup checklist that includes these steps:

- Create a business plan
- Decide on a business structure and business name
- Get license information and business referrals
- Obtain the necessary tax information
- Identify sources of financing

The full startup checklist is available at the back of this guide.

Some people will just cold-start a business, jumping right into operations. Others will take the time to write a business plan that states what their business is doing and where they want it to go. **A business plan helps you refine the business idea to help you see if the business will be successful enough to create the income you need *before* you put your money into it.** Even if you are willing to risk your own money, most lenders will require that you show them a business plan before they put *their* money into it!

There are lots of books, guides, and workshops on how to write a business plan. You can also get some hands-on help from a counselor as well as a self-study CD at your local community college Small Business Center. If you live near a UNC campus you can attend the SBTDC's Pre-Venture Orientation which walks you through startup steps (see <http://sbtcd.org> for locations), or you can often get local business students to help with market research or other background work. Some regions also have a chapter of the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) (<http://score.org>). All of these organizations employ trained business counselors who can help you deal with some of the tougher issues surrounding your business plan. They can't write your plan for you, but they can help you avoid common business pitfalls.



Many new business owners are seeking government grants to support them in the business start-up process. Sadly, there are very few programs that provide this type of grant. However, there are a few specific initiatives that provide some start-up financing. For example, the North Carolina Board of Science and Technology (<http://www.ncscienceandtechnology.com>) provides some limited matching state funding for research projects that are part of the federal government's Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program. Veterans can also receive special support from various Small Business Administration programs (http://www.sba.gov/nc/NC_VETERANS_RESOURCE.html).

There is no easy way to get government money for a new business start-up. You're either going to have to fund the business using your own resources and credit (such as the 3 Fs: "friends, family and fools"), or go out and get a loan from a local bank. If you or your business cannot qualify for a bank loan, there are several other options for you. Self Help (<http://www.selfhelp.org>) provides loans to qualified individuals traditionally underserved by conventional lenders including people of color, women, rural residents, and low-wealth individuals statewide through its seven NC offices. The North Carolina Microenterprise Loan program (<http://www.ncruralcenter.org/loans/micro.htm>) can provide loans of up to \$25,000 for a new rural business. Local microenterprise funds such as Mountain BizWorks or a revolving loan fund administered by your council of governments can also help out. But, in all of these cases, the money comes in the form of loans. You must qualify for the money, and, of course, you must pay it back!

It is never too early to understand and begin implementing sound business practices. At this point, you may also want to continue learning about the business start-up process. North Carolina's many training organizations, including the community colleges and NC REAL, don't just teach the basics of how to start a business. They offer workshops on lots of useful topics, like how to use QuickBooks financial software or how to do business on eBay.

A word from the wise:

The information in the business plan is much more important than the format. Too many people get tied up in the format without really thinking through the questions they will need to deal with for the business to succeed. The process of business planning is more critical to you than the document. Your lender requires the document to be sure you have planned ahead.



Can you get free government grant money to start your business?

If you ever watch late night television, you're probably familiar with the commercials that talk of "free government money" for your business. While there are a few very limited sources of government grants, this claim falls in the category of "if it sounds too good to be true, it isn't true."

Starting a business is hard work, and it requires an extensive financial and personal commitment from you and your family. Because new businesses are so important to North Carolina's economy, government agencies and lots of non-profits work to help budding entrepreneurs. But most of this help is about giving a hand-up, not a hand-out. If you want information or training on how to succeed in business, we can help. If you're looking for free government money, good luck!

Is your home going to be your business' first address?

Many successful businesses have their start in garages, basements, and spare rooms of the entrepreneur's home. There are practical, legal, and tax implications of doing this. NC REAL offers an on-line user-friendly course on the business use of your home.

(<http://www.ncreal.org>)

Using technology in starting your business?

The Internet can be a treasure trove of resources, as well as offering convenient access to the information, forms and referrals at your convenience, anytime, anywhere. Federal tax information and forms, state and local licenses, permits, and applications can all be accessed and submitted electronically. A good introduction to the use of the Internet in developing your business can be found at <http://www.e-nc.org/pdf/final-e-commerce-manual.pdf>.

e-NC Business and Technology Telecenters (BTTs) serve the Alleghany, Anson-Union, Cherokee, Martin, Northampton, Rockingham, and Rutherford county regions with a range of technology-related services, high-speed Broadband access, digital literacy training, and e-commerce assistance. Call 1-866-NCRURAL or visit <http://www.e-nc.org> for locations and BTT contact information.

THE GROWTH PHASE

AFTER YOU'VE BEEN IN BUSINESS FOR AWHILE, you will hopefully be prospering and may even enter what experts call the high-growth phase. At this point, your business is growing rapidly and your biggest challenge becomes simply managing growth. At this phase, three big problems seem to crop up:

- 1) **accessing money**
- 2) **linking to fellow entrepreneurs**
- 3) **finding good employees**

ACCESSING MONEY

Firms that grow fast need funding to finance that growth. If you have a good business track record, many funding options are available. Most entrepreneurs move ahead thanks to traditional bank loans, sometimes with support of the U.S. Small Business Administration (<http://www.sba.gov>). For example, the SBA 7(a) loan guarantee program is used by thousands of North Carolinians each year through banks all over the state.

Some fast-growing firms need more than a bank loan — they need an infusion of equity investment that normally comes from a venture capital firm or from individual angel investors. You can locate North Carolina-based venture capital firms through the SBTDC's guide Capital Opportunities for Small Business (http://sbtdc.org/publications/cap_opps.asp) and talk with your SBTDC counselor about angel investor networks around the state. East Carolina University helps convene the Eastern NC Investor Network (<http://author.ecu.edu/cs-acad/rds/ei/investor.cfm>). Dogwood Equity Fund (<http://www.dogwoodequity.com>) can provide investments in the range of \$1–7 million for qualified firms located in rural North Carolina. The NC Rural Center's new Rural Ventures Fund will target companies in Tier 1 (distressed) counties that need \$50,000 to \$350,000 in equity or subordinated debt. See <http://www.ncruralcenter.org>.

LINKING TO FELLOW ENTREPRENEURS

If you're looking for money, you can't simply send in an application and expect a check to arrive. You will need to build a personal relationship with your lenders and investors. The best way to do this is to get out and network. There are several active regional entrepreneurial networks in North Carolina, both small and large, and they cater to the needs of the entrepreneurs in their regions (http://www.cednc.org/resources/reports_and_surveys/networks_guide.pdf). "Business to Business" networks are where you can best learn about which banks are most aggressive about doing business with new firms, or where you can find good employees. You can't find this timely but essential information in books or on websites.

Some networks are tied to specific industries — such as the North Carolina Agritourism Network (<http://www.ncagr.com/agritourism>) or Handmade in America for craftspeople (<http://www.handmadeinamerica.org>) — or to specific issues, such as the Council for Entrepreneurial Development’s Chief Financial Officer Roundtable (<http://www.cednc.org>).

If none of these organizations suits your location or type of business, you can attend local Chamber of Commerce meetings, Jaycees, Rotary, Lions Club, professional organizations, or anywhere that other business owners gather. Or you can start your own front porch network like some folks in Shenandoah, Iowa did a few years back and now there is a place to go and people who are interested (<http://energizingentrepreneurs.org>). Read the Networks Guide for dos and don’ts on starting a new network.

FINDING GOOD EMPLOYEES

Finding good people is the other big challenge facing growing businesses. Word of mouth and networking is one way many business owners find employees. JobLink, a one-stop center for job seekers, has offices in each county (<http://www.ncjoblink.com/centers>), usually located with the Employment Security Commission or the community college. Temp agencies and independent contractors can be helpful for short term needs. If you need to train new workers, the state’s Customized Training Program (<http://www.investnc.com/education/custom.asp>) might be for you. Through this program, firms can receive free employee training if they create at least 12 new jobs in a year.

Trying to do business with the military?

North Carolina’s General Assembly passed a law in 2004 to help North Carolina businesses get more of their share of the contracts from our many military bases.

The NC Military Business Center (<http://www.ncmbc.us>) was established as part of that initiative and works closely with the community colleges statewide. MatchForce (<http://www.matchforce.org>) matches North Carolina businesses to government contracts, government purchasers to NC suppliers, and job seekers to NC jobs. Businesses, contracting officers, cardholders and job seekers can register, post, search and receive opportunities.

The North Carolina Procurement Technical Assistance Center (http://sbtcd.org/services/gov_procurement.asp) is another helpful resource to companies wanting to procure work from the Department of Defense or other government agencies.

RESOURCES FOR KEY DECISIONS

THROUGHOUT YOUR BUSINESS VENTURE you will face key decisions such as:

- How do I find and keep great employees?
- How do I determine if a new market (such as export) is a good opportunity for me?
- How can I increase sales with a website and selling online?
- How do I improve efficiency to make more profit?
- How do I deal with decline or even potential bankruptcy?
- How can I ensure my business continues after I retire?

Continuous improvement is the name of the game in business today and it can take many forms. It can mean entering new markets. It can mean improving the manufacturing or production process. Or, it can mean improving the skills and talents of you and your management team.

If you're looking to enter new markets, it pays to do a little research first. You may need to use outside marketing support or consultants. Some basic industry research can be accessed via the SBTDC's research office (<http://www.sbtdc.org>). More extensive support can be found if you're trying to do business overseas. North Carolina operates export offices around the globe, and the NC Department of Commerce (<http://www.exportnc.com/services>) offers a wide array of support if you want to do business overseas. If you sell agriculture-related products, you can get help from the NC Department of Agriculture (<http://www.ncagr.com/markets>).

If you're interested in improving your internal processes for manufacturing or production, North Carolina State University (NCSU) may be the place to go. NCSU's Cooperative Extension (<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu>) works with farmers to introduce new products, services, and to improve existing operations. The Industrial Extension Service (<http://www.ies.ncsu.edu>) helps firms improve manufacturing and engineering processes, and address health, safety, and environmental concerns. Through the NC Department of Commerce's regional Retention and Expansion Program, Existing Industry Specialists can visit you at your site and offer specific information about business assistance programs, resources, and services.

If you need help in strengthening your management team's capabilities, these programs can help. You can also access private coaching and counseling via the SBTDC, SCORE, or from a private business network or leadership development firm in your region.

CONCLUSION

ACROSS THE STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA each county and region has business development assistance, for people at every educational level. We hope this guide helps you find quality information near your business location. Don't forget to see also the *2007 North Carolina Business Resources Directory* distributed at the February 2007 North Carolina Entrepreneurship Summit and at http://www.ncruralcenter.org/resource_guide.pdf.

CHECKLISTS

TWO SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLISTS for entrepreneurs are included here for reference, the first one from Good Work, Inc. and the second from the Council for Entrepreneurial Development. The third checklist is a **STARTUP CHECKLIST** from the NC Commerce's Business ServiCenter.

GOOD WORK'S ENTREPRENEUR SELF-ASSESSMENT PART 1

WHY DO I WANT TO BE IN BUSINESS?

Check off the reason(s) that most apply to you.

- 1. I want to be my own boss.
- 2. I want flexible working hours.
- 3. I need something to occupy my spare time.
- 4. I want to utilize my skills and talents better.
- 5. I would someday like to quit my present job and to live off my own business.
- 6. I need additional income.
- 7. I have an idea that I've never seen tried before.
- 8. I must/want to work from home.
- 9. I can't work regular hours.
- 10. I am driven to work for myself.
- 11. I want to create something that hasn't existed before.
- 12. I want to create jobs for my family or community.
- 13. I want my extended family to be able to have work where we live.
- 14. Other: _____

GOOD WORK'S ENTREPRENEUR SELF-ASSESSMENT PART 2

DO I HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO RUN MY OWN BUSINESS?

Do you **Strongly Agree**, **Somewhat Agree**, or **Do Not Agree** with the following statements? Put a check in the column that best describes your answer. At the end, total up each column for your score.

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Do Not Agree
I am a risk taker.			
I am a self-starter.			
I am self-confident.			
I have a marketable skill.			
I don't mind working long hours and weekends.			
I am persistent and don't give up easily.			
I am a very good organizer.			
I am comfortable with bookkeeping.			
I am a good salesperson.			
I can deal calmly with criticism and rejection.			
I like people and dealing with the public.			
I am not afraid to make decisions.			
I have the discipline to see a job through to its end.			
I can live without a regular paycheck for 1–2 years.			
I have the support of my family.			
I am good at networking, meeting and talking with people who might help me with my business.			

Congratulations! The more items you check off in the **Strongly Agree** and **Somewhat Agree** columns, the better prepared you are to start your own business at this time. The items you checked off in the **Do Not Agree** column are challenges. Review these items and decide how difficult it may be to overcome each one. Some of these things, such as lack of bookkeeping skills, can be overcome easily by taking a class. Don't be discouraged.

CED'S ENTREPRENEURIAL TEST*

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU WILL BE SUCCESSFUL IN BUSINESS?

Some business development materials start out with a dissertation on the characteristics of the business owner in order to help you decide if you should go into business for yourself. These questions deal with the basic personality of potential entrepreneurs.

Are you “entrepreneurial” enough to build a business?

Do you know what the meaning of the word *entrepreneurial*?

Are you a risk taker?

Did you get good grades in school?

Did you know many successful entrepreneurs did not?

You are a cautious person and a good student. Should you forget the whole thing? That's what some entrepreneurial tests would suggest.

However, there are many successful business owners who, as an adolescent, were team players, athletes, school leaders, excellent students, and never seriously questioned the status quo. Often, though, a tendency toward caution is not typical of many successful entrepreneurs. Most entrepreneurs tend to be maverick personalities with risk-taking vision and courage. Many entrepreneurs tend to be just a bit “off beat” and they sometimes need to be in order to creatively grow a successful business.

Obviously there is no set formula for success. However, the following entrepreneurial test may help you in your personal evaluation process. You just need to remember that this is simply a tool. It is fun to take and fun to interpret, but you should keep it in perspective.

For each question, check the answer that best describes you. **You must answer ALL questions for the test to be accurate.**

*You can find more information on-line at <http://sba.gov>.

SELF-TEST

	Yes	Maybe	No
1) I'm persistent.			
2) When I'm interested in a project, I need less sleep.			
3) When there's something I want, I keep my goal clearly in mind.			
4) I examine mistakes and I learn from them.			
5) I keep New Year's resolutions.			
6) I have a strong personal need to succeed.			
7) I have new and different ideas.			
8) I am adaptable.			
9) I am curious.			
10) I am intuitive.			
11) If something can't be done, I find a way.			
12) I see problems as challenges.			
13) I take chances.			
14) I'll gamble on a good idea even if it isn't a sure thing.			
15) To learn something new, I explore unfamiliar subjects.			
16) I can recover from emotional setbacks.			
17) I feel sure of myself.			
18) I'm a positive person.			
19) I experiment with new ways to do things.			
20) I'm willing to undergo sacrifices for long-term rewards.			
21) I usually do things my own way.			
22) I tend to rebel against authority.			
23) I often enjoy being alone.			
24) I like to be in control.			
25) I have a reputation for being stubborn.			

SCORING YOUR TEST: Award yourself three points for every **Yes** answer, two points for every **Maybe** answer and zero points for every **No** answer. Add up your points for your score. **If you scored between 60 and 75**, you can start that business plan. You have the earmarks of an entrepreneur. **If you scored between 48 and 59**, you have potential but need to push yourself. You may want to improve your skills in your weaker areas. This can be accomplished by either improving yourself in these areas or by hiring someone with these skills. **If you scored between 37 and 47**, you may not want to start a business alone. Look for a business partner who can complement you in your weaker areas. **If you scored below 37**, self-employment may not be for you. You will probably be happier and more successful working for someone else. However, only you can make that decision.

COMMERCE BUSINESS SERVICENTER'S START-UP CHECKLIST

Congratulations on your decision to embark upon a new venture in North Carolina! To save time and ensure you have all the information you need in one place, we've outlined a six-step checklist to help you get started. The requirements may vary according to your type of business.

STEP 1: Create a business plan.

For any business, the first step is to turn the would-be owner's basic idea into a written viable plan of action. Your business plan must convince you that your business will work "on paper" and then serve as a road map and model for your business success. A well-thought out business plan is necessary for obtaining loans and other aid.

STEP 2: Decide on your business structure and register your business name.

One of the earliest decisions a company makes is determining the appropriate business structure. Whether a corporation, a limited liability company, partnership or other entity is chosen, careful consideration must be given to the management, structural and tax implications of this decision. While not a replacement for sound legal or tax advice, the following information outlines many of those structural options.

- **Register your business names for sole proprietorships and general partnerships.** Contact the County Register of Deeds Office (<http://ncinfo.iog.unc.edu/library/counties.html>) where you intend to do business.
- **File corporations, LLC, LLP, or limited partnerships.** Contact the North Carolina Secretary of State Office (<http://www.sosnc.com>), Corporations Division or call (919) 807-2225.

STEP 3: Get license information and business referrals.

The State of North Carolina has no single business license that will ensure compliance with the numerous state licenses, permits, and regulatory requirements. Additionally, the proposed business may be subject to local and/or federal requirements. Simply knowing which agencies to contact can be a very confusing task for the new entrepreneur. Call the Business ServiCenter at (800) 228-8443 (toll-free in NC) or (919) 715-2864 for State license and permitting requirements go to <http://www.nccommerce.com/servicenter/blio/redbook>.

- **Local license and zoning issues.** Check with city/town and county agencies where you intend to do business.

<http://www.nclm.org/NC%20Cities/A.htm>

<http://ncinfo.iog.unc.edu/library/counties.html>

STEP 4: Obtain the necessary tax information.

Taxation for small businesses may be simple or complex, depending on the size and type of business structure. Keep in mind that tax liability for each business will be different and that you should consult your attorney and accountant regarding comprehensive tax planning to fit your unique business situation. Visit the Business ServiCenter website (<http://www.nccommerce.com/servicenter/blio>).

STEP 5: Identify sources of financing.

Refer to the Business ServiCenter Sources of Capital section of the website (<http://www.nccommerce.com/servicenter/blio>) for an overview of financial resources and special loan programs available for small business owners and entrepreneurs in North Carolina.

STEP 6: Learn about employer reporting requirements and responsibilities.

Visit the Business ServiCenter Employer Issues section of the website (<http://www.nccommerce.com/servicenter/blio>) for instructions on how to register as an employer, apply for tax ID numbers and unemployment insurance, obtain worker's compensation insurance, and adhere to employee eligibility regulations.

Some optional considerations and resources that may apply:

- For Federal Identification Numbers (EINs) contact the Internal Revenue Service (<http://www.irs.gov>) or call (800) 829-4933.
- For State Sales Tax and State Withholding Tax Numbers contact the North Carolina Department of Revenue (<http://www.dornc.com>) or call (877) 252-3052.
- Consult with an accountant for bookkeeping, tax, and related needs
- Obtain insurance
- Review contracts with legal counsel
- Review applicable regulations (OSHA, EPA, Labor, etc.)
- Register trademarks or patents
- Develop policy and employee handbook
- Consider joining trade associations, chamber of commerce organizations

Was this guide helpful? What did you want to know that was not here?

Please provide any written comments or feedback about this guide to:

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