

Legal aid to entrepreneurs

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ENTREPRENEUR Richard Thoma brought his idea for a computer storage system to life with the help of a new free legal aid program for fledgling entrepreneurs. The program was launched last fall as a joint effort of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, the Philadelphia Bar Association's Section on Corporation, Banking and Business Law, and the Advanced Technology Center of Southeastern Pennsylvania.

According to Frederick D. Lipman, chairman of the Chamber's Technology Council, it is the first of its kind in the country. The program was started as a means of strengthening regional technology development and creating new jobs in technology and related industries.

"It's designed to generate as many new jobs as possible in order to compensate for the many jobs lost in recent years," Lipman says. The legal assistance program is part of a larger plan which now includes accounting and marketing services, and will ultimately include testing for technical feasibility. "All four aspects must exist in order to attract venture capital."

Under the legal aid program, an entrepreneur who exhibits a reasonable promise of success in starting up a new technology company but lacks the necessary funds may be eligible. The Technology Council screens and selects those applicants who qualify and assigns them a volunteer attorney.

The entrepreneur is eligible for up to \$1,000 in free legal services, which range from incorporation to establishing patent rights. "The program puts us in contact with the people who have an immediate need for legal advice and no funding," says Frank Benasutti of Benasutti and Murray. To date, six entrepreneurs have received counseling and more than 60 lawyers have volunteered their services.

Getting Started: Richard Thoma had invented a new information storage system for personal computers. Last fall, he applied to the Technology Council, was accepted, and

within a week was assigned to a lawyer. People and Technology, Inc. was formed and the Electronic File Cabinet was trademarked in late November. After incorporation, Thoma was able to raise \$10,000 in seed capital.

Since then, Thoma has reached an exclusive distribution agreement with several companies. Thoma's entrepreneurial dream was realized, and he even has a full-column ad in the February issue of *Byte*. "With the help of the legal aid program, I was able to get the rights to the product and open up a whole new market for something that wasn't available before," he says. "The legal agreement was the keystone of my ability to get funding."

Often, an entrepreneur will get an extra boost through his attorney's professional contacts. "The attorney may have other clients who are interested in this type of investment," Lipman adds.

What's Next: In January, the Technology Council launched the accounting and marketing arms of the program in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Institute of Certified Public Accountants and the American Marketing Association. Lipman says several major universities have expressed interest in providing technical evaluation services, but that part of the program is still in the planning stages.

The accounting and marketing programs have both received their first clients. "With the addition of these two services, the program is moving closer to its goal of providing the support new entrepreneurs need to get on their feet," explains Suzanne M. Tavani, manager of the Technology Council. Benasutti describes it as "synergism."

"The program lets the entrepreneur work back through the system to get the additional help he or she needs. If he had simply gone to a patent attorney, he wouldn't have received this kind of follow-through," he explains.

For more information on the entrepreneurial assistance programs, contact Suzanne Tavani at the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, (215) 545-1234. □

