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Time, money, cultural recognition are concerns for Milwaukee small business owners

Report probes technology use by small businesses, predominantly those owned by people of color

Cost is a chief obstacle for small businesses to using technology, as are a lack of access to training, capital and cultural recognition, according to Milwaukee small business owners surveyed and interviewed for a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report.

The pandemic has necessitated a shift in the ways many businesses operate, requiring many to implement new technologies and practices such as online ordering and no-contact pickups and delivery.

For some businesses, it was relatively easy to make these changes because of technology used prior to the pandemic, including websites, apps, and contactless payment systems. Some small businesses did not have this technological infrastructure in place, however, making it more difficult for them to pivot to the new normal.

Commissioned by the Greater Milwaukee Committee, this report examines the use of technology by small businesses in the city of Milwaukee. A specific emphasis is placed on small businesses owned by people of color, who made up a majority of small businesses surveyed.

The findings are based on a survey of Milwaukee small business owners and a series of interviews with both business owners and organizations that assist small businesses in Milwaukee. Businesses surveyed were in fields including consulting, food and beverages, manufacturing, retail, services, arts and culture, construction, transportation, health, events or media.

Some findings include:

- When asked “What barriers prevent you from using technology for your business or make using technology for your business more difficult,” the two most common responses were fees (66%) and initial cost (57%).
- Access to information or training (34%) and comfort with technology (28%) are also barriers for many respondents. These were more commonly cited by older small business owners.
- Sizable numbers of survey respondents said they increased their use of hardware (49%), software (52%), or social media (65%) during the pandemic. This was particularly true among younger business owners.
- Each Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Hmong business owner and organizational leader we interviewed said participating in existing entrepreneurial initiatives can feel daunting because they are being centered in or led by the white Milwaukee community. This theme was reinforced by our survey responses as well. Language is another barrier for some communities, especially those that are Spanish- and Hmong-speaking.

Also included is an analysis of 11 possible strategies and solutions that could be implemented at the local level to address the technology needs of the city's small businesses and their owners and workers. They are organized around four themes: a need for learning and training, better access to financial assistance, cultural recognition, and better Internet access.

As technological advancement continues to rapidly re-shape the way Americans live, work, and play, small businesses face daunting challenges in obtaining requisite knowledge and making the necessary investments to keep pace with the change and meet the needs and expectations of their customers.

The report points out that with federal pandemic relief dollars available and potentially more coming to support broadband infrastructure from the federal government, Milwaukee now has a possible opportunity to use at least some of these dollars to ensure that quality internet access in the community is easily accessible for those who need it.

[Click here to read the full report: "Up to Speed: Technology challenges facing Milwaukee's small businesses."](#)

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