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## Business

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### Savannah's tech-based businesses: 328, and counting

*Among the area's new start-up companies, graduates are creating opportunities for themselves and others.*

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As graduation day loomed in 2001, Susan Isaacs found herself wondering what she was going to do.

The Savannah College of Art and Design graduate and three of her friends, wanted to stay in Savannah. But employment options seemed rather thin.

"I looked around, but there was not too much of anything," she said. "So we decided to do our own thing. We thought it would be easy."

It wasn't.

But with loans from family and good advice from SCAD and the Small Business Development Center, their design and marketing company, Paragon, has made it to year three.

Paragon is among the 328 knowledge-based companies in the Coastal Empire, according to Chris Miller.

Miller, who heads up the Creative Coast project for the Savannah Economic Development Authority, has been on the lookout and keeping count.

It's the first time SEDA - or anyone for that matter - has taken a serious inventory of the area's tech companies.

"I'm a geek hunter," Miller said.

But despite these "honed" hunting skills, Miller said he's found two companies in as many days that were in the area but under the radar.

"It's like popcorn, companies are popping up all the time. I just turned up the heat, the oil was here all along," he said.



*Susan Isaacs started her own marketing and design company when she couldn't find local employment after graduating from the Savannah College of Art and Design in 2001. Her company is one of 328 knowledge-based companies in the area. Scott Bryant Savannah Morning News*

Lynn Vos, Savannah area director for the Small Business Development Center, started noting more tech-based companies five years ago. Many have come to the Development Center for assistance.

The world economy is increasingly being driven by knowledge-based industries. Cities like Savannah, looking to "get some wind under their wings," need to work on diversifying their economies by attracting and retaining these types of businesses, said Skip Stiles, a Norfolk, Va.-based consultant on science, public policy, and regulation.

Stiles, who spoke at the Coastal Business, Education and Technology Alliance luncheon earlier this week, said smart economic development people are as concerned with attracting smart folks as they are in attracting companies and infrastructure.

"Because you've got all the elements," he said.

And that's something the area's working on, said Lynn Pitts, senior vice president for the SEDA.

"I was talking with someone earlier today, and she told me she had a strong mental image of Savannah as a beautiful, historic city," Pitts said. "And the good thing is, that's a good thing.

"But as Chris Miller likes to say: 'We're pretty, but we're smart too.'"

The universities and institutes in the area mean that one of the beauties of this community is the wealth of intellectual resources it has to call on, he said.

Linda Tierney, SCAD's director of alumni services, said 13 to 15 percent of the school's graduates choose to stay in Savannah.

Those who start their own businesses are committed to providing work for future graduates.

"They have the ability and entrepreneurial spirit to go out and freelance and start their own businesses that give to the arts and the community," she said.

Isaacs is one of those grads.

"One of the things we hope to do is create a basket to catch future SCAD students," she said. "To be something we didn't have when we graduated. Someone has to dig their heels in and take a chance."

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