

Getting back to business



Cara and Gregg Burzynski, owners of Seabrook-based AeroDynamics Metal Finishing, have faced their share of pandemic-related challenges over the past two years.

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Child care, hiring top concerns for small companies as pandemic outlook brightens

By Josie Albertson-Grove
New Hampshire Union Leader

Like small business owners around the state and across the country, the last two years have meant challenges, adjustments and pivots for Cara Burzynski, president of AeroDynamics Metal Finishing in Seabrook, and her staff.

"When things got tough we were all doing things that were not necessarily in our job descriptions," Burzynski said, recalling the chaos of March 2020 - the rush to find face masks and hand sanitizers so her employees could keep working on medical equipment.

"Our employees really stepped it up," she said. But after two years navigating ever-more-complicated supply chains, major equipment upgrades have been set back years, and difficulty hiring and retaining staff are wearing thin.

"It's definitely a struggle," Burzynski said.

Results of a nationwide survey conducted for Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program shows thousands of other small business owners are feeling Cara's pain.

A list of policy recommendations in a report released last week by Goldman Sachs and the Bipartisan Policy Center focused on policies that could make it easier for businesses to hire, set up in-house child care on their own or in cooperation with other local businesses, and recommended policies to ease businesses' access to credit and government contracts.

As the delta variants threw shadows on the hope for a full recovery in 2021, and the omicron wave surged over the winter, 42% of small business owners told pollsters in January that they were still struggling financially.

Difficulty hiring - due in large part to the lack of child care - were major problems across the country, and business owners also said that they felt shut out of government contracting and worried about getting loans.

More than half - 55% - of surveyed business owners said child care was the number-one obstacle

► See **Obstacles**, Page B3



From left: Luz De Ayala, Maranda Andew and Estephany Rojas work as "maskers" at AeroDynamics Metal Finishing in Seabrook.

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to full recovery. Among business owners in their late 30s and early 40s, more than two-thirds cited child care as their top concern.

Business owners surveyed, including the owners of child care businesses, also noted that the child care business model is not working. The pay is low, but because child care is such a labor-intensive business, the costs for families are more than many families can afford.

Half of survey respondents said hiring and retaining qualified staff is the most significant problem facing small businesses. Two-thirds of business owners said they were actively hiring, and almost nine in 10 said it was hard to find qualified people.

"We're looking to attract quality people. So you have to be able to make sure you're in the game," Burzynski said. For AeroDynamics, that has meant taking a hard look at the kind of pay she was offering – and raising it, she said, to enable her staff to support their families and live decent lives.

"I think you can see that everywhere," she said.

According to the report, smaller business owners said they had trouble competing with larger firms offering sign-on bonuses and

even basic benefits like retirement plans and on-the-job training that might be out of reach for the smallest businesses.

But for Burzynski, being small has been a big advantage.

"I think what has happened is people are looking to do something that they are passionate about. They want to lessen their commute. They want to go someplace where their voice is heard," she said. "We're trying to work with our employees to be flexible, and make it so that they want to come to work."

Burzynski also said she worries about the non-human impediments to growth, like sourcing the raw materials she needs to make her products, and buying new equipment that will enable more automation.

The pandemic has presented setbacks on both, she said.

"We have to store more inventory than we have before," she said. Principles of lean manufacturing are out the window, she said, especially when there's no guarantee of being able to buy all her necessary materials at the same time.

Think of trying to make a cake with a storeroom full of flour – but no eggs.

"You have to buy it when

you know you can get it," she said.

She knows other manufacturers have similar challenges – because she got a call last week informing her that an order for new equipment she ordered six months ago, now has a delivery date of "we don't know."

She had been hoping to use that new equipment to automate more of the manufacturing process – but now, with demand from customers higher than ever and plenty of room to grow, Burzynski has resorted to buying equipment used.

"The supply chain issues are so real," she said, and small businesses are not out of the woods yet. "The pandemic might be winding down, but these supply chain problems, gas prices, the political state of affairs – small businesses need attention."

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Bob Levesque, chrome plater, works at AeroDynamics Metal Finishing in Seabrook.