

WORK

SCORE Mentoring: A Free Resource for Entrepreneurs Seeking Growth

BY MADDY OSMAN ON 9/28/23 AT 7:00 AM EDT



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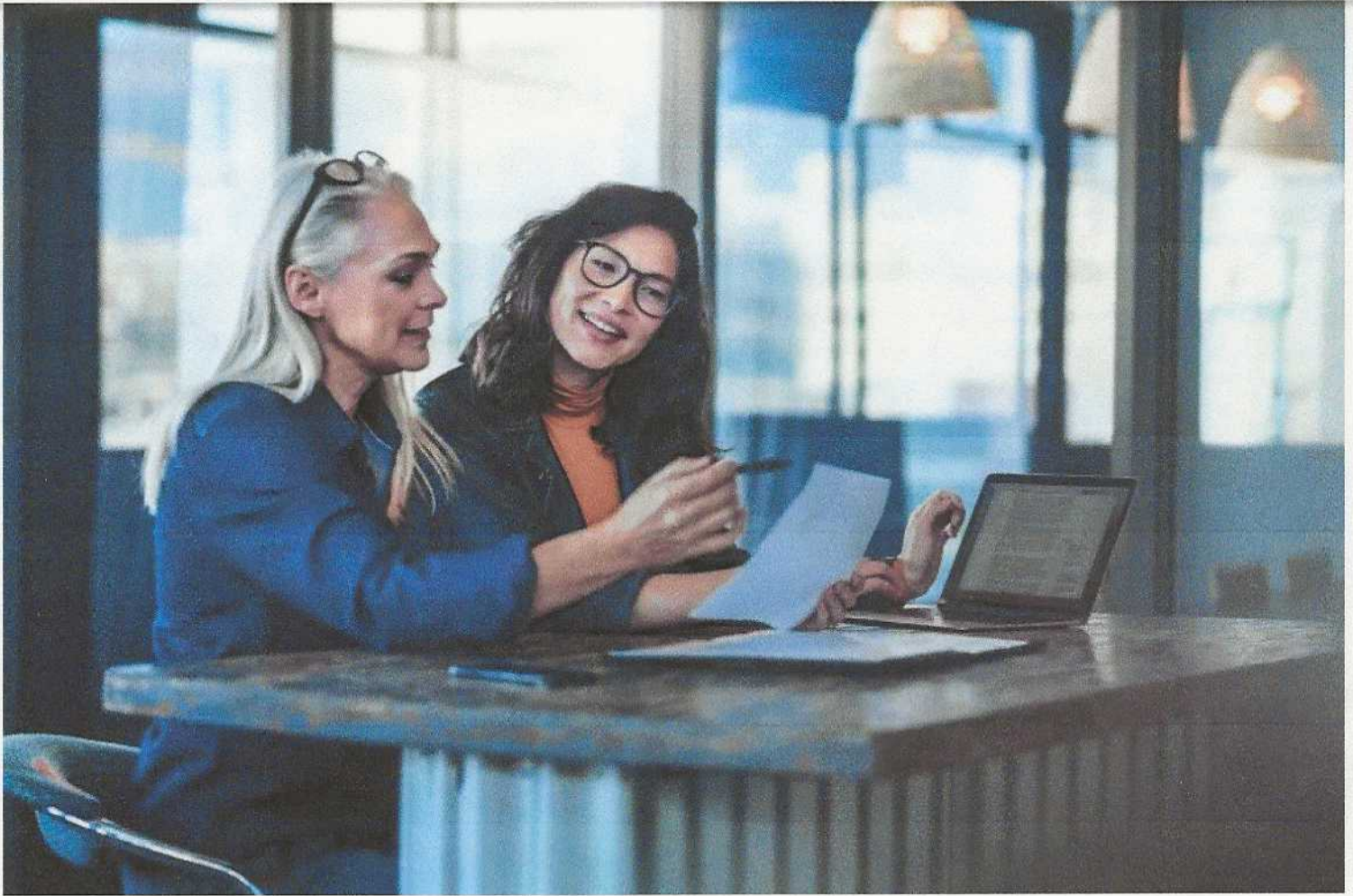
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Let's face it: starting and growing a small business in the U.S. is hard. There's a reason why so many more people opt for traditional employment despite the endless potential that comes with entrepreneurship.

One of the most important things I've learned throughout my years both as a freelancer and an agency owner is that you can't be an island. If you think you have all the answers, your growth will be limited.

Instead, surround yourself with peers who are both at and above your level. Specifically, I recommend seeking mentorship opportunities from nonprofit organizations like SCORE.



Two women analyzing documents at the office. Securing a mentor via SCORE allows you to get expert business advice from seasoned volunteers with practical experience.

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What Is SCORE?

SCORE, or "Service Corps of Retired Executives," is, unintentionally, the best-kept secret from American business owners. Whenever I talk about it with people in my network, people seem surprised about its existence.

That, in turn, astonishes me—especially considering it's the nation's largest volunteer organization that helps small businesses. SCORE [operates 250+ chapters](#) in major U.S. locations, supported by 10,000+ volunteers.

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SCORE runs as a nonprofit and resource partner of the SBA (Small Business Administration). For entrepreneurs [seeking guidance](#), SCORE provides free resources via experienced mentors who are typically retired professionals looking to pay their success forward.

The organization also hosts useful business workshops and local networking events for a nominal fee.

How SCORE Has Helped Grow My Business

My SCORE mentor helped me grow two of my business ideas—here's how:

Meeting With My SCORE Mentor

When I first heard about SCORE, I was skeptical. The fact that I could be matched with an experienced business mentor who would be available whenever I needed help—at no cost—seemed too good to be true.

Regardless, I filled out the application to [request a SCORE mentor](#) and was quickly matched with Jim Vernon. With no shortage of educational and professional accomplishments, Jim's background and business experience stood out to me.

He started volunteering with SCORE while transitioning out of a heavy work schedule, looking for a way to give back. These days, Jim acts as the Denver SCORE Chapter Chair.

Together with a team of other chairpeople and volunteer mentors, Jim handles the ongoing operations and needs for managing SCORE from Denver to Castle Rock and Fort Collins, Colorado. The chapter fields 5-7 mentor requests daily and runs multiple online workshops and in-person networking events.

Jim and I first started meeting many years ago when I was a freelancer experimenting with various business ideas. Specifically, I reached out wanting a sounding board for my e-commerce venture, [Tanks that Get Around](#).

While Jim wasn't focused on the e-commerce space in his professional life, he gave me a lot to think about from a business perspective, and his insights helped me build the brand and make sales.

Ultimately, I decided to move away from growing this particular brand. However, I continued to consult with Jim after deciding to invest more time into transitioning my freelance writing business into an [agency model](#).

SCORE mentees can request to meet with their mentors as needed. At this point in my entrepreneurship journey, I typically set meetings with Jim a few times a year during pivotal times when I want input from someone [who has my best interests at heart](#) (and a lot more practical experience than I do).

While many SCORE mentors consider themselves to be more generalist in the guidance they provide, they also collaborate with [subject matter experts](#) depending on the mentee's specific needs. In other words, you have the opportunity to work with multiple professionals throughout your SCORE mentorship journey.

Overall, my engagements with SCORE and its mentors at the early stages of my businesses played [a key role in getting to where I am today](#).

During our chat, Jim noted that's what SCORE excels at, stating, "Most of the market we serve is in the early stages of starting and getting a business off the ground. Most people are passionate about an idea but don't realize they need to juggle many other factors like keeping financial track of cash flow."

He added, "Tons of issues come at you when you're first starting out. So, having someone who's been there and done that, can be in your corner, ask some good questions, and help you prepare for the obstacles you're going to face can be helpful."

Jim finds satisfaction in playing that key supporting role regardless of the outcomes.

"Not every mentoring situation is going to be the next [Amazon](#), but almost every mentoring situation is satisfying because you can see the growth in the individual and the progress they make."

Jim followed that up with a story about a couple who wanted to open a retail store after finding success with their baked goods at local markets. Jim helped them write a business plan they took to the bank and got funding. When Jim went to the grand opening, they said, "We couldn't have done this without you."

Despite that, Jim insists that they did all the work—he assisted by providing resources and guidance regarding the perspective of what the banks were looking for. Years later, the couple's business is doing great, and it's the wife's full-time job.

He finished his recollection of this proud mentor moment by sharing, "When you sit down with someone and give them your undivided attention, and they're able to talk about something they're passionate about, it's such a win/win."

Attending SCORE Workshops and Networking Events

Receiving mentorship is a large part of what SCORE does and the value it provides entrepreneurs—but it's not the full extent of their offerings.

I've gotten so much out of local resources like Denver's quarterly Women Entrepreneurs Networking Series. And I was honored to be invited to speak at one of their 2023 events! It's so useful to have this recurring meeting space made up of my fellow women entrepreneurs who operate in the same location.

SCORE also offers various in-person and online workshops focused on various aspects of starting and running a business. Both networking events and workshops are available at a nominal cost—I can't recall seeing any that exceeded \$30.

The two most useful Denver SCORE workshops I've taken to date were about understanding financial statements (check out [part one](#) and [part two](#), available on-demand regardless of where you're based). The instructor, Tom Moore, is a SCORE Counselor and retired CPA with extensive industry and mentorship experience.

Using Business Checkup

Per Jim, Business Checkup is "Focused on companies who have been operating for several years and have run into particular challenges like a flat spot in their sales or their supply chain coming apart. We send in a consulting team of volunteers to ideate solutions to these issues and stay with them throughout their implementation."

To get the most out of this offering, your company must have at least three years of detailed (and accurate) financials.

Other Great Resources for Entrepreneurs

[More than 20 percent of businesses fail](#) in the first year. According to Jim (via SCORE research), if you have a SCORE mentor, that number gets reduced by half.

He shares the following ideas for other great resources that entrepreneurs can turn to:

- A lot of towns and cities have economic development offices. In Denver, we have [The Commons on Champa](#). These economic development offices offer facilities that can include free meeting space, some business services and networking opportunities with fellow entrepreneurs. On a related note, The Commons on Champa hosts multiple events around Denver's fabulous and free [Denver Startup Week](#) event.
- There are eight [Small Business Development Centers](#) in Colorado (and many more throughout the United States). They have similar counseling and training offerings to SCORE and operate likewise as a fellow division of the SBA.
- Ask your local entrepreneur community and resource centers about [funding and grant money opportunities](#) for small business owners.

The Importance of Mentorship

In Jim's words, "It's fabulous to sit with someone who's been there, done that, who can be a sounding board for you and help you with some resources to face some of the challenges that come along with small businesses."

As someone who's acted as a mentor and has benefitted from the mentorship of others, I have to agree. By participating both ways, you generate good karma and keep the business world moving forward.

Just try it out. And if you don't want to take it from me, take it from this last bit of wisdom from my SCORE mentor: "I would encourage anybody starting out to get a SCORE mentor."

About the Author

Maddy Osman is the author of [Writing for Humans and Robots: The New Rules of Content Style](#). Maddy's journey from freelance writer to founder and CEO of [The Blogsmith](#) yielded numerous insights to share about content creation for enterprise B2B technology brands. Her efforts earned her a spot in BuzzSumo's and Semrush's Top 100 Content Marketers and The Write Life's 100 Best Websites for Writers. She has spoken for audiences at WordCamp US, SearchCon and Denver Startup Week.