

From steel town to startup sector, why Pittsburgh has it all

By Greg Petro for Upstart Business Journal
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Few people know the real Pittsburgh.

As the world's foremost producer of coal and steel in the 19th century, the city has a lingering reputation as a smoggy, blue collar steel town. In fact, as recently as just a few years ago, I met a visitor who had never been here before. Upon entering the city he said, "Wow. This is not how I expected Pittsburgh to look. It's a beautiful city." My response? "It's been a long time since it was pitch black at noon due to steel mill soot."

The mills have long since closed and the fact is that Pittsburgh has an amazing history of firsts — from commercial radio to banana splits — that were born from the same entrepreneurial

passion and ingenuity that made it the capital of the steel boom. This innovative spirit is what's fueling Pittsburgh's vibrant business sector.

Pittsburgh's rich history of self-determination, grit and entrepreneurship make it a great place to start and grow a business. Here are the top four reasons I run my company in Pittsburgh — and why you should, too.

Innovation

My company, [First Insight](#), which provides actionable data insights to brands, isn't necessarily what you would think of as a traditional Pittsburgh company, but there are many benefits to growing an innovative tech company here. Access to cutting-edge thinkers, programs and

institutions is a priceless advantage to companies looking to lead in the 21st century. Pittsburgh has three prestigious universities within a 10-mile radius: the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University and Duquesne University.

First Insight has benefited directly from Carnegie Mellon's Tepper School of Business, from which we appointed an advisory board member specializing in marketing technology from the faculty and regularly tap into a showcase of brilliant students at the school's startup pitch nights.

The Pittsburgh Tech Council is an innovative local resource for young and established technology companies across the board, from IT to hardware and

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biotech, with access to talent, business development, government relations and visibility.

In addition to the universities and resources for tech companies in the area, well-recognized technology companies such as Google, Apple and Uber are putting down roots in Pittsburgh. These brands stimulate innovation, elevate the conversation and energize the entire business community because of how they are changing the way people access information, interact with technology, and get from place to place.

People

Ask any Pittsburgher what makes the city great and you will consistently hear, “the people.” Home to

world-class talent drawn in by Pittsburgh’s universities and corporations, the extraordinarily skilled workforce makes Pittsburgh what I describe as one of the country’s biggest small towns and one of the top reasons First Insight calls the city home.

Pittsburghers are highly connected to each other and like to say there are just 1.5 degrees of separation between people here (a twist on the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon game). These connections foster a genuine concern for the greater good and a disposition for true collaboration that is so valuable to both community and business success.

Andrew Carnegie, H.J. Heinz and George Westinghouse instilled a can-do attitude and

tradition of entrepreneurship in Pittsburghers that is still thriving today, demonstrated by the success of locally grown companies like PNC Bank, PPG Industries, ModCloth, 4moms and First Insight.

Lifestyle

Pittsburgh is a great city to both work and live in, and has a lot to offer to help find the work-life balance that has become so important to many in recent years. Since 2000, Pittsburgh has been named the “most livable city” by The Economist, Forbes and Places Rated Almanac for its stability, healthcare, culture, environment, education and infrastructure — all of which are key elements for maintaining a happy, healthy and stable workforce.

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Pittsburgh is beautiful. USA Today recently rated the view atop Pittsburgh's Mount Washington as "America's No. 2 most stunning view."

As far as I know, it's the only city with an entrance. Coming from the airport, you exit the Fort Pitt Tunnel to a remarkable view of Pittsburgh, flanked by the three rivers that join at the Point to create the golden triangle of downtown.

With some of the nation's highest-rated schools and one of the lowest crime rates, Pittsburgh is a great place to raise a family. Farmer's Insurance rated Pittsburgh as the third safest city in the United States and this year's U.S. News rankings listed two Pittsburgh high schools on the top ten list for

the state of Pennsylvania. Include sports (Steelers football, Penguins hockey and Pirates baseball), more than a dozen museums, extensive bike trails and exceptional music and theater venues, and it's clear that the city has something for every employee and entrepreneur.

Stability

Above all, the most important reason to run your company in Pittsburgh is its economic stability. The city boasts a steady growth rate that has been safe from the booms and busts of other major metropolitan centers; the result is a stable housing market and workforce. This solid foundation means businesses, and startups in particular, have fewer unpredictable variables

to deal with when it comes time to take risks.

In addition to the obvious benefits of a lower cost of living — better quality of life, ability for young professionals to buy a home — there are less obvious benefits that are equally impactful. Job security and residential stability reduce overall stress and support mental health.

What Pittsburgh Needs from New Entrepreneurs

With six Super Bowl titles, five World Series championships and three Stanley Cups, Pittsburgh has pride in its tradition of winning. But whether we like it or not, failure is a healthy part of business success. Pittsburgh will accelerate its success when it fully

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acknowledges its solid economic and civic foundation and remembers its history of hardworking, risk-taking entrepreneurs.

Embracing and celebrating failure as a sign of progress is key to Pittsburgh's future and a quality we must find in new entrepreneurs.

I can tell you first hand, with Pittsburgh's resources and stability, it's definitely not a risk to headquarter your company here — in fact, it could actually be your competitive advantage.