

Women Rock Florida's Business Scene

Women entrepreneurs thrive in this low-cost, business-friendly environment.



Anna Bond, co-founder and creative director of Rifle Paper Co.

Stephenson has benefited from many of them. "The business environment and the resources available here make Florida a very attractive place for women-owned businesses," she says.

Florida's robust economy abounds with opportunities for a wide range of businesses. It is home to market leaders in technology, aviation, life sciences, manufacturing, and many others. Florida ranked third among all states by number of WOBs in 2016, according to "The 2016 State of Women-Owned Businesses" report. More tellingly, it recorded the highest growth in number of women-owned firms between

2007 and 2016—up 67 percent.

After successfully repositioning her business after 9/11, Stephenson had to build a new state-of-the-art, 32,500-square-foot facility just to keep up with the booming demand for Datamaxx's services. At that time, she briefly considered a move to another state, but the compelling reasons to stay put quickly made that idea a non-starter. Stephenson is quick to tout Florida's many advantages. A business-friendly climate and favorable tax structure complement a competitive cost structure, talented workforce, and robust technology infrastructure. In addition, the state is home to a number of entrepreneurial incubators like the Florida State University Research Foundation.

Florida is just as appealing to high-concept entrepreneurs, says Anna Bond, creative director and co-owner, with her husband, Nathan Bond, of Rifle Paper

Co. Their artistic paper goods venture in Winter Park, just outside Orlando, has achieved explosive growth since its 2009 launch. It's been on the Inc. 5000 list of fastest-growing businesses since 2013 and now has a workforce of about 200.

"We developed a reputation as a creative and really interesting company to work for, and that attracted very talented people early on," says Anna Bond. She retained those promising early hires, who grew with the company. She considers talent pool access one of Florida's big advantages, in addition to the number of other women business owners in the area. "It creates a very supportive atmosphere for female entrepreneurs," she says.

Access to superior manufacturing and logistics infrastructure has been a boon to Rifle Paper. It's formed long-term relationships with "wonderful local partners that know our standards," Bond says. Low cost of living and commercial real estate values let the company maintain a large retail space in downtown Orlando and a massive warehouse operation just 15 minutes away.

Lee Kapel says Florida was the perfect place for her to break through the aviation industry's notorious gender barriers. As owner, president, and CEO of Weston-based TSI Aviation, she uses her company's WOB status to target lucrative government and private-sector contracts.

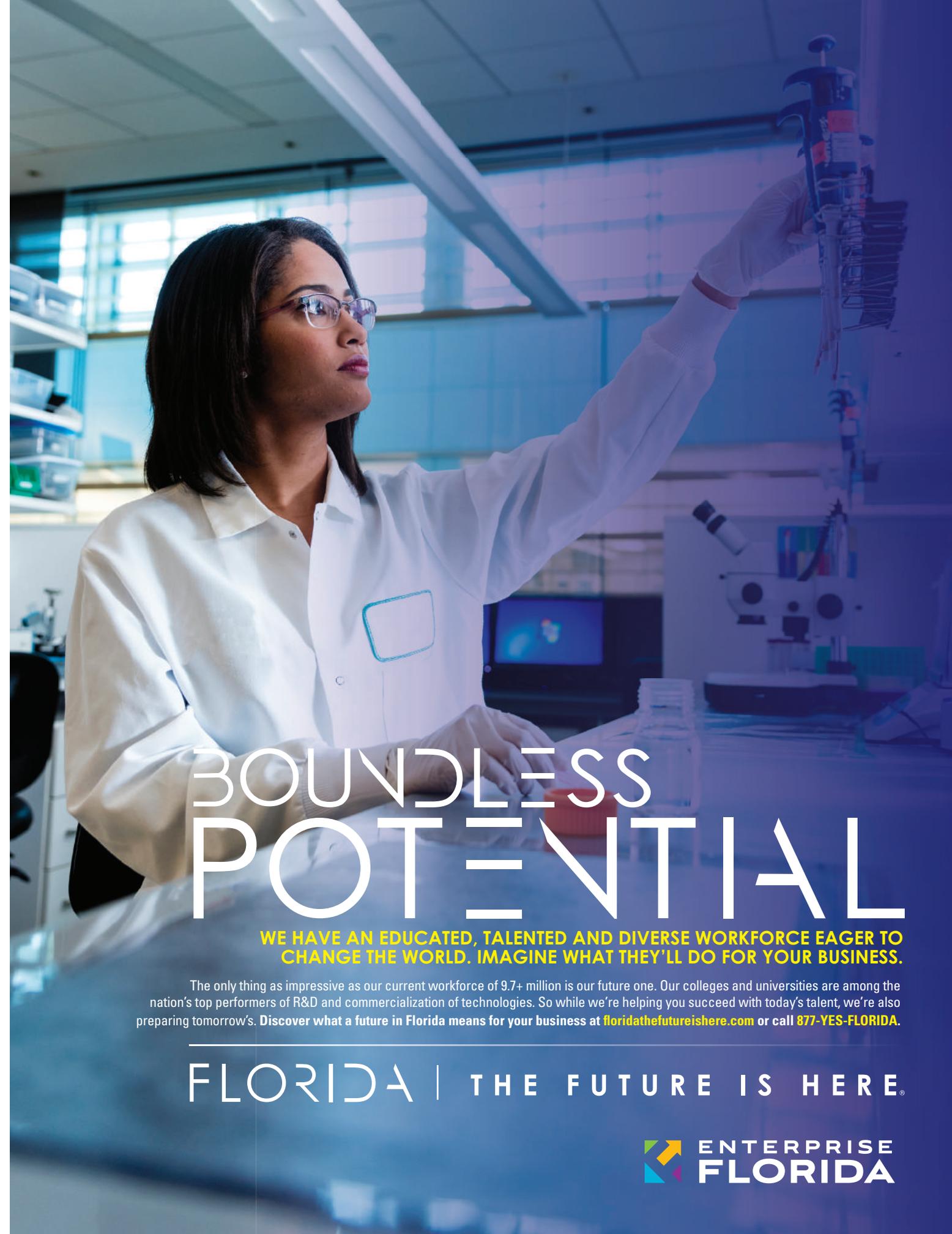
Cuban-born Kapel particularly values the multicultural environment that characterizes south Florida. "We do so much business in Latin America and other parts of the world," she says. "Having a multicultural workforce has been huge for us!"

From high-tech infrastructure and a business-friendly atmosphere to a deep talent pool and renowned quality of life, Florida has emerged as the growth leader in women-owned businesses. And with the wealth of resources targeted to female entrepreneurs it's no surprise that so many women business owners are choosing the Sunshine State. ■

It was smooth sailing for Kay Stephenson, co-founder and CEO of Datamaxx Group, for her first 10 years in business. Her company provides secure communications services to law enforcement and security companies—and competition from bigger companies was minimal. But that changed dramatically after September 11, 2001.

Rather than confronting the increasing number of large competitors head-on, she freely shared her experience and technology, deftly positioning Tallahassee-based Datamaxx, a certified woman-owned business (WOB), as an invaluable partner. That partnership made those large companies eligible for set-aside contracts that otherwise would have been out of their reach.

From the dozens of Lean In Circles throughout the state to an abundance of targeted resources, Florida is a great location for women entrepreneurs.



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