

TWO FLORIDA ENTREPRENEURS FIND A HOME FOR INNOVAKNITS AT THE MANUFACTURING SOLUTIONS CENTER IN NORTH CAROLINA

ABOUT INNOVAKNITS LLC. InnovaKnits is a specialized contract manufacturer that offers flat knit consulting and develops domestic flat knit textile products for sectors like medical, wearable electronics, and technical fields. Other industry uses include aerospace, energy, performance athletics, orthotics and prosthetics, molding and composites, hosiery, and high-end fashion and apparel. Besides product development, InnovaKnits provides inbound and outbound training and consulting services on STOLL knitting equipment.

THE CHALLENGE. By age 12, Neil Tagner was programming flatbed knitting machines and working in his parents' sweater manufacturing plant and high-end apparel knitting mills across the USA and abroad, before NAFTA impacted the industry. Before launching InnovaKnits, Jason Wilkins was employed at an injection molding company that manufactured prosthetics for amputees. The two entrepreneurs took hosiery classes at the Manufacturing Solutions Center and worked on implementing machines to produce compression hosiery for textiles related to prosthetics products. Wilkins and Tagner realized that they could create a much broader range of product solutions using their combined specialized technical knowledge and the right equipment. That's how the idea for InnovaKnits was born. Wilkins shared, "We knew it would be tough to efficiently build the type of manufacturing operation we initially envisioned in Florida, and we understood that the textile supply chain was stronger in and around North Carolina. The Manufacturing Solutions Center is an entity that truly exists as a connect-the-dots in the textile world."

MEP CENTER'S ROLE. Partners Neil Tagner and Jason Wilkins moved their entrepreneurial operations from Florida to the Manufacturing Solutions Center business incubator in Conover, North Carolina, in 2015 and officially launched in 2016. The Manufacturing Solutions Center is part of Catawba Valley Community College. It works with traditional manufacturers and manufacturing startups in design, research, development, prototyping, and product testing, and provides connections to industry experts and domestic resources.

The Manufacturing Solutions Center has played a key role in InnovaKnits' business relationships and growth. In 2016, InnovaKnits became a resident in the business incubator space at the Manufacturing Solutions Center. The team there continues to support, consult, and train InnovaKnits on hosiery and knitting processes, equipment, supply chain, product development, and testing lab services. From an initial connection facilitated by the Manufacturing Solutions Center, InnovaKnits has expanded that client relationship from a \$30,000 income to a \$500,000 per year account. InnovaKnits now uses 7,000 square feet of manufacturing space in the Manufacturing Solutions Building II. The Manufacturing Solutions Center II building is a public-private partnership between the City of Conover and the private equity group Whiskbroom. The Whiskbroom-owned part of the building houses four operating companies that graduated from the Manufacturing Solutions Center I business incubator.

RESULTS



\$375,000 in increased/retained sales



\$40,000 in new investment



\$100,000 in cost savings



2 increased/retained jobs

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-Jason Wilkins, Managing Partner