There’s an old saying that my foreign-born parents often used, which roughly translates to 'don't cry over the roses when forests are burning.' This means: don't worry about the small issues because they pale in comparison to seemingly uncontrollable large scale ones. This saying also insinuates that individual efforts are canceled out by more people or stronger forces pushing in a different direction, so why even bother? While I understand the point, I somehow could never get myself to side with it. I've always believed that any collective issue is an individual issue multiplied. I want to cry over both the roses and the forests then ensure that neither ever burn again.

**Why Circular Economy in Small Business?**

I believe that Plant Chicago's director Jonathan Pereira explains best in this blog post. While we often attribute environmental conditions to the biggest producers, 'according to the Small Business and Economic Council, businesses with under 20 employees make up 89% of total business and 46% of total GDP in the United States.' 89%! Collectively, the 'linear' practices of small businesses have a large footprint yet are often not included in conversations about environmental impact and reform.

So why aren’t small businesses more engaged? In Jonathan's words, The answer is perhaps obvious: small businesses are busy working. The small business owner doesn't have the financial stability or time to attend an expensive conference, nor the luxury of time needed to focus on initiatives not directly related to improving their bottom line." These statements were only reaffirmed by my interviews, which I will share later. There is also a lack of know-how, a support network, and accountability. In light of all of this, Plant Chicago saw a gap/discrepancy and committed to doing something about it. Thus, the idea for Plant Chicago's *Circular Economy for Small Business Toolkit* was born.

**Practical Examples**

Before I go further, I wanted to share a few practical examples of how businesses can implement circular economy. Businesses can participate in a local circular economy by:

- Purchasing inputs made from local materials or which can be locally regenerated
- Sourcing renewable energy
- Locating operations close to the resources & infrastructure being used
- Returning nutrients to the correct ecosystem or reincorporating waste products into production
- Accurately measuring all inputs and outputs
- Designing out waste altogether

In addition, the human element of circular economy cannot be overlooked. A few ways for businesses to integrate this is by:
- Creating a workplace culture that values reuse and sharing
- Training employees on circular practices and letting them take ownership over certain projects
- Educating customers about circular practices and incentivizing them to participate
- Identifying indicators, quantifying and communicating success based on factors other than financial gains alone

**Toolkit Progress to Date**

The Toolkit started as a 53-page document with six sections consisting of mostly self-assessment questions. It was crafted before the start of summer 2019. I arrived as Plant Chicago was awaiting responses from the summer 'trial run', and it was established that I could best assist by enlisting more participants.

One of the aims of my intern project was to improve the toolkit. In order to do that, we needed more feedback from potential users. To boost participation, we broke the document into phases, and I met with the willing businesses to walk them through the assessment (versus relying on them to complete it alone).

Over the course of eight weeks, I interviewed seven businesses and walked through filling out the 'Your Stuff' assessment section of the toolkit with each of them. I interviewed a flower shop, a bakery and deli, a sign making business, a meat market, a glass and window company, an organic liqueur start-up, and a mortgage brokerage. During the interviews, I noted remarks made and feedback given outside of the toolkit questions.

**Small Business Interviews**

My first interviewee was the owner of a flower shop in Chicago. I scheduled a time but still had to ask my questions as she was multi-tasking. She handles a lot of organic matter from flower and plant remains, but to recycle or compost, would have to go out of her way to contract a service and pay double her current bill. (She already inquired.) She voiced her daily challenges and frustrations to include being very limited in choice of suppliers. She is required to purchase certain products such as vases and accessories from a specific company in order to keep receiving their orders, but these products are often shipped from overseas and made from various plastics that will shortly end up in landfills. Many things are expressly inefficient, but the **bottom line** and **existing options** drive her operations.

My second interviewee was a 40-year owner of a deli & bakery in Chicago. She was also in a constant whirlwind of directing employees and handling administrative functions. Luckily, I was able to squeeze in my questions before something more important came up. She also voiced her desire to recycle but stated that the city only provides bins for cardboard. She could compost the pounds of food scraps and organic matter that they throw away daily, but again, two deterrents are **price** and **available services**. She shared a story about when she agreed to let her utility company make 'cost and energy efficient' and
'environmentally-friendly' changes. She is not convinced that her efforts and investment were well spent, though, as she has yet to see a difference on her bills. This brought to light another aspect of obstacles to promoting circular economy practices: past experiences and trust issues, either between the soliciting entity and the target business or in the technology itself.

I also interviewed an owner of a sign making business in my neighborhood. He was very honest about the unfortunately environmentally harmful nature of his work. The ink that he utilizes is toxic, and the plastics used for the signs and backings cannot be recycled. He mentioned that he wishes this weren't the case, but the technologies needed do not yet exist. The best that he can do is send his empty ink cartridges back to the supplier, but he is also incentivized for that.

Another interviewee was a family-owned, long-running window and glass company in the city. To my surprise, this enterprise appeared more efficient than the interviewees' and more economical than I thought possible for a business of their size and type. Not only do they make most of their own components from raw materials, but they do not throw away clippings, extras, or mistakes. They either melt them down and place them back into a loop or mill them for pick up. Companies pay for the shredded material so both sides are incentivized and happy to work together.

I also interviewed an organic liqueur start-up company. They were already performing circular practices like composting with a local food scrap hauler but felt like they needed to do more. Towards that objective, one of the owners volunteered for this initiative. I believe that he is representative of a new wave of entrepreneurs who believe that circular economy should be embedded in businesses' planning and daily operations. This owner was the first to ask me, 'from all of these examples, what are the top 3 things that I should be striving for?', which spoke to the desire and need for measurable goals and accountability. Owners with his enthusiasm and motivation have the ability to greatly assist with this initiative, and ultimately, affect the most change.

Next Steps

The takeaways from my interviews, which echoed Jonathan's article, were: first, small businesses are strapped for time and money. While they want to do the 'right thing', they likely won't pay into a circular system if that takes away from their already slim profit margins. Currently, the city of Chicago provides few to no commercial recycling options. To recycle or compost, they would have to contract with another company and likely pay steep prices. They would like to partner with suppliers who have sustainable business models, but they are scarce in many markets. Furthermore, in the views of many of these businesses, certain circular practices have not proven themselves. All of these factors individually, let alone combined, pose considerable challenges to implementing circular economy practices.

Yet, I noticed that people and businesses are curious about the topic and open to reconsideration if they see more benefits. Some owners have incentives to take small circular
actions. Others have the inner drive and are searching for reasons to participate. All could benefit from measurable goals and accountability.

At present, Plant Chicago is working hard to streamline the Circular Economy for Small Business Toolkit without compromising on content. Part of why we've been able to analyze and start crafting a better product is thanks to feedback from many small businesses in Chicago. If you or someone who you know is a small business owner or interested in helping small businesses achieve circular economy objectives, feel free to reach out to info@plantchicago.org.

The toolkit will be a living document, meant to not only assist businesses themselves, but also the communities that they serve. Helping Plant Chicago is, therefore, helping ourselves to lead more sustainable, economical, conscious, and healthy lives. We are all affected, and can all, in some way, contribute.

We recognize that there are many tasks and responsibilities to fulfill on a daily basis. In your haste, though, have you ever stopped and realized that you were forgetting something really important? Many people are now stopping and realizing that they have been overlooking one of our most important responsibilities and vital relationships: the one to our planet and between us and our earth.

Thank you for reading and hope to see you at Plant Chicago soon!