

Hiring power

How the Sun Devil 100 are fueling growth by building businesses as well as hiring from their alma mater

By Lisa Robbins, ASU News
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Story by Carolyn Said

From grocery aisles to construction sites, residential building products and advanced manufacturing, businesses led by ASU alumni are creating jobs and expanding in a way that supports families and businesses in Arizona and beyond.

This is the homegrown innovation that fills the ranks of the [Sun Devil 100](#). This elite group of entrepreneurs and corporate leaders spans a wide array of industries and employs 218,481 people full time. The organizations in this year's group collectively reported a total revenue of \$74.8 billion for the 2024 fiscal year.

Four Sun Devil 100 standouts — Sprouts Farmers Market, GCON, Awake Window & Door and azbil North America — show what that growth looks like.

A common thread is a lasting connection to ASU, including hiring graduates, mentoring students and applying an entrepreneurial mindset shaped on campus. The result is a powerful feedback loop — one where education fuels innovation and alumni reinvest in the next generation.

Sprouts Farmers Market: Homegrown goodness

Curtis Valentine, '06 MBA, CFO, and **Brandon Lombardi**, '00 BS in global business (financial management), '03 JD, chief legal officer and chief sustainability officer

36K employees

Headquarters: Phoenix

Years in business: 24

Yearly revenue: \$8.8B

Rooted in Arizona and growing rapidly nationwide, Sprouts Farmers Market isn't just riding the shift toward mindful eating — it's helping propel it.

"The health and wellness movement has a lot of momentum across the country and especially in Arizona," says Curtis Valentine, the company's chief financial officer.

Valentine points to Sprouts' dedicated Foraging team, which scouts emerging brands and trends.

"They build relationships with founder entrepreneurs ... to bring in differentiated, health-forward products that our customers love," he says.

The result is a constantly evolving mix of offerings. The company's growth trajectory is equally dynamic. Sprouts launches about 40 stores annually and will surpass 500 U.S. locations this year.

For Brandon Lombardi, chief legal officer and chief sustainability officer, that growth is closely tied to Arizona — and to ASU.

"Being a homegrown Arizona company ... we're excited about the relationship and partnership we've built (with ASU)," he says. "There are a lot of shared values ... innovation, accessibility and an entrepreneurial spirit. These are the traits embedded in our Sun Devil community, and it's why ASU talent is such a great fit for us at Sprouts."

Two-thirds of Sprouts' interns and all of its new-grad hires into the management training program in 2025 hail from ASU.

Pricing analyst Danny Mendez, '25 BS in computer information systems, says the transition to Sprouts after graduation felt natural, and he loves solving problems in a way that benefits customers.

Awake Window & Door: Ingenuity in action

John Engelstad, '15 MBA, co-founder and COO; **Scott Gates**, '04 BS in marketing, '15 MBA, co-founder and CEO; **Maria Gates**, '05 BA in education, co-founder and chief people officer

103 employees

Location: Gilbert

Years in business: 6

Yearly revenue: \$38M

Awake Window & Door began with a shared mindset shaped at ASU — and is now manufacturing its products in Gilbert. Three of its four co-founders — CEO Scott Gates, Chief People Officer Maria Gates and COO John Engelstad — credit the educational foundations laid at ASU with helping them build a fast-growing company, and they met at ASU.

“To find your business partner as part of your cohort, you feel very fortunate,” Scott says.

Today, the company specializes in outfitting modern luxury homes across North America with products that push the limits of size and simplicity — expansive, floor-to-ceiling glass panels that maximize views and were developed in-house by their engineering team.

Awake has a social mission too: second-chance employment for people reentering the workforce after incarceration, comprising nearly 60% of its workforce.

The company attracts Sun Devils like Neal Rabuse, '19 BS in supply chain management. Now a senior supply chain analyst, he came to Awake Window & Door and found himself helping scale a company from near zero to tens of millions in revenue.

Scott and I, being married, had always talked about this dream we had of building something together with a social purpose behind it.

Maria Gates

Co-founder, Awake Window & Door

GCON: Heart of Arizona's economic growth

Gabriel Gavriilidis, '96 BS in construction management, co-founder and vice president; **Michael Godbehere**, '94 BS in construction management, CEO and co-founder

204 employees

Location: Phoenix in the West Valley

Years in business: 23

Yearly revenue: \$400M

Long before they were building multimillion-dollar semiconductor facilities, Michael Godbehere and Gabriel Gavriilidis were two West Valley kids with a shared idea: start a company of their own.

They met in high school, went to Glendale Community College and transferred to ASU, where that idea took shape.

The construction program “laid the foundation for where we are now,” Gavriilidis says.

Their approach has fueled rapid growth — from \$70 million in revenue in 2019 to more than \$400 million today — driven in part by Arizona’s booming semiconductor and data center industries. The company has become a large contractor licensed in 23 states and was recently acquired by Webcor, a California-based general contractor and its parent multinational construction company, Obayashi.

“I’m a fourth-generation Arizonan, so it’s amazing over my lifetime, the differences I’ve seen in the state,” says Godbehere. “And the easiest way to describe construction in the Arizona market right now is the tide rises all boats. And in the reindustrialization of the U.S., which is going to take another five to seven years, we have positioned ourselves to be right in the heart.”

Just down the road from where they grew up in the West Valley, GCON’s headquarters reflects that philosophy. Designed by the founders, the space doubles as a community hub, hosting nonprofit boards, local organizations and even police officers stopping in to write reports.

As important as what GCON builds is who it builds. More than 50 full-time staff are ASU alumni.

They’re alumni like Elijah Farrell, ’18 interdisciplinary studies, who in six years has risen to the role of project manager from project engineer.

“For him (Godbehere) to take me under his wing and ... mentor me was a really cool experience,” he says.

The two founders are also working with ASU and Glendale Community College to strengthen a transfer pathway into ASU’s construction program, expanding access for students.

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—

Michael Godbehere
Co-founder and CEO, GCON

azbil North America: 180-degree turnaround

Kenneth Gerard, ’86 BS in accountancy, CFO

82 employees

Location: Phoenix

Years in business: 30

Yearly revenue: \$55M

When Kenneth Gerard stepped in as CFO of azbil North America, the company's U.S. division had an accumulated loss of \$30 million. Seven years later, the company has zero debt, \$30 million accumulated gains and revenue topping out at \$55 million. The turnaround, Gerard says, came down to one principle: partnership.

The company's products are manufactured at azbil's headquarters in Japan but then assembled in the U.S. and customized for customers. Included in the mix are industrial parts for semiconductors, control valves, transmitters and factory floor solutions.

"TSMC is a huge opportunity for us now too," Gerard says. "Our little niche is that we also make the best sensors and best controllers."

Gerard worked his way through college as a bookkeeper, gaining hands-on experience alongside his degree. His approach was to learn everything he could about the companies he was in and how to make them more efficient.

Throughout his career, Gerard has built internship programs that bring in ASU seniors for real-world accounting experiences before they graduate. Many have gone on to successful careers, forming a network of professionals he still mentors today.

"When you walk out the door with your diploma, you have to have something more than just a diploma," he says. "And that approach is (why) I think ASU is a great environment."

Author bio

A journalist, Carolyn Said has 26 years of experience as a business reporter and editor at the San Francisco Chronicle.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



From left: Sprouts employees Mika Dubey, merchandising specialist; Brandon Lombardi, chief legal officer and chief sustainability officer; Curtis Valentine, chief financial officer; and Danny Mendez, pricing analyst. Photo by Sabira Madady

Text image(s)



Awake Window & Door employees (from left) John Engelstad, co-founder and COO; Scott Gates, co-founder and CEO; and Maria Gates, co-founder and chief people officer. Photo by Jill Richards



GCON cofounders Gabe Gavriilidis (left) and Michael Godbehere. Photo by Jill Richards



Kenneth Gerard, CFO of azbil North America. Photo by Jill Richards