

**A NEW, DIGITALLY ENABLED, SMALL BUSINESS FRONTIER:  
PANEL DISCUSSION**

**Robert J. Lahm, Jr.**, Middle Tennessee State University  
MTSU Box 40, Murfreesboro, TN 37132  
615-898-2785; [rlahm@mtsu.edu](mailto:rlahm@mtsu.edu)

**Raj S. Selladurai**, Indiana University Northwest

**ABSTRACT**

Right now, a small business revolution is in the making. A convergence of technological innovations is setting the stage for a virtual, and literal, revolution. The Internet has flattened the playing field, enabling any small business to compete by creating an online “presence,” thereby reaching a world-wide audience. On the horizon, is an era of mass customization, and personalized service enabled by increasingly sophisticated database driven back-ends, voice recognition systems, virtual assistants, and other “human-like” intelligent systems under development—early versions have already emerged. As costs decline, these technologies will increasingly enable entrepreneurs to run global businesses, from a desktop.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Overview**

A few years ago, a fledgling small business owner may have been dismissed by prospective clients for operating out of his or her home, using an answering service, and printing promotional materials on a desktop publishing system. However, technological advancements and societal changes have impacted attitudes. Corporate downsizings, burnout, traffic, stress, issues of work-life balance in the lives of dual career households, terrorism, and other factors have made the ideal of working from home and starting a small business increasingly desirable, and acceptable. We’ve always admired self-sufficiency, but a previous era dominated by industrialization, mass production, and gigantic corporations offering lifelong employment and reliable paychecks, made the alternative career of owning one’s own small business seem, well, “quaint.”

Today, would-be Internet entrepreneurs can contract with developers and programmers from around the world to develop a Web site, upload product images and information, process electronic transactions, and deliver tangible and intangible goods via drop-shipping agreements and digital downloads, in their pajamas. Your presenter notes that there is some irony in the above scenario, in that if one adds a satellite dish with a high speed Internet connection and a remote farmhouse to the picture, we can envision a reverse migration to an economic and social era of self-sufficiency that resembles a previous agrarian society of times past. With the above portrayal as a backdrop, this presentation will provide information about the specific strategies that small businesses are using to create, market, manage, and grow, online and other technology supported businesses using minimal resources, while at the same time achieving strong performance results.

## **“So What?”**

It is easy to miss the implications of incremental technological advancements and social changes that foreshadow fundamental shifts in the business environment, or in the world in which we live as a whole. Entrepreneurship educators and practitioners need to remain abreast of new opportunities that have been made possible for small business owners. In some ways, although many entrepreneurship educators may “cover” e-commerce related topics, many are like the proverbial “cobbler with no shoes,” possessing only limited access to technology resources, training, and software application skills of their own. With absolutely no disrespect intended, a perusal of many faculty Web sites demonstrates that some are, relatively speaking, technology “have-nots.”

Only a few short years ago, if a business wanted to issue a media release, weeks of research to create a list, and days and days of “licking, stuffing, sealing, and stamping” envelopes would be required. Now, a news release that may potentially reach thousand of media outlets, and in-turn millions or billions of individuals, can be executed from a desktop computer with the press of a “Submit” button. Other technologies such as Internet-based ordering and fulfillment systems, ASP’s (application service providers), and Web promotion and affiliate management tools, can be utilized to allow almost anyone, with minimal resources launch a small business, and run it. A better understanding of a new, digitally enabled, small business frontier, including its implications and possibilities is relevant to business practitioners and entrepreneurship educators, alike.

## **SESSION DETAILS**

### **Topics**

- WebPreneurship: How does it differ from entrepreneurship?
- An evolving Internet environment and its implications: from static brochure sites to dynamic sites offering personalized interactive experiences.
- An era of technology enabled “mass customization.”
- Partnering with brand-name companies is only a click away.
- Automatic sign-ups, autoresponders, FAQ’s, and knowledgebases service many needs, without human intervention on the provider end.
- Digital products and their nature: unlimited, intangible, and extremely easy to “ship,” (since there is no shipping—products are automatically delivered).
- “Infopreneuring”: Entrepreneur and Inc. magazines have both noticed its potential.
- Tangible products: today, pictures; tomorrow, video and audio demonstrations. Drop shipping, order processing, and fulfillment. Fallout for brick and mortar businesses.
- Technology as a support system for service businesses: consultants, authors, and experts use the Internet to sell their products and create brands.
- If you create a niche, robots and spiders are your friends.
- Internet marketing, PR, and advertising: driving traffic to Web sites; low cost marketing methods; the power of viral marketing.
- Scams, security threats, and reasons to be afraid, very afraid.

## **Format and Procedures**

The panelists will lead a discussion on the topics above and their implications. In-depth questions, answers, and audience commentary will be encouraged. For USASBE/SBI conference attendees who wish to maximize their understanding of the topic under discussion, this workshop will be immediately preceded by a companion workshop session (described under separate cover).

## **About the Panelists**

Robert Lahm is an Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship and the Entrepreneurship Intern Program Coordinator at Middle Tennessee State University, located approximately 30 miles southeast of Nashville, Tennessee. He has previously founded several off-line businesses and held management level positions in the media, in the computer industry, and in advertising. In addition to his university appointment, he is presently the creator/owner of eight commercial Web sites, including: [EntrepreneurshipArticles.com](http://EntrepreneurshipArticles.com), [EntrepreneurshipClearinghouse.com](http://EntrepreneurshipClearinghouse.com), [WebPreneurship.com](http://WebPreneurship.com), [ArticlesontheWeb.com](http://ArticlesontheWeb.com), [StudentsBuyCheap.com](http://StudentsBuyCheap.com), [DomainEndZone.com](http://DomainEndZone.com), [DomainVolcano.com](http://DomainVolcano.com), and [Resume-Works.com](http://Resume-Works.com).

Rajan Selladuria is an Associate Professor of Business Administration at Indiana University Northwest in Gary, Indiana. His research interests include mass customization by small businesses, production operations management, and strategy.