ETA RESEARCH PROJECT

Small Business Succession & Long-Term Planning Snapshot

Prepared by: Upstate Venture Connect | January - June 2026

ABOUT UVC & THIS WORK

Upstate Venture Connect (UVC) is a 16-year-old entrepreneurship support organization based in Upstate New York. UVC grows, connects, and champions a diverse ecosystem of high-growth entrepreneurs, and through its ETA initiative, expands that mission to the next generation of small business owners. UVC is not a broker or transaction advisor. It is the marketing and relationship engine: identifying opportunities, building trust with owners, and connecting both sides of a transition to execution partners.

WHAT IS ETA?

Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition (ETA) is UVC's initiative to address a quiet economic crisis: thousands of small business owners across Upstate NY are aging out of ownership with no succession plan. UVC frames this as an ownership opportunity, a pathway for operators, immigrants, veterans, and first-time buyers. The same matchmaking infrastructure UVC built for high-growth startups is now applied to SMB transitions: mapping succession landscapes, identifying willing sellers, and connecting them with prepared, community-rooted buyers.

Since January 2026, the ETA Research Project has been interviewing small, owner-operated businesses in Erie and Niagara County to better understand long-term planning, succession readiness, and where support is most needed. Findings are drawn from direct conversations with owners, not surveys.

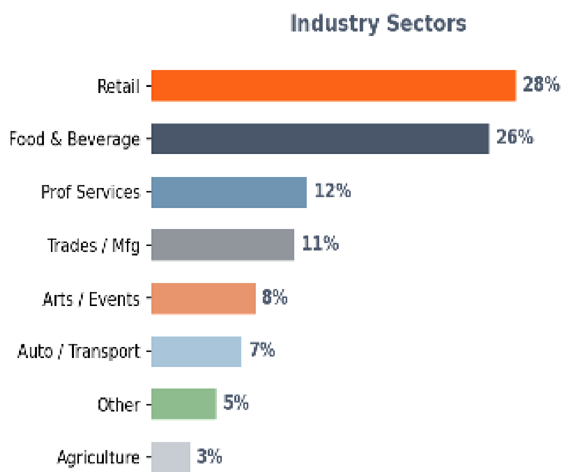
153	78%	59%	73%
CONTACTS INTERVIEWED	OPEN TO LOCAL TRANSITION	DON'T KNOW THEIR BUSINESS VALUE	WILLING TO MENTOR A SUCCESSOR

01 WHO WE INTERVIEWED

The database spans business owners, community partners, and ecosystem stakeholders across Erie and Niagara Counties. The majority are seller-side: small, owner-operated businesses across a range of industries, legal structures, and business ages. Most rent their locations and have been in business between 5 and 20 years.

INDUSTRY SECTORS

Share of seller-side contacts by sector



YEARS IN BUSINESS

How long they've operated

20+ years		35%
11–20 years		24%
5–10 years		27%
Under 5 years		14%

02 OPENNESS TO TRANSITION

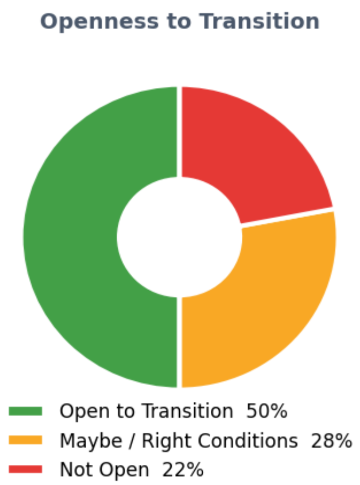
Nearly eight in ten owners were open to a future transition tied to trust, local ownership, and protecting employees and what they built. That's the encouraging signal. The harder one: 55% have zero succession plan in place — and only 1% have a clear, documented plan.

78%
OPEN TO A TRANSITION
Yes or maybe, given the right fit

55%
HAVE ZERO SUCCESSION PLAN
Of those surveyed; only 1% have a clear plan

> ***The gap between willingness and readiness is where this work lives. Most owners are open to the idea of a transition… they just haven't started planning for one.***

TRANSITION OPENNESS



SELLER FINANCING

Allow payments over time?

No		42%
Yes		38%
Maybe		19%

WILLINGNESS TO MENTOR BUYER

Train a successor?

Yes		73%
Maybe		11%
No		16%

WHAT OWNERS SAID MATTERS

Trust is the threshold. Many owners qualified openness immediately: "It would have to be the right person."

Local matters deeply. Several said they would only sell to a local operator, as fear of distant investors stripping value was common.

Employees first. Protecting staff, not maximizing price, was the most common reason owners gave for wanting a careful, planned transition.

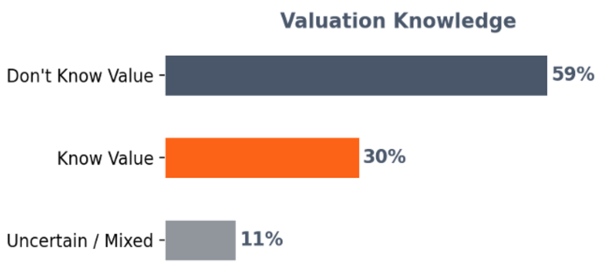
Note: Full recordings available in Granola.

03 THE VALUATION KNOWLEDGE GAP

One of the strongest patterns in the interviews is how few owners feel confident about the value of their business before a transition is imminent. Two-thirds of respondents said they do not know what their business is worth. Only about three in ten reflected any real confidence. A handful gave mixed or conditional responses.

> **Valuation is not just a number at the point of sale. It is a way of understanding what makes a business transferable, resilient, and worth continuing. When owners don't know how value is created, measured, or protected, transition decisions are more likely to happen late, informally, or under pressure.**

DO YOU KNOW YOUR COMPANY'S VALUE?



WHAT BUSINESS OWNERS SAID

> *"I find it hard to pin down. It feels subjective and not very important right now."*
>
> **Business owner, services sector**
>
> *"I figured this out when I was ready to sell. I wish I'd known much sooner."*
>
> **Business owner, already exited**

04 SUCCESSION READINESS: THE FULL PICTURE

Valuation awareness is one piece of a broader readiness puzzle. The research surfaces consistent gaps across six dimensions: succession planning, financial team quality, banking relationships, corporate records, operating systems, and valuation knowledge. Each gap is a place where early support could significantly extend a business's salability and lifespan.

SUCCESSION PLAN STATUS

No Plan		**73%**
Exploring / In Progress		**7%**
Has Formal Plan		**20%**

Of 122 who answered: 55% have no plan, 44% have a rough idea only, 1% have a clear plan in place.

OPERATIONAL READINESS (% ADEQUATE)

Corporate Records Current		**70%**
Financial Team & Systems		**66%**
Operating System Documented		**53%**
Banking Relationship		**39%**
Valuation Knowledge		**29%**
Formal Succession Plan		**28%**

05 AN IMPORTANT BUT LESS OBVIOUS TRUTH

Emotional openness to transition is significantly higher than technical readiness for it. Owners may be willing to consider a future transition, but many do not yet have the tools, valuation clarity, systems, or planning support to approach that transition confidently.

> **The risk is not simply that businesses sell under bad conditions. The deeper risk is that viable, community-rooted businesses close, stagnate, or become impossible to pass on because planning starts too late.**

EMOTIONAL OPENNESS VS. TECHNICAL READINESS

DIMENSION	SCORE	%
Open to Selling		78%
Interested in Learning About Options		85%
Willing to Mentor a Successor		73%
Financial Team & Systems		66%
Corporate Records Current		70%
Operating System Documented		53%
Banking Relationship		39%
Formal Succession Plan		1%
Valuation Knowledge		29%

> **Owners who engage with succession planning 5-7 years before they want to transition have dramatically better outcomes. Those who start when they're ready to retire often find it's too late to build a sellable business, and the business closes instead.**

06 WNY VS. NATIONAL BENCHMARKS

How do UVC's local findings compare to national data on small business succession? Where comparable national statistics exist, WNY's challenges are broadly consistent with, and in some cases exceed, national trends. Several of the most important dimensions UVC is measuring have no reliable national benchmark at all, which points to the value of this ground-level research.

METRIC	WNY FINDING (UVC DATA)	NATIONAL AVERAGE	CONTEXT
No Formal Succession Plan	55%	33% national avg	Above avg
Open to Ownership Transition	78%	*No national benchmark available*	UVC finding
Don't Know Business Value	59%	*No national benchmark available*	UVC finding
Baby Boomer-Owned (20+ yrs)	35%	41% national avg	On par
Open to Seller Financing	51%	15% national avg	Above avg

NATIONAL BENCHMARK SOURCES & NOTES

No Formal Succession Plan: WNY 55%, National ~33%: WNY significantly exceeds the national average. Gallup 2024 and Brown Brothers Harriman 2025 both put the national "no plan" figure around 30-36%. WNY's 55% (likely higher at 73% when non-responses are included) suggests deeper unpreparedness than national trends indicate.

Baby Boomer-Owned Businesses: WNY 35% in business 20+ years, National ~41% Boomer-owned: Baby Boomers own approximately 41% of all US privately-held businesses, roughly 12 million firms. WNY's high share of long-tenured businesses mirrors this generational pattern. Most have no succession plan.

Open to Seller Financing: WNY 57%, National ~15% of closed deals: WNY's 57% reflects owner openness; the national 15% (IBBA Q4 2024) reflects how many completed transactions actually include seller financing. The gap suggests owner willingness may exceed what gets structured into deals.

Sources: Gallup 2024, Brown Brothers Harriman 2025, Edward Jones 2024, IBBA Market Pulse Q4 2024, Exit Planning Institute, LendingTree Boomer Entrepreneurs Report 2024.

07 EXPERT COMMENTARY

Joel Redmond
MD, Family Wealth Consulting | Key Private Bank

From what we've seen, the first question most owners have about their business is 'what is it worth?' The second question is 'is that enough?' There are other important questions, but we typically have been able to help owners obviate a lot of frustration by getting them to focus on these two at the outset.

08 ADVISORY TEAM

This research is possible thanks to the support of a state-wide entrepreneurial advisory network

Bob Bojanek CNY & Mohawk Valley	**Chris Schoepflin** WNY	**Alby Shale** Hudson Valley
Dallas Gilpin Hudson Valley	**Joe Disorbo** WNY	**Tim O'Keefe** WNY
Michael Ryzewic Southern Tier	**Melissa Pegus** CNY & Mohawk Valley	**Bob Forness** WNY & Southern Tier
David Rust WNY	**Amy Lindner** CNY & Mohawk Valley	**Andy Gordon** WNY
Joel Redmond CNY	**Kevin McCormack** WNY	

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

KeyBank	**Transworld Business Advisors** Broker Partner

09 THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF A CONVERSATION

This research was never meant to end with a report. We conducted these interviews because we wanted to understand what business owners in Erie and Niagara County are actually experiencing, not what surveys assume they experience. You took the time to talk with us. This is our way of sharing back what we heard.

UVC is building something in this region, and we want the businesses we've talked with to be part of it. That doesn't mean selling, or committing to anything. It means staying connected to a growing community of owners, advisors, and potential partners who care about what happens to local businesses and the people who built them.

WAYS TO STAY CONNECTED AND GET SUPPORT

Get a Business Health Check	Join Our Owner Community	Get Matched with the Right People	Stay in the Loop
Understand where your business stands today on the dimensions in this report, including valuation, succession readiness, and financial systems. No agenda, no pressure.	Connect with other WNY business owners navigating similar questions. Peer learning, shared resources, and honest conversation about what it means to own and eventually exit a business.	Whether you want to talk to a broker, a lender, an attorney, or a potential buyer, UVC can make warm introductions to trusted partners. We stay upstream of the deal.	We share research, programming updates, and opportunities as they become available. No spam, just relevant information for WNY business owners who are thinking ahead.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO HAVE A PLAN TO START THE CONVERSATION

Most of the business owners we spoke with said they hadn't really thought about succession because it felt either too far away or too complicated. That's exactly why we're here. UVC's role is to make this less overwhelming, not to rush anyone toward a decision. Whether you're five years out or twenty, the earlier you understand your options, the more options you have.

Reach out any time. We'd love to hear what resonated, what we got wrong, and what questions this raised for you.

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