

Entrepreneur taps fresh ideas, energy of youth

Platform allows college students to hone skills as freelance designers

By KERRY FELTNER

The transition from school to full-time job is a change that every person entering the workplace has to make.

The looming question is: with no prior professional experience, how can a person become a full-time employee at a company that they desire to work for?

Local entrepreneur Antonio Calabrese is working to address that question with the launch of his company Boonle Limited Partnership.

Boonle is a freelancing platform focused on design work, ranging from mobile apps to logos or illustrations. It helps design students build their portfolios and get real world experience with business clients—before graduation.

“The work that comes out of these kids ... you wouldn’t think they are students,” Calabrese says. “They do fantastic work. The big thing for them was it’s not just classroom work; it’s real work. They can go to an employer or future clients and say, ‘This is my portfolio, but these are real clients. I understand the business aspect of it, I know how this works, and I’m ready to launch my career right after college. I don’t have to go through the learning curve; I’m already prepared.’

“And that’s really our goal—to help launch their careers right out of college,” he adds.

Boonle also helps businesses get relevant design work from students who are learning the most up-to-date practices of design.

Today Calabrese runs the firm as CEO; Matt Olpinski is creative director.

Calabrese grew up in Greece and attended Monroe Community College for two years before enrolling at Rochester Institute of Technology. He graduated in 2007 with a degree in business management. He had a minor in finance and a concentration in communication.

During school he launched Enhanced Detailing, a small detailing shop for a handful of clients. The side gig taught him as much as his business classes, he says.

“When I was going to RIT, I said I’m just going to go do detailing on my own, and I opened up my own little shop because a lot of the guys who were buying Jaguars knew me,” Calabrese says. “My typical college day I was either at class or at my shop at 8 a.m.

“I was a little money-hungry in college, and I really wanted to apply what I was learning in school,” he adds.

After graduation, he held sales positions with a variety of Rochester companies, including BlueTie Inc. and Bausch & Lomb Inc.

“Sales is all about relationships and communication, so as much as I look back and say I hated corporate life, I hated my sales job, I definitely learned a lot from that,” Calabrese says. “I may

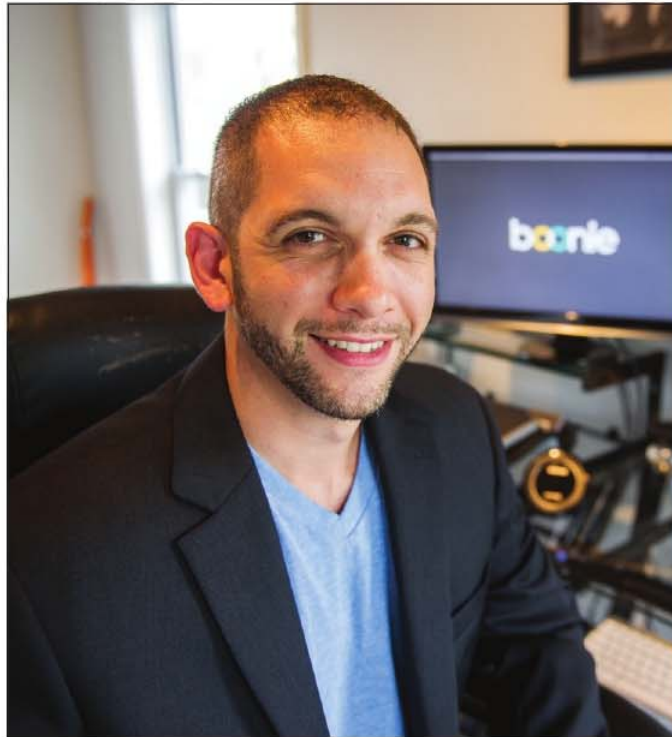


Photo by Kate Melton

Antonio Calabrese of LeRoy is the founder and CEO of Boonle, a company that brings together student freelance designers with corporate clients in need of low-cost design work.

not be where I am today if I didn’t take those jobs. I don’t want to discredit the experiences I had because it definitely played a big role in just being a businessperson.”

He also continued to pursue his entrepreneurial interests by creating websites for friends and family members.

Learning alongside tech-savvy people at RIT helped to shape his future, he says.

“Even though I’m not really a tech person or an engineer—I went there for business—it was a great blend, which was the difference I feel like I got when I talk to my friends who also went to a college (for) business,” Calabrese says. “I have a lot more technical knowledge being involved in the RIT community because I got involved in the different student groups and did work with engineers and computer science majors. They kind of pushed me into this tech space a little bit.”

With a decade of sales experience completed, Calabrese was ready to create his business in 2014.

“I finally came to the conclusion that I don’t want to be in the corporate workforce, and I’m just going to quit my job and go build sites as a freelancer,” he says. “I was selling in the Rochester market for almost 10 years at that point.”

He set out to design websites full time—and soon found it a tough go.

“I fell flat on my face because every time I went out,” he says, because potential clients asked him, “‘What do you have to show us?’ So I started reaching out to charities and other friends and family again to really fine-tune my skill

set (and) get some reputable sites out there that I can go to. That whole process worked for me; I was able to really land on my feet and generate a full-time income for myself.”

He thought others would face the same problem of showcasing their talents, and the idea for his company, Boonle, was born. In a freelance platform market that is very competitive, Boonle is carving a niche with a focus on first-time freelancers.

There are “a lot of freelance platforms out there,” Calabrese says, and they’re divided into two segments: “the really experienced guy who’s based in the Western culture like the U.S. or the U.K. and they charge a premium, and then there’s the experienced guy based in India or Pakistan, and they have the experience and they charge a low rate.

“So you get lost in that crowd. There’s nowhere to go, so I was never able to find work on those sites.”

The number of people who work for themselves is growing, Calabrese says. “It’s a booming market. It’s growing even more rapidly than in the past, so this problem is persisting even more with the saturation of the market. It’s becoming even harder now for newbies to get started.”

Calabrese started the site by welcoming all kinds of self-employed creatives.

“When we first launched, it was open door for everybody and all types of work. So I had people from all over the world signing up posting ridiculous projects like playground architecture and songwriting for daughters and it was a mess; we had no focus,” Cal-

abrese says. “So over this past year I really refocused.”

At times of doubt or uncertainty, Calabrese takes time to think. Business decisions require some slowing down in order to understand the factors at play.

“I take a break, even if it’s 10, 15 minutes,” he says. “It helps you to think about it. In any situation, you shouldn’t immediately react. Take a few minutes and really start to think things through, and you will start to formulate some ideas and ways to work around it. Sometimes you may have to take a day.”

The focus on student freelancers started to take shape over the last few months. Today some 200 students market their work on Boonle. Only students with a valid “.edu” email address can submit their work or take on projects for businesses.

“There’s a great resource with extremely talented students where they can get work done,” Calabrese says. “They’re learning all the new trends; they know what’s going on. You go to a traditional designer, they might have 20 years’ experience and be really good at what they do, but they’re not up-to-speed really on what’s going on. These students are in it every day and are producing great stuff.”

On the business side, companies have access to talented designers for lower rates. It also is a way to screen potential employees.

“It’s a good way for businesses to test potential candidates,” Calabrese says. “You’re getting work for low cost, you’re seeing what kind of work they can do, how they interact with you—are they responsive, are they hitting deadlines. You can hire them right out of college and you already know what to expect.”

Calabrese says growing the company is his biggest struggle.

“It’s weird especially in the tech or startup space because, if you follow any tech blogs like TechCrunch or Mashable, every day you see a \$5 million funding round, a \$10 million round—this person got bought out for \$50 million,” Calabrese says. “It’s a lot harder than people imagine. I think there’s a misconception. I knew there were going to be some bumps, but I didn’t know it was going to be hills and mountains.”

Still, Calabrese is glad he can make a difference in his community. He hopes to help students realize Rochester’s value and vice versa.

“After being at RIT and now dealing with these students on a regular basis, there is a lot of talent here that leaves,” he says. “And I don’t know if the community really recognizes that. I know we have the talent here, and I know Rochester could be a great community for business.”

“I have that goal to be one of those companies that will help keep people here, keep students here,” he adds.

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 #TeamPXY with Carter and Corey on 98PXY is a partner with Fast Start. Listen on Monday from 6 to 10 a.m. for their interview with Antonio Calabrese.

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