

'No Irish Need Apply' Couldn't Stop Them

By Rohit Arora, CEO of Biz2Credit

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I am a big proponent of supporting immigrant-founded and immigrant-owned businesses. This week, Irish Americans across the country will celebrate St. Patrick's Day. They are known for celebrating their songs and impact on American culture, but they also deserve acclaim for their success in business.

Immigration from Ireland to these shores pre-dates the American Revolution. In fact, New York City's first St. Patrick's Day Parade was held on March 17, 1762, fourteen years before the Declaration of Independence. It began, ironically, with homesick Irish who served with the British Army and were stationed in the American colonies. At the time, such a celebration would have been banned in their native country. The parade marchers reveled in the freedom to wear green, sing Irish songs and play their instruments.

In the late 1840s, a massive wave of immigration from Ireland came to America's shores as the Irish sought to escape the great Famine. Like other immigrant groups who would follow them, the Irish were not welcomed with open arms. Their religion was mistrusted, and they met open disdain. Many times they were excluded from economic opportunities and encountered signs that said, "No Irish need apply."

Unwelcome in many industries, the Irish made their mark in politics and civil service. They rose through the ranks in government and in the military, as well as the police and fire departments in cities across America. Later, music and film stars, such as Bing Crosby and Walt Disney, became enormously successful.

Subsequent generations achieved prosperity through entrepreneurship, including bar and restaurant owners, attorneys, travel agents, to name a few. Barry O'Donovan, owner of Kilkenny House restaurant and pub in Cranford, NJ, was given the SBA's "Phoenix Award" in 2012 for overcoming adversity and re-building his business after Hurricane Irene.

A great number of entrepreneurs of Irish descent founded some of America's top companies, including Motorola co-founder Paul Galvin and Henry Ford, who revolutionized the auto industry. Groups, such as the Irish Business Organization of New York have been established in the past few decades to help entrepreneurial and highly educated immigrants, who have launched businesses in technology, finance, and other industries.

According to the Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey, there are roughly 35 million U.S. residents who claimed Irish ancestry. About 33.3% of Irish Americans ages 25+ hold a bachelor's degree or higher and 41% of Irish-Americans work in management or professional occupations. They are quite a success story in this country.

Ethnicities that followed the Irish through Ellis Island -- the Italians, Jews, and emigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe -- also pursued and achieved the American Dream. In the last half-century, however, the demographics of immigration have changed dramatically. The exodus from European countries has stemmed, while natives of Mexico, the Caribbean, South Asia and the Far East come to America in record numbers. Immigrants from these countries are starting businesses at a high rate.

The Fiscal Policy Institute analyzed data from U.S. Census' American Community Survey and found that 18% of small businesses in the U.S. are owned by immigrants, up from 12% in 1990. The latest census figures available show that immigrants comprise 13% of the U.S. population and that the majority of these small business owners do not have college degrees. In New York, 36% of small businesses are owned by immigrants, including myself. Miami and Los Angeles have the highest share of immigrant-owned businesses.

Today, funding options for aspiring small business owners are available that simply did not exist for immigrant groups that came to America in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In recent decades, there have been a number of special programs established to help immigrant-owned businesses, which are often located in urban enterprise zones. Organizations, such as ACCION East and Online, are much more willing to provide capital to immigrants than many banks are. The SBA, which plays a vital role in American small

business development, has long supported small business growth by entrepreneurs whether or not the U.S. is their country of origin.

"The collapse of the Celtic Tiger certainly caused many to pause, but the Irish today have an air of confidence and enterprise about themselves," says Ray O'Hanlon, editor of the *Irish Echo* newspaper, which annually recognizes its "Top 40 Under 40" business leaders of Irish American descent who work in a variety of fields. "The Irish are, by necessity, exercising these traits globally as a result of the tough economic climate in Ireland itself."

Immigrants such as the Irish, who have flocked to America's shores for economic opportunity for generations, bring with them a strong desire to succeed and attain a better life. As the descendants of immigrants from Ireland celebrate their achievements this week, all ethnic groups can tip our hats or raise a toast to them for proving that America is indeed a land of opportunity.

Rohit Arora is co-founder and CEO of Biz2Credit, an online resource that connects 1.6 million small business owners with 1,100+ lenders, credit rating agencies and service providers such as CPAs and attorneys via its Internet platform. Since 2007, Biz2Credit has secured \$800 million in startup funding, small business loans and business lines of credit for entrepreneurs across the U.S.

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