



The Interview: City startup veteran looks back, says goodbye
Ann Lansinger, head of the city's main tech incubator, to retire April 5

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Ann Lansinger has been a part of Baltimore's startup scene for three decades. In fact, she was involved in local tech startups before there ever was much of a scene.

Lansinger, who has run Baltimore's Emerging Technology Center in [Canton](#) since 1999, is to retire April 5. She will leave behind a record of growth — and an energized tech culture in Baltimore.

Lansinger has been a shepherd and witness to some of the region's most promising technology firms and their progress over the last few decades. She's also seen, up close, how entrepreneurs and their companies can fail.

Before becoming president of the ETC, Lansinger helped launch the [University of Maryland, Baltimore County](#)'s first business incubator in the late 1980s. She then led that organization for several years. At the ETC, she ran a nonprofit entity with a \$2 million budget that receives nearly a third of its funding from the quasi-public [Baltimore Development Corp.](#), which itself is funded by Baltimore tax dollars.

When Lansinger took over the ETC, only four companies were under its wing. Today, there are 85, while an additional 175 companies have "graduated" and are now operating on their own. The ETC is credited with creating 1,800 jobs since its founding in 1999, Lansinger said.

Lansinger will pass the reins to Deborah Tillett, a veteran video gaming industry executive and consultant who has been a longtime booster of Maryland's gaming industry.

The Baltimore Sun recently caught up with Lansinger to discuss her experiences running the ETC, working with startups, and helping entrepreneurs with their business plans and dreams.

You've been head of the ETC since before the first dot-com bubble. What was the Baltimore tech scene like then?

Back then, the Baltimore tech scene was scattered. It wasn't cohesive at all. People were running in their own silos. That really changed rapidly with the onset of social media, with people connecting more with each other. You had a handful of small companies acting independently, and now what you have is a growing cohesiveness in the community. They all know one another. They're more likely to work together. To buy from one another. I really don't recall much of a tech community. We were catching up, if you will, to Northern Virginia.

Is there a difference in the kind of companies that you saw launch when the ETC opened compared to what there are today?

They were less likely to be serial entrepreneurs. They were more likely to need a lot of basic help. Back then, they were more raw. Today, companies appear to be more sophisticated. People coming to us have been exposed to entrepreneurial thinking more than they would've been before. I can remember we had

one company where the people came in with \$2 million in funding and no business plan. They're going to have to do more homework now before they get started, and they are doing it.

Do you have a sense of what it takes to succeed — or fail — as a startup? What have you seen in your experience in successful entrepreneurs?

You can see the fire in the belly. And you can see whether or not someone seems to have the confidence, someone who is going to be prepared for the hard times as well as the good. Someone who won't run away easily. I'm going to use Paul Palmieri [CEO of mobile advertising firm Millennial Media, which filed for an IPO this year with plans to raise \$75 million] as an example. The day I met him, I knew immediately this guy was going to hit it big. You can see someone who comes in and just has that confidence that they can do it. And they're grounded.

Are there recipes for failure?

People who are not willing to listen. People who are not smart with how they handle their finances. People who are not collaborative. I think those are the people who are likely to fail. A lot of companies fail because the market shifts and people don't have ideas for follow-up products. Anybody who comes in with a one-product company, and doesn't think about how to change or add to it, is probably not going to make it.

What are some companies that have graduated from the ETC that have grown and become successful?

Millennial Media. Social Solutions. WellDoc. Moodlerooms. Visicu. Key Technologies. A&G Pharmaceuticals. LookingGlass Cyber Solutions.

How have you measured success and outcomes as the ETC's leader? What metrics have guided your leadership?

I measure success by the success of our companies. Our economic development metrics have always been focused on number of companies, number of graduates, number of jobs. They're creating jobs everywhere along the economic spectrum, with an average salary between \$67,000 and \$75,000 a year. We also like to point to the fact that our companies have garnered over a billion dollars in external funding.

Have you noticed anything different in the last couple of years about Baltimore's tech community? A lot of people say there's more energy and networking happening. But what do you see on the ground?

I can't keep up with it. I might be at an event one evening and [ETC Vice President] Neil Davis will be at another the same evening. We're paying very close attention to what else is going on in the Baltimore tech community. What we're trying to do is find a way to be relevant to the whole entrepreneurial structure. What I would like to see going forward is to find a way to be there to serve our graduates, to remain relevant to them as well. To make sure we're catering to the needs of all the entrepreneurs in the ecosystem.

As you leave, what do you see as the big challenge for your successor?

More aggressive marketing, to make sure we're getting the word out to all the entrepreneurs as they are thinking of what they want to do to consider the ETC. I think my successor is going to need to be very active, very energetic, while looking for new ideas and staying up to date with the latest trends. I think it's going to be a bit of a balancing act.