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# FIRE AWARDS


Meet the honorees in the Workplace category for this year's Fire Awards.  
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Now in its second year, Pacific Inno's Fire Awards recognize excellence in tech and innovation — including areas like food and energy independence. This includes both startups and longstanding businesses that are innovating in new ways.

The winners were chosen from a mix of nominations from the community and the PBN editorial team. This year, the awards recognize 16 businesses across four categories: energy; food and agriculture; technology, science and data; and workplace. Each category also includes one company that's designated as the "Blazer" — the top honoree as determined by the PBN editorial team based on information provided in the nomination, growth potential and recent accomplishments.

PBN asked each of the honorees about recent funding success, as well as what they are the most excited about in their business right now. Plus, honorees also share their insights on how Hawaii can create a more robust tech sector.

Below are the honorees in the workplace category. Click [here](#) for the energy category, [here](#) for food and agriculture, and [here](#) for technology, science and data.

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## "BLAZER"

### Makai HR

#### Marci LaRouech, president



Marci LaRouech  
Courtesy Makai HR

*LaRouech has fostered growth at Makai HR, which was acquired by ProService Hawaii in May. Within the last year, the company's gross profit has increased by 66%. The HR solutions company serves small- to medium-sized businesses, most of which are rebounding from the Covid-19 pandemic and are looking to stretch their budgets, reduce costs and drive revenue.*

**Tell us about your most recent funding success.** Makai HR was recently acquired by ProService Hawaii, the leading provider of bundled HR solutions in Hawaii. As new members of the ProService team, we now have the opportunity to serve thousands of Hawaii companies and their employees.

**What about your business excites you the most right now?** Silver Lake, a renowned tech investment firm, recently partnered with ProService. Together, we are looking forward to amplifying our ability to bring cutting-edge solutions to local businesses, elevating the employer experience across Hawaii. We're excited to serve Hawaii employers and their employees even better and through that, cementing ourselves as one of the top providers in the country while remaining headquartered in Hawaii. Our transformative journey holds immense promise as we reshape the landscape and deliver unparalleled value to employers throughout the state.

**What is one thing you think we need as a state to cultivate a robust tech and innovation sector?** Fostering a collaborative environment and embracing outside-in thinking is crucial. First, establishing a collaborative culture is essential, encouraging knowledge-share, partnerships and community engagement. This can be achieved through collaborative workspaces, tech meetups, and mentorship programs, enabling the exchange of ideas and collective problem-solving. Second, embracing outside-in thinking involves seeking external perspectives and expertise. Encouraging partnerships with global tech companies, hosting innovation conferences, and attracting top talent from diverse backgrounds will inject fresh ideas, experiences, and technologies into the local ecosystem. By combining a collaborative environment and outside-in thinking, Hawaii can leverage its unique cultural heritage and natural resources to create a vibrant tech and innovation sector, propelling the state's economic growth and sustainability.



Benson Choo  
Finance Factors

## **Finance Factors Ltd.**

### **Benson Choo, executive vice president and chief information officer**

*At Finance Factors, IT stands for "innovative transitions." On the banking side, for example, the company uses Salesforce as part of an integrated loan origination system to optimize client information intake, origination data, property data and other information custom-tailored to improve market outreach efforts. Choo said the company built this tool to bolster success within its finance portfolios.*



**Tell us about your most recent funding success.** Technology plays a pivotal role in Finance Enterprises' business in Hawaii's three mainstream sectors, i.e. banking and finance, insurance and real estate. Funding success at the enterprise level has enabled the team to replace legacy technologies, improve efficiencies through virtualization and cloud computing while transforming operations through business intelligence. Malicious attacks and zero-day vulnerabilities were avoided by using the latest cybersecurity tools powered by artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies.

**What about your business excites you the most right now?** The transformations taking place in our multi-sector businesses and the paradigm shifts are being driven by technology. Whether leveraging strategic advantage through new systems or services, technology is proving to be the exciting constant – a major driver of business success. With the advent of emerging technologies, we are excited about doing business in more innovative and unprecedented ways. As Russell Lau, our chairman and CEO, would say, "Technology keeps defining new ways of doing business. And we are fortunate to have a forward-thinking IT team that understands our diverse business contexts and contributes to our collective success."

**What is one thing you think we need as a state to cultivate a robust tech and innovation sector?** We have made strides in modernization efforts since these technological advancements have streamlined operations, minimized expenses, and mitigated financial risks associated with cybersecurity threats. As we continue in that trajectory, it is important to keep an open mind – embracing ideas and innovations – to explore ways we can make things better in our unique island-based economy. The pandemic compelled the rapid adoption of technologies for remote workers faster. We need to continue that momentum and leverage the proven benefits of technology to grow Hawaii's innovation economy. We have the potential to become a model state for innovation and high-tech!



Group shot of the Information Technology department of the Finance Factors family of companies. Not all team members are pictured.  
Finance Factors

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Julie Morikawa  
Eugene Tanner | PBN

## ClimbHI

### Julie Morikawa, president

*Founded in 2009, ClimbHI aims to inspire, train and provide resources for Hawaii students to pursue their future careers in hospitality, among other statewide industries. Morikawa recently told Pacific Business News that since last year, the organization has reached more than 71,500 students through various programs and more than 600 events.*

**Tell us about your most recent funding success.** ClimbHI is focused on partnering with educators, businesses and organizations to help expose as many of our keiki as possible to meaningful experiences that showcase future opportunities here at home. This past school year, local businesses that value the aloha spirit funded ClimbHI's service excellence credential centered around the Aloha Spirit Law for 700 high school students across the state. Over \$50,000 was raised for students to receive the training and certificate.

ClimbHI is also proud to partner with Koi Pond Bridges to focus workforce development initiatives in the West Hawaii [Island] communities. Together we created new concepts like a "Hiring Blitz" that are leading to graduates finding jobs upon graduation in career paths that will lead to economic self-sufficiency.

**What about your organization excites you the most right now?** We are driven to help our keiki find inspiration, learn how to pursue their passion here at home or beyond, and reach their goals and dreams!

**What is one thing you think we need as a state to cultivate a robust tech and innovation sector?** Exposing, educating, and inspiring our keiki to pursue tech/innovation sector opportunities from as early an age as possible is key!





Image: ClimbHI

ClimbHI is focused on partnering with educators, businesses and organizations to help expose as many keiki as possible to meaningful experiences that showcase future opportunities in Hawaii.  
ClimbHI

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