Taking an Active Approach in Entrepreneurial Mentoring Programs Geared Towards Immigrants

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

Immigrants face significant challenges that impair their ability to access resources that can develop their entrepreneurial potential. Traditionally disadvantaged in terms of resources and know-how, new immigrants often find themselves in jobs that do not match their skill-sets or aspirations, and their credentials may not be recognized by their adopted country. Thus, self-employment may present itself as a viable career opportunity for immigrants.

North America is increasingly dependent on foreign talent to replace an aging demographic, and because many immigrants strengthen the economy through entrepreneurial means. Therefore, it is important to minimize barriers faced by immigrants. Barriers are often found in government policy and the labour market.

This study asks how can we refine entrepreneurial outreach activities to immigrants who often experience language, culture or power-related barriers? Furthermore, how can we develop an immigrant-focused entrepreneurial mentoring programme?

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

Francine Schlosser from the University of Windsor used action research to highlight the challenges experienced by immigrant entrepreneurs and in turn discuss practical measures to resolve these challenges through mentoring programmes for nascent entrepreneurs.

The researchers first step was diagnosing the problem. They used semi-structured interviews of 1-hour in length to ask 25 successful immigrant entrepreneurs about the perceived utility of mentoring. When asked what obstacles they faced when they chose self-employment in Canada, participants responded that they lacked access to information about the Canadian customer and business regulations like licensing, difficulties obtaining financing, and a lack of business networks. This exploratory dialogue with immigrant entrepreneurs highlighted a need for entrepreneurial mentoring in the community.

Therefore, in the next step, the researchers sought insight from academic studies of entrepreneurial mentoring and reviewed practical programmes of small business assistance. Accordingly, they developed the New Canadian Business Series. This was a unique multi-disciplinary programme involving both business and law students who coordinate and deliver workshops for course credit. The result was a series of six workshops.

Feedback was collected on the 6 workshops, and used to create a mentoring forum over a six-month period. The mentoring forum was designed to reward the loyal workshop participants with an opportunity to interact with successful entrepreneurs from the area and to receive some preliminary legal advice from a local lawyer/mentor. The premise was that these mentoring and network opportunities would give them an opportunity to apply some of the knowledge they
learned in the workshops while making valuable contacts. Finally, the researcher was able to
develop a balanced scorecard to assess and improve the programme.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

The researchers were able to highlight the challenges experienced by immigrant entrepreneurs:

- Immigrants often lack knowledge of business practices, regulations, and the legal framework in their adopted country.
- Immigrants are challenged to develop an adequate social/business network because they are new with limited landed contacts outside their family or ethnic enclave.
- It is difficult to find successful role models and advisors who have faced similar cultural barriers when starting their own businesses.
- Without a domestic credit history, immigrants may lack access to financial resources.

The researchers also found the importance of developing mentoring programmes for immigrant entrepreneurs. Building on the experiences with this pilot programme, they recommend the following improvements for mentoring programmes involving promising immigrant entrepreneurs:

1. Develop a welcoming and tracking strategy to better understand the varying and changing needs of immigrant participants.
2. Develop a network among participants, for example, using an email list, twitter feed or Facebook page that includes a monthly update of future events.
3. Create a dynamic programme that incorporates new concepts and updated materials into subsequent workshops in order to attract both new and previous participants.
4. Create customized workshops that suit the needs of a particular region.
5. Develop a profile of each participant so that appropriate mentors can be found, specifically matching professional and industry specific skills to needs.
6. Emphasize the need for participants to be prepared to talk about their ideas. Elevator pitches are a critical first step towards commercializing an idea.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research may be useful to universities. Study results provide a model to enable universities and others to reach out to nascent immigrant entrepreneurs. The working experience this provides to business and law students also proved useful, and universities may want to replicate the process. In turn, this research will benefit immigrant entrepreneurs, as they will have the opportunity to resolve their challenges through mentoring programmes.

CITATION

September.

**KEYWORDS**

Action Research, Balanced Scorecard, Immigrant Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial Mentoring

**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

This exploratory dialogue with immigrant entrepreneurs highlighted a need for entrepreneurial mentoring in our community. This helps combat the challenges immigrant entrepreneurs face relating to business knowledge, the legal framework, networking opportunities and role modeling.