



Youth in Community Economic Development The Right Stuff



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Youth in Community Economic Development

The Right Stuff

The Greater Trail Community Skills Centre was established as a non-profit society in 1997 in response to rising unemployment, economic restructuring, the need for skill enhancement and training and the changing demographics in the Greater Trail region. The mandate of the Skills Centre is to serve as a focal point for bringing together community resources to support individual, organizational and community capacity building. The Centre's mission statement is to be "a community leader in social and economic development and learning."

The Skills Centre's social enterprise venture is called "The Right Stuff". The venture is designed "to meet the needs of youth related to employment and training and to diversify and grow the Skills Centres' revenue sources to support other projects and programs that fulfill our social mandate." This profile will relate the story of how the Right Stuff developed and will provide an outline of its development as a social venture to date.

This profile is one of fifteen stories examining youth involvement in community economic development (CED). The profiles have been produced as part of the Canadian CED Network's efforts to encourage effective practices in youth leadership and engagement to enhance the social and economic conditions of Canada's communities.

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Context

The City of Trail is situated on the Columbia River in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia, Canada, just north of the Canada/USA border. The Greater Trail region encompasses the communities of Trail, Rossland, and the Beaver Valley. The City is one of five municipalities and two electoral areas, geographically described as the Greater Trail region. Trail is the financial and service centre for the Greater Trail area. Nestled in the Selkirk and Monashee mountain ranges, Trail is also a year round centre for recreational activities and nearby Rossland is considered a destination for mountain biking and skiing.

Trail and Rossland developed at the turn of the century with the discovery of gold and copper ore in Rossland. Trail then became the home of the Teck Cominco lead and zinc smelter that created a stable economic base for several decades. Faced with economic challenges over the last two decades due to the downsizing of Teck Cominco, the region has been forced to diversify economically. The long-term

workforce reduction at Teck Cominco has been compounded with the School District

reductions from 21 schools to 11 schools in two years and the loss of many local community college programs. In addition, an aging and declining population has put Trail in the disadvantaged zone of social and economic indicators. Trail was one of the first regions in BC to have a community FreeNet and the region has had numerous businesses develop recently that are based on ICTs. High-tech research and development in the Greater Trail area is estimated at 7.5 million dollars annually.

History

Staff at the Community Skills Centre have worked hard to promote the building of community capacity and to encourage a variety of community economic development opportunities - the Right Stuff was a natural evolution of this work. Michele Cherot explained to us that the Skills Centre employment counsellors were seeing a large number of young people who didn't fit or meet the criteria for any funding programs, but who desperately needed training and employment supports. The Skills Centre staff had been searching for interesting business opportunities and when a request for a proposal from the Trail Daily Times was received they "put the two together seeing collating work has a very good fit for unemployed youth."

The Right Stuff was developed in response to a need to provide the collating and delivery service for the daily newspaper in the region. Right Stuff staff transport the papers from Nelson to Trail, then collate the papers adding promotional flyers, and then bundle and deliver the papers to the carrier routes for home delivery. The papers are delivered within the Greater Trail area from Ymir to Genelle, and Rossland, with an average delivery volume totalling 5 500 papers per day and 200 000 flyers per week.

Activities in CED

The Right Stuff is a social venture - it uses the collating and delivery of the paper as a business training opportunity for unemployed youth workers who have difficulty finding work due to their age, lack of work experience and limited skills. Training objectives address developmental needs providing the youth with fundamental life skills, employability skills, and experience in teamwork and

leadership skills. The net revenue from the social venture is then reinvested back into the Skills Centre.

The Right Stuff is currently entering its fourth year and employs six collators who typically vary in age between 18 to 30 years old. The cost of housing in the downtown core of Trail is fairly affordable, so young people gravitate there. This client group does not usually own vehicles. One of the main reasons the Right Stuff is located in the downtown core of Trail is that it makes work very accessible. An added bonus is that it places them in the mainstream of daily business activity which is often a new experience.

The set up cost for the Right Stuff was \$20,000. The business operated at a loss for the first six months and since then has been very successful. It generates a healthy annual surplus independent of a grants or subsidies which is highly unusual for a social venture. There are five distribution routes totalling 245 km within the Greater Trail area, where the collated newspaper and flyers are delivered five days a week, within a three-hour period of the papers arriving at the Right Stuff. At the onset of the venture a project coordinator was hired who ensured that the facility and all the equipment requirements were in order before business operations opened. This person also assisted with the set up of the operations process when the facility was ready. The social venture employs a full time Front Line Supervisor who ensures that the daily deadlines are being met, overall operations are running smoothly and safely, and who acts as a model regarding an appropriate work ethic and behaviour for the rest of the staff. There are two additional part time support staff for this project. The first is an employment and life skills Counsellor, located off-site, who provides career planning and life skills

development support for the collators. The second part time employee is a “job coach”, who provides daily on-site support for life skills development. Michele Cherot, the Business Manager at the Skills Centre, and the main informant for this profile, is the project lead who oversees all aspects of the Right Stuff project. There are also 3 drivers contracted to provide delivery of the collated newspapers to the distribution points.

Michele talks about some of the challenges: “In the collating business the volumes of flyers cycle dramatically through the course of the week and throughout the year. As a result we can only offer the collators 10-15 hours a week of work. Their standard of living is challenging for them, but it is a better living for them than income assistance and one that provides more dignity and opportunities for growth. We’re working on developing other businesses that would provide them with at least 25 hours of work per week, which would raise their standard of living significantly. With the support of employment counsellors the collators’ work responsibilities require them to learn every aspect of the operation right up to acting supervisor.

“So if our front-line supervisor is away for any reason, we want eventually want them to be able to step up and take over. This means liaising with *Trail Times*, the newspaper, and with staff and being able to handle things as they come along.”

Michele explains the venture in more detail: “We’ve had a total of 20-22 people come through our door. Our success rate for our social goals is 73%. We consider success to be when a client moves on to more full-time employment or formal training. We have had to let a few of them go. We’ve certainly gone through progressive levels of discipline with some of them, but have come to realize not everyone is ready for or fits with the program. Using the Personal Growth Plan staff are required to reflect and move forward with their personal and life skills development as one of the conditions of employment. A benefit

attached to the Personal Growth plan is the opportunity to earn additional months of work.

“One of the basic tenets of the Right Stuff is that this work experience is intended to serve as a stepping-stone – we make it very clear to them when they start their employment with us that this isn’t permanent long-term employment, and that we want to prepare them to move onto other things. They have to meet the work site requirements but they must also show progress in their personal growth plan. They’re the ones that set the goals, with the support of the employment and life skills counsellor, and they have to meet their goals. Their work and personal progress is reviewed and evaluated every 3 months. If they score adequately, they earn another 3 months of work, if they do not meet their goals they will have another opportunity to earn 3 months of work at the next review. They’re guaranteed a year of work if everything is as it should be, but they can keep extending their time with the Right Stuff with each review. They have 3 opportunities in the course of the one-year period to add 3 months. We have come to recognize over the last few years that there are times when an individual who has been doing really well will start to slide back and fall into old habits and patterns. They have opportunities to fail and they have opportunities to succeed, and we have found it quite successful to put the responsibility of their results on their shoulders. This way they start to own their successes and their failures.”

Youth Inclusion in CED

Although the Right Stuff doesn’t have a formal philosophy of youth participating in decision-making and governance, in practice the youth do get involved in problem solving for Right Stuff operations. Every month to 6 weeks the Right Stuff has a team meeting where they discuss the business, problems and brainstorm potential solutions. In addition, the youth staff review the operating budget, and regularly assess the overall business. Michele explains, “There have certainly

been times where productivity, that is the speed in which the newspapers and flyers are collated, has affected our budget. So then we say, "OK things are moving too slowly, what ideas do you guys have?" By engaging the workers in finding the solutions they become aware their inputs can affect outcomes.

Outcomes and Evaluation

We asked, could you describe any major outcomes or impacts from the Right Stuff in relation to individual success and community success? Michele responded:

"For the individuals, we want to see real and sustainable personal growth. What we're looking for, and why we have the personal growth plan, is that it's not our intent that we just employ them for a period of time and then send them on their way. We are trying to encourage and support long-term change. By that we mean, how they view themselves and how they relate to the world. Typically they come in with a victim attitude. We want to support a change in that kind of thinking— and for that reason we don't put a limit on how long they're with us as long as we are seeing progress. We originally put a one-year limit on their employment because we thought that they would be ready to be on their way, but there are varying levels of need. We want them to be self-determining on when they are ready to move on. Some youth have been with us for as short as 6 months and have then gone onto other employment. So we're trying to customize it as much as possible. We've had people go on to further training and we've had people find better jobs.

"As for the community, it's an opportunity to create awareness about a social enterprise and how learning and skills development can take place in different ways. We can show that what we're doing in the community is quite unique. The social venture is also a tool for us to develop awareness and prove that there can be success with social enterprises. There have also been tremendous benefits for our organization in that we have

consistently generated a surplus of around \$16,000 a year after year. We have many costs that our other contract funding does not cover - the cost of having a board, professional development for our staff, and those kinds of things. The net revenue from the Right Stuff allows us to fill those budget gaps.

"We account for everything in the running of the Right Stuff – contributions of my time, the life skills counsellor, photocopies, everything that is related to the cost of running the operation. And on top of that we have a training budget to provide self-development. If the young people want to take a computer course or First Aid, we pay for them to attend as part of their personal growth plan. There are a lot of extra support costs to be considered when running a social venture.

"We've done an analysis of "if we hired..." For example, we analyzed the cost of doing teamwork because it's an important skill in today's work world. We would be much better off financially to hire the best collators in town, and run the business on piece work. We'd probably make another \$10-15,000 a year. It would still be a social enterprise because the money is coming back to a non-profit organization; however it wouldn't have the added value of helping young people move on with their lives.

"The biggest unexpected outcome is the cultural impact this project has had on the Skills Centre. We had huge cultural challenges that came at us sideways – we weren't expecting them. We really had to pull back and talk about the cultural shift with all staff regarding the challenges of running a business as opposed to providing counselling services via a government contract. When you are working with government service contracts, you have a year-contract/6-month and you get used to functioning where you demonstrate outcomes or results over an extended time frame. Things like earning a profit, having to meet daily deadlines, and making tough business decisions creates a very different working environment. Through this process we recognized that

the Skills Centre itself is a social enterprise. Because we don't have core funding, we have to find ways to survive, and we are."

Success Factors and Lessons Learned

When we asked – are there any major lessons learned that you would highlight? Michele responded: "Yes. It takes a whole organization to make a social enterprise work – everybody has to be on board. It takes time to witness the kind of change that we're looking for in our clients, and even in ourselves as an organization learning to feel comfortable with the business culture. The cultural issues – they're going to be big. They can bring a social enterprise down – they're very significant. Also, our business contract with the *Trail Times* has to be renewed every year. We need to keep the *Trail Times* happy or we will lose this opportunity, we are in a competitive business environment. Another lesson learned - you need to make a business plan, they are very important, but reality always looks different. You need to be prepared for that."

Policy and Future Directions

The Skills Centre would like to provide youth with more hours so that they can adjust to living on more than a subsistence wage. Michele adds; "If we can find something that can provide them with another 10-15 hours a week, that will raise their expectations even more on how they can function in the world. We find that it takes a while for them to get used to that, but it really does work in the long run. They get used to having a little bit of extra cash and a little more of independence and they find that it actually feels pretty good. So that's our next objective."

Thanks to Michele Cherot for the interview and the Skills Centre for the photographs.

Lessons Learned

It takes a whole organization to make a social enterprise work – everybody has to be on board.

It takes a significant investment in time to develop a social venture.

The business plan is very important, but the organization must also be prepared for reality to be different.

Be prepared to educate internally and externally regarding cultural issues.

Real social change takes time.

Contact:

Michele Cherot
Greater Trail Community Skills Centre
123 - 1290 Esplanade St.
Trail, B.C., V1R 4T2
Telephone: (250) 368-6360
Fax: 250 368-6370
www.communityskillscentre.ca

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Canadian CED Network
211-620 View Street,
Victoria, BC V8W 1J6
Telephone (250) 386-9980
Toll free 1 (877) 202-2268
Fax (250) 386-9984

Emerging Leaders Coordinator
fbrodhead@ccednet-rcdec.ca

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