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The Juneau County Inventors & Entrepreneurs Club Experience: Catch the Culture!

Working from the premise that innovation and entrepreneurship will thrive if cultivated in a supportive environment, the Juneau County Economic Development Corporation (JCEDC) introduced a “club concept” as a key component of its strategic plan. The Wisconsin-based development corporation created the Inventors & Entrepreneurs Club (I&E Club) to restore a culture of rural entrepreneurship that through the years had largely been ignored. With very enthusiastic energetic participants, “Catch the Culture” quickly became the slogan spread by club participants.

Changing the local culture, attitude, and approach to economic development is at the core of the local club concept in Juneau County, which has a population of about 27,000. Historically, the county had consistently ranked among the five counties in the state with the highest unemployment rates. Over time, the county economy evolved to depend primarily on a few manufacturers (concentrated in the electronic assembly and stainless steel metal fabrication industries) as key employers. In 2000 and 2001, three of these plants closed, displacing nearly 1,500 workers, which further aggravated the already depressed economy.

Juneau County has since broken out of the lowest tier of the state’s unemployment rankings, a clear advance that surprised even state economists. Juneau County is experiencing a more diversified local economy through entrepreneurship strategies. Other depressed counties can learn from this experience, and this report describes strategies used by the JCEDC.

The foundation for the I&E Club of Juneau County began in 2002 as an initiative of the JCEDC when the county unemployment rate was nearly 14 percent and participation in the workforce was only 64 percent. The inaugural meeting of the I&E Club was held in February 2003. JCEDC staff provided guidance to the developing club to incorporate as an independent 501c3 nonprofit organization on April 28, 2004. The club operates with its own board of directors and officers separate from the JCEDC. This autonomy and local ownership are factors that contribute to its success.

The I&E Club meets in a locally owned telecommunications company which allows the use of a large conference room free of charge. Many other local businesses have supported the club by donating funding or resources. The University of Wisconsin (UW)-Extension Office, Small Business Development Centers, government contractors, and many other organizations continue to partner with the I&E Club, Inc.

In 2004, Juneau County’s I&E Club was chosen by Wisconsin Rural Partners, Inc., the state’s federally recognized state rural development council, as one of Wisconsin’s Top Rural Development Initiatives. Since that time, the JCEDC has worked with the State of Wisconsin to help develop similar I&E Clubs across the state.

Club Structure

While the Juneau County Inventors & Entrepreneurs Club is an independent organization, the JCEDC continues to be directly involved in providing a variety of support services, including facilitating meetings and promoting Club activities. Guests are welcome to visit club meetings to see firsthand how the club could assist in the development of their ideas and potential new businesses.

The JCEDC includes notices of club meetings, updates on upcoming programs, and connections to various resources on the JCEDC website (www.juneaucounty.com) and through e-mail listservs. JCEDC staff also assists the club officers in arranging for speakers. Maintaining local economic development and business leader involvement is important in identifying the speakers with expertise and experience on which club members can draw for educational presentations and mentorships.

Meetings are open to the public and occur monthly on the same day each month and at the same location. The Juneau County I&E Club found that it is important to hold the meetings on the same day each month, largely because many who attend learn about the club through word of mouth instead of announcements or advertised press releases.

The Juneau County I&E Club meets from 6:00 PM until the last person leaves, usually about 9:00 PM. Club membership fees start at \$35 per year for an individual and his or her immediate family. Joint memberships in the JCEDC

and the I&E Club are also available. The membership donation is tax-deductible and makes the participant eligible for grants to various workshops or conferences and also to receive a club T-shirt. The meetings are open to the public, and the club encourages everyone, not just paid members, to attend the meetings and to stay networked. Regular attendance of 30 to 45 people is the ideal size for the club model. Since January 2006, 633 unique individuals have attended Juneau County I&E Club meetings. The JCEDC maintains a database of more than 950 names and has regular e-mail communication with an I&E Club list of about 400.

The JCEDC has also helped develop other clubs in Wisconsin, partially in response to the growing number of people who had been driving significant distances to participate in the Juneau County I&E Club. Many of these clubs have prospered and, in turn, work as sister clubs, encouraging their members to freely participate in other clubs if they have an interest in the speaker topic or wish to increase their networking base.

Facilitation is a key component to holding a successful meeting. The enthusiasm and energy demonstrated by the facilitator helps to create a positive environment and instills a sense of security and comfort to the club members. In the case of the Juneau County I&E Club, the JCEDC facilitates the monthly meetings as well as matches inventors and entrepreneurs with appropriate resources.

Creating and Maintaining a New Culture of Innovation and Entrepreneurship

An Inventors & Entrepreneurs Club recognizes that the technical support and related social needs required for most entrepreneurs to succeed depends on creating a nurturing culture. Because low population density and a related lack of a critical mass of resources and peers are often cited as obstacles to promoting entrepreneurship in rural areas, the I&E Club provides a welcoming and supportive environment, education on an ongoing basis, networking opportunities, and access to a variety of resources. These several components reinforce the motivation of club members to succeed.

The core function of the I&E Club is to engage people in creating a new future for their community by changing how they view their role within a redefined local culture. While the overall JCEDC strategic plan must focus on generating economic growth, creating jobs, and increasing the local tax

base, these benefits are not the primary focus of I&E Club efforts. The leaders of the development corporation nevertheless are confident that new employment can result from I&E Club initiatives to engage local persons (www.rupri.org and www.energizingentrepreneurs.org). Therefore, it only makes sense that a small rural county such as Juneau County devotes more resources to creating entrepreneurs as a means to supporting local business startups.

Motivating residents to explore their ideas and dreams and helping move them along to fruition can dramatically change the local economic landscape. Currently, eight years into the I&E Club effort, the Juneau County economy is growing from within, and a fresh new attitude prevails around entrepreneurship. These efforts can diversify the economy which hedges against the rapid changes now underway. During the current period of rapid change, old

business models and mature approaches are becoming less relevant. Small rural areas must have a base of motivated, educated, and networked entrepreneurs to grasp new opportunities and turn them into businesses to replace those that are being lost. If America loses this critical base of people who possess the entrepreneurial spirit, too few will be able to seize new and different opportunities when they arise. A special concern for rural communities is that this inertia will cause them to wind down economically and be comprised almost entirely of service businesses supporting the public sector.

Innovation and entrepreneurship is a journey of twists, turns, failures, and successes. Finding an idea for a new product, service, or business venture is often the fun and easy part for entrepreneurs, according to I&E Club experiences. Figuring out the next steps and determining the sequence of steps to follow is where the difficulty begins. Therefore, the first and main task taught at the club is to determine the proper steps in exploring an idea.

Generating community support for participants on an entrepreneurial journey can be crucial to success. Entrepreneurs need grace time to experiment, change directions, and find their place in the sun. They need input, involvement, and encouragement from the community along the way.

Merely the fear of failure can stifle many good ideas. People have been taught to view failure only as a bad thing, fraught with embarrassment and stigma. In personal conversations with successful entrepreneurs in the Midwest states, several have commented that one of the

first hurdles they needed to overcome was the notion that failure would brand them as a loser. This fear of failure can be isolating, keeping us from reaching out to others for help. Consequently, entrepreneurs often find themselves struggling alone and, after much agonizing, they feel like giving up. That is the real tragedy. With a little tweaking and a few corrections or more information, success could have been just around the corner. The I&E Club provides an alternative to this scenario and a safe, supportive environment within which to experiment with ideas.

Listening to naysayers in the community and those who do not understand the personal drive necessary to experiment with innovative or entrepreneurial ways can make entrepreneurship an emotional journey. This has been brought out anecdotally through conversations with entrepreneurs who have since developed successful businesses. In recalling their path to success, these successful business persons often comment that it was difficult to move forward knowing that some in the community had automatically predicted their doom right from the start and would have been more than happy to remind them when the idea failed.

Part of an I&E Club's effectiveness is based on its ability to assist members to reject a culture of pessimism. The club approach challenges the fear of failure, and the impending sense of ridicule that may result, by recognizing failure as an integral component of entrepreneurship and innovation. The club atmosphere helps the members celebrate the lessons learned through failure by sharing experiences and insights gained with others in the club early in their entrepreneurial journey.

What Do You Find at an Inventors & Entrepreneurs Club Meeting?

The short answer to that question is education, networking, and access to resources, supplemented with a healthy dose of motivation.

Juneau County has found that a diverse group of people with a wide variety of talents leads to the most interaction and best results within an I&E Club. Newly formed clubs should try to attract a mix of inventors, entrepreneurs, businesspeople, manufacturers, investors, entrepreneur assistance companies as well as economic development resources to each meeting. Lacking paid staff, most I&E Clubs rely instead on volunteers and mentors from the local business community and economic development professionals to serve as facilitators.

One reason that the I&E Club in Juneau County has succeeded is that it creates a nonthreatening environment. The

club introduces people to the business mindset in an informal, non-academic manner. There is no hierarchy based on level of an individual's educational attainment or social status; instead, it is a forum of equal peers who learn best from peers—those who have “been there and done that.” It is much easier to learn when, for instance, someone familiar with obtaining government contracts says, “It is a little scary, but I will stop by and walk you through it. And by the way, here is my phone number should you have a question.” This is the type of setting that the I&E Club in Juneau County fosters.

Most people are uncomfortable with networking, so the club environment makes it easy for them. The Juneau County I&E Club includes introductions of everyone at each meeting. Participants are asked to tell why they came to the meeting, even if it was because of simple curiosity.

These introductions provide an excellent opportunity for members to hear what stages of exploration others are in and pick up on clues as to how they could possibly assist. This also gives a facilitator the chance to match them with appropriate resources and contacts.

Finally, participants are asked if they have a specific talent or experience that they would offer to help others in the club, either on a volunteer or fee basis. CAD drawings, electronic design, and art services are examples of the types of free services offered by peers within the club. The Juneau County I&E Club has found that member businesses will also offer assistance to inventors and entrepreneurs in intellectual property protection, marketing, prototype development, and manufacturing. Usually they work at reduced fees for club participants.

Club participants are advised that if they have an idea which they plan to protect in the future, they should keep that information to themselves or use the confidentiality agreement provided by the club. Usually, specific information is not necessary to learn how the club can assist an inventor or entrepreneur.

The energy level and expectations are extremely high within club meetings. Educational speakers address all aspects of the invention and business processes. The educational component lasts for approximately 30 minutes, with time set aside for questions. Educational topics include the following:

- Prototype development
- Market research
- Intellectual property protection
- Business plans
- Financing
- Marketing
- Website development
- Sales
- Packaging
- Project management
- Balancing multiple undertakings

One of the most intriguing and exciting aspects is the networking, which is reserved for the last portion of the club

meeting. Very few people possess all the talents needed to make a success of their idea. People are set up for failure when told they need the skills “to do it all.” For instance, an inventor may have a great idea, but it will go nowhere without being matched with appropriate sales and business talent. The peer learning that takes place within the I&E Club helps inventors and entrepreneurs identify their skill strengths and weaknesses.

The club is where members find the talent and experience needed to explore and grow. The time and talent of many inventors and entrepreneurs are best invested in focused areas, while securing trusted external assistance to tackle some other tasks. Within the club, individuals will gravitate, with some guidance from the facilitator, to other club members who can provide specific expertise, advice, or provide the necessary services for pay. The Juneau County I&E Club also teaches inventors how to secure and utilize manufacturer representatives to professionally represent their products to potential funders and manufacturing firms. Similarly, connections can also be made to resources for training that will improve various skill sets. Again, the message to club members is that it is okay, even encouraged, to ask for assistance.

Many exciting outcomes have resulted from the networking sessions. Participants never know when they will meet a person or gain access to a resource that will help them succeed. In some ways, networking at the I&E Club is like the lottery; people cannot win if they do not play. One of the strong attractions of the I&E Club is that people find partners, investors, salespeople, manufacturers, and many more resources during the meetings and then follow up with later transactions.

The process of one-on-one networking is not the same, however, as building networks. New and functional networks such as a cluster group focused on alternative energy have resulted from the club. These clusters can create a lot of activity for members between the monthly meetings since these people share a passion for certain opportunities. While these follow-up efforts are sometimes difficult to monitor and measure, they clearly demonstrate that important outcomes result from the club experience.

Measuring Success

Entrepreneurship development is a long-term process. Success of I&E Clubs should not be measured by traditional economic development indices such as the number of jobs created, number of products invented, or number of business startups. While these are solid economic

indicators, they do not truly capture the purpose of the club which is to educate, nurture, and network inventors and entrepreneurs in a way that fosters a culture of idea exploration and opportunity hunting. Therefore, one must think more broadly and long-term about how success is

measured and what it means in terms of building new leadership and capacity within the community and generating a welcoming environment in which a variety of businesses can thrive.

The Juneau County I&E Club gauges success by monitoring factors such as the level of motivation, environment, and networking. However, the club itself does not spend much time or energy on analyzing its success. Instead,

these metrics are usually left to organizations like JCEDC and other club support organizations that must measure their consulting outcomes. I&E Club activities generate a variety of activities within the JCEDC office and the other partnering support organizations and agencies on a local, state, and regional basis. The success of the club can be measured by the number of follow-ups and types of requests for assistance that flow to these offices from club activity.

Facilitator as Motivator—Ra Ra Sis Boom Ba

Every club needs a champion. The person who acts as club facilitator is critical to fostering a vibrant and successful club. Charged with conducting the meeting, the facilitator also encourages networking and acts as a matchmaker to fill inventor/entrepreneur needs with the right resource or contact with another club member. As a champion, motivator, and cheerleader, the facilitator makes meetings fun and entertaining as well as informative.

As the facilitator launches the participants into their introduction session, a watchful eye will help him or her recommend that certain people get together in the networking session that will be held later in the meeting. For instance, this can mean matching someone with an idea to another person who can supply some needed expertise such as in marketing or obtaining a patent. It could also mean grouping together people with common interests to form a cluster in order to jointly gain access to materials or services in order to increase their purchasing power.

Encouraging an Entrepreneurial Movement

There are now 42 I&E Clubs in Wisconsin that provide a venue for networking among entrepreneurs as well as for linking participants into a larger system of support services outside the community. County and community-based I&E Clubs across Wisconsin have become a great feeder system into many of the fine local, state, and federal entrepreneur support programs or organizations. The Wisconsin Entrepreneurs' Network (WEN) is a network of diverse service providers supporting entrepreneurial businesses by sharing information, resources, and access to expertise. WEN began in June 2005 as a joint venture between the Wisconsin Department of Commerce and UW-Extension's Entrepreneurship and Economic Development Division. According to its missions statement, WEN (2010) "provides entrepreneurs with access to a statewide network of resources and expertise, identifies high-potential entrepreneurs and helps move their businesses forward, facilitates collaboration between entrepreneurs and between organizations that assist entrepreneurs, and helps create and grow minority-owned businesses." WEN partners include the University of Wisconsin System, the Wisconsin Small Business Development Center Network, the Wisconsin Technical College System, the Agricultural Innovation

Center, regional economic development groups, and others interested in fostering entrepreneurship in Wisconsin. A majority of the services provided by WEN partners are free or at low cost. For more information about WEN, refer to www.wenportal.org.

The Juneau County Economic Development Corporation has been a reference point for clubs starting in many locations, both in and out of state, as well as in 11 foreign countries. I&E Clubs now exist in Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Iowa, and New York. A New York club also broadcasts a live weekly radio show, Got Invention Radio!!, for inventors and entrepreneurs (www.gotinvention.com).

Because of the success of the I&E Club concept among adults, focus is now turning to creating support networks for entrepreneurial youth. There is growing interest in designing school curriculum that will couple with a creative environment in support of entrepreneurial activities for youth. The JCEDC is currently working with a handful of teachers in Juneau County to develop an Entrepreneurial and Leadership Charter School. This may be a creative way to stem the brain drain and foster nascent start-up businesses.

Summary

The primary focus of an I&E Club is to create an environment that will stimulate innovative ideas in conjunction with promoting entrepreneurial ventures and risk taking within a safe environment. It is also the view of the Juneau County Economic Development Corporation board of directors that using a club strategy is an important component of its overall local economic development strategy. We believe that a supportive entrepreneurial environment within a defined locale creates a cycle that includes a diversified local economy, creates greater civic capacity and opportunities for new leaders, encourages new business development, and, in turn, leads to job creation. An additional desired outcome is to have several serial entrepreneurs develop from the club, with each going on to create several new businesses.

An economic developer's toolkit for the 21st century must include support for inventors and entrepreneurs. The JCEDC approaches the I&E Club as an important component of our long-term economic development strategy that is at the center of efforts to change local culture. The I&E Club strategy supports economic development in several ways:

- Entrepreneurship retains talent in the area.
- An I&E Club can provide a pathway for displaced workers to turn their talents and energies toward their own innovative ideas.
- For local economic development organizations, it is more economical to assist home-grown businesses rather than chase large manufacturing firms, hoping for them to locate or expand in your area.

- Entrepreneurship is strongly associated with economic growth and regional competitiveness.
- Entrepreneurship helps diversify a local economy.
- The peer learning environment within the club encourages people to become risk takers who spark new business ventures.
- A club creates a supportive and exciting environment in which entrepreneurial enthusiasm becomes contagious. Persons wishing to investigate the potential of their ideas can do so with a group of like-minded individuals.
- The club provides education, networking, mentoring, and encouragement. Entrepreneurs need grace time to explore, experiment, change directions, and hone their ideas.
- An I&E Club is an environment where ideas can be defined, challenged, modified, and nursed.
- The club provides a base of motivated, educated, and networked entrepreneurs who are innovative and able to grasp new opportunities during challenging economic times.
- I&E Clubs address the obstacles of technical support and related social needs of entrepreneurs by providing a safe venue for networking among entrepreneurs as well as by linking participants into a larger system of support services outside the community.

Reference

Wisconsin Entrepreneurs' Network (WEN). (2010). *About us*. Retrieved October 28, 2010, from www.wenportal.org/About.htm.

The Rural Research Report is a series published by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs to provide brief updates on research projects conducted by the Institute. Rural Research Reports are peer-reviewed and distributed to public officials, libraries, and professional associations involved with specific policy issues.