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Virtual Incubation Manitoba

An economic development tool that encourages entrepreneurship in all communities

Learning opportunities have long been thought of as only viable through traditional face-to-face interaction. This has severely limited the opportunities for those who do not have the ability to attend traditional classroom teaching because of distance and geographic location. Distance education and life long learning can address many issues both social and economic, and they can take many forms. eLearning is one of the most important tools and methods to achieve delivery of equitable educational opportunities.

Smart Partners of Manitoba has initiated the third round of their entrepreneurial training program, Virtual Incubation Manitoba or VIM. The VIM program provides value-added services to entrepreneurs such as business planning, strategic guidance on markets, analyzing proof of concept opportunities, support in reaching global markets, access to business mentors and management consulting. Smart Partners of Manitoba has taken the virtual concept to the next step by putting their Virtual Incubation Manitoba program online. Being online and virtual, allows the participating learner, in this case the aspiring entrepreneur, access to these services no matter where they may be located in Manitoba.

The decision to take VIM online was twofold: access and infrastructure improvements allow for improved delivery of training and education services to remote and hard to service areas and the well-proven case of small business being a major economic driver. Developing online virtual incubator space is a significant economic development initiative for several reasons, the two most important of which are, reduced attention by both the incubator and participant on managing real estate and the ability to deliver mentoring and training from a distance to the participant.

VIM enables entrepreneurs to access management and business skills training while continuing to develop and refine their business concept. The online component of VIM enables eCommerce business development using eLearning and eConsulting services. The online capabilities of VIM are important considering the distribution of the population in Manitoba.

VIM Online utilizes the learning management system, or LMS, developed by Technologies for Learning

Group (TLG). Brendan Nagle, President and CEO of TLG states, "This project demonstrates the power of teamwork in creating solutions for online delivery of high value training programs to remote areas." The VIM Online team includes Virtual Incubation Manitoba (content area expertise), Cathedral Group (counselling, mentoring and administration) and TLG (instructional design, online administrative platform and hosting).

While the overall project could not be a success without all the players, TLG's Learning Management System is a key project driver to the VIM online program as it provides the engine for e-commerce and administrative management. The LMS supports scalable delivery of the VIM program to IT company start-ups across Manitoba by providing a robust foundation for delivery of eLearning, counselling and mentoring at a distance. For those learners without adequate infrastructure access for eLearning, VIM provides complimentary distance education methods using compact disk, postal delivery, telephone and one-on-one visits.

Business incubation has proven successes in all industries. In contrast to a 20% survival rate for startups in general, 80% of incubated companies make it through their first five years. Now in its fourth year, the VIM program has successfully provided incubation services to 28 companies in Manitoba. Virtual incubation is an economic development tool that encourages entrepreneurship in all communities – geographic or cultural. VIM encourages participation of Manitoba's Aboriginal and Métis people, who benefit greatly from the creation of entrepreneurial activities within their communities.

Background

On September 25, 2002 Stephen Owen, Secretary of State (Western Economic Diversification) and senior federal minister for Manitoba Rey Pagtakan announced funding for a "Smart" Virtual Incubator project led by Smart Partners of Manitoba. The VIM program, modelled after the then recent successful completion of Smart Partner's Virtual Incubation pilot project, sought to continue this success. The Smart Partners of Manitoba concept of a "virtual incubator" is the first of its kind in Canada.

An incubator may be defined as a catalyst to the process of starting and growing companies. Incubators provide entrepreneurs with training, access to expertise and networks as well providing the tools they need to make their ventures successful. Incubation programs diversify economies, commercialize technologies, create jobs and build wealth.

Unique to the VIM concept is the commitment to have on-going relations with other business incubators. The dissemination of information and experiences benefits all incubation programs and is paramount to the successful introduction of new businesses to Manitoba's knowledge economy. Regular and open communications between all Manitoba business incubators can be a powerful tool in aiding to ensure that new businesses participating in incubation programs remain viable and sustainable for the long term. For this reason VIM is a member of the Association of Manitoba Incubators (AMI).

Through work in connectivity, Smart Partners is acutely aware of the lack of access to technology and communication resources in the Northern and small rural communities in Manitoba. Smart Partners of Manitoba has recently completed a report called "Manitoba Smart Connections, Connectivity and An

Assessment of Public Internet Access In Manitoba (Part II of Connectivity in Manitoba.)” This report is available at: http://www.smartwinnipeg.mb.ca/connectivity_manitoba_part2.htm