

Digital Media Zone – An incubator for business development and experiential learning at Ryerson University

Opportunity

The concept of the Digital Media Zone (the Zone) arose in 2009 as students and alumni approached Sheldon Levy, the President of Ryerson University in Toronto, to discuss how a university, in addition to helping students *get* great jobs, could help them to *create* great jobs. Space, mentoring, consulting, and funding were seen as essential ingredients.

Elements that would contribute to the development of what became the Digital Media Zone were already in place. As part of the Entrepreneurship program in the Ted Rogers School of Management, Ryerson students were already involved in the international Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) organization, in which student teams create economic opportunities in their communities by teaching others about market economics, success skills, financial literacy, and business ethics. SIFE created the StartMeUp Ryerson program to support and nurture the enterprising ideas of students and alumni for a business, a non-profit, or a community organization. In StartMeUp, the youth entrepreneurs provide a description of their idea and a customized development plan is developed with action items, funding possibilities, marketing ideas, and a generalized timeline.

From these roots, the idea of an incubator for student and alumni digital entrepreneurs was created. In 2010, 6400 square feet of space was transformed into the Digital Media Zone, a place where entrepreneurs learn by creating their own digital businesses.

Innovation

The Digital Media Zone is a creative, dynamic learning environment and workplace designed for young digital entrepreneurs, where they come to innovate, collaborate, and market their products and services. There is also a focus on the commercialization of youth-driven digital research. The Zone currently provides the framework for their learning and their business activity, such as open flexible workspace, equipment, utilities, business plan counselling, mentoring, workshops, networks, and industry showcases at no cost (or equity) to the user. The entrepreneurs access the resources and the mentoring according to their needs as they move their ideas from prototypes or research to a digital business product or service.

Digital Media Zone

The first companies brought into the Zone were founded by students and alumni. As interest grows, applications have been received from many young entrepreneurs such as students from University of Toronto and Waterloo, and others in business and education. Most of the companies apply to join through the StartMeUp program, submitting a business outline and getting coached on making a presentation. They then pitch their concept to the DMZ Steering Committee and, if accepted, are introduced to The Zone membership. All Zone companies have regular check-in sessions throughout their stay to monitor progress.

There are four criteria that are used to assess the applications to join the Zone:

- The product or service proposed by the company must be based on a unique idea enabled by digital media that has social or commercial value;
- The idea must have a business plan and a prototype;
- The company team is encouraged to be part of the community and must be willing to contribute what they do best to the collaborative nature of the Zone. As the companies are at different stages of development, they act as mentors to each other; and
- All companies in the Zone are required to communicate about their progress.

The companies must reach certain milestones in order to stay in the Zone. Some have been there since it opened, as they continue to develop and contribute to the community.

Among the 30 companies currently in the Zone, some are working on digital applications with direct links to education:

Soapbox: Using this online platform, members of a community (educational institution, business, politics) send in suggestions which are voted on by other members of the community. Those ideas which garner the most support are sent to the community leaders for response and action. The concept has already been integrated into Ryerson, where suggestions forwarded to Sheldon Levy have resulted in changes such as an extension of library hours. Soapbox has also been licensed by Indigo.

Viafoura: Using this plug-and-play user engagement platform, online readers of newspapers and news sources can comment using video (including split-screen), audio and text. The company is in discussion with CNN and other media outlets about the use of the technology.

Ryerson has begun to use it as well.

Phosphorous Media: Interactive public-space advertisements projected on walls and floors create unique marketing tools for reaching prospective students, and any other consumer group, through materials designed particularly for them.

The Zone is not run by faculty; the student work is extra-curricular. Students, alumni, and others work on their digital business development, supported by the services offered by the Zone staff and mentors and their shared expertise and creativity.

Outcomes and Benefits

Ryerson students have access to the Digital Media Zone as a centre of 21st century learning, with just-in-time learning available from the resources and expertise that surround them. The students are emerging entrepreneurs who are learning by doing real business development and integration in a key industry of the future. The student response is enthusiastic, even passionate about the opportunity they have been given.

In the first year and a half of operation, the DMZ has fostered over 37 companies, 7 of which have 'graduated'. Of these seven, one has grown from 2 to 50 employees, and one has failed. About 400 jobs have been fostered.

The Zone facilitates cross-pollination as the companies meet and share and even use each others' products or create new companies. Valerie Fox, the Director of the Digital Media Zone, described the atmosphere as one of "friendly competition".

Challenges and Enhancements

The Digital Media Zone has been so successful to date that the major challenge is how to sustain and grow the unique business model so that, as Valerie Fox says, "the magic is not lost."

Flexible structures, nimble responses, and an ongoing commitment to support and mentoring are essential for the dynamic, experiential learning atmosphere of business development and collaboration. This hybrid of academe and business is not always easy.

Potential

The Zone is expanding in 2012 to include another 5000 square feet and 50 people, along with more support programs and mentors. In addition, new educational programs in Digital Media are being launched.

In May 2012, fellowship students from India and China will be coming to join the Zone.

Contact North | Contact Nord

Ontario's Distance Education & Training Network

Companies in the Zone, and those in an incubator at the University of Waterloo, are scheduled to be creating joint pitching sessions. Valerie Fox sees great potential in partnering with other post-secondary institutions as there are lots of ideas to share on how the Zone can be used. As well, products and services from the Zone have proven to be useful at Ryerson University and could be adopted by other post-secondary institutions in Ontario.

For Further Information

Valerie Fox
Director
Digital Media Zone
Ryerson University
vfox@ryerson.ca

<http://digitalmediazone.ryerson.ca/>