



Case Study **December 2004**

Community-based Learning Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities Winner, 2004

Skills and Opportunities for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities— IBDE Program

OVERVIEW

The Internet Business Development for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities (IBDE) program of the Community Futures office of Central Kootenay provides adults with physical disabilities the opportunity to enhance their employability skills in a self-paced and supported work and learning environment. The IBDE program provides marketable skills for persons with disabilities who want to reach for financial independence by becoming self-employed.

The IBDE program combines three months of accredited web design instruction with three months of practical website design experience. After completing the training course, participants partner with a local business

to design a website for them. Through the program, learners gain the web design and business management skills needed to become independent entrepreneurs.

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses community learning.

Name of Program
Internet Business Development for Entrepreneurs with Disabilities (IBDE)

Date Established
2002

Skills Developed
Information and communications technology
Communication
Entrepreneurship

Contact
Kay Ryan
IBDE Project Coordinator
Community Futures of Central Kootenay
201 – 514 Vernon St.
Nelson, BC V1L 4E7
Tel.: (250) 825-9433
Fax : (250) 352-5926
E-mail: kryan@futures.bc.ca

OBJECTIVES

The skills acquired in the IBDE program are used to establish an affordable home-based web business in as little as six months. Participants can also use their new skills to seek employment as in-house website designers for other businesses. The broad objectives of the IBDE program are to:

- Provide individuals with disabilities with opportunities and support to acquire self-employment related skills;
- Offer a web-based business incubator featuring virtual stores created by entrepreneurs with disabilities;
- Provide individuals with disabilities with opportunities to explore and test an approach to financial self-sufficiency through entrepreneurship;
- Support program participants and increase their self-esteem by developing knowledge and skills, as well as business and personal networks;
- Sustain the IBDE program and expand it to other Community Futures offices and related support agencies across Canada; and
- Provide a new Internet sales marketing opportunity for Canadian artisans and other small regional businesses.

TARGET GROUPS

The program targets adults with physical disabilities. It provides opportunities for individuals to work at their own pace in their own homes, with the goal of establishing an affordable home-based web business within a few months. Each participant is a potential entrepreneur with an interest in running his or her own business. Through the on-line course and the start-up of an on-line business venture, learners network and liaise with their instructor, fellow participants and the business community.

ACTIVITIES

The IBDE program consists of a three-month, on-line, Selkirk College–accredited web design course, followed by a three-month practicum, in which participants use their newly acquired skills to create a web store under the guidance of on-line instructors. Once

their web stores are completed, participants are partnered with clients—artisans from their local region. The web design entrepreneurs then sell the artisans' products, for a commission, in their web stores. Program participants can choose to have their store featured in the Virtual Mall web portal, < www.virtualmall.ca >, or they can host it as a stand alone website on the World Wide Web.

Using either strategy, participants develop the skills needed to create their own web store or other independent websites, and become self-employed. Throughout the program, participants receive ongoing business management support and training from Community Futures and its delivery partners.

In the IBDE program, entrepreneurs with disabilities work at their own pace, in their own home while they network and liaise with their instructors and fellow participants. The eight-course, 720-hour program is delivered on-line and is supplemented by in-house business management workshops. Topics covered in the eight courses include: using the Internet, HTML programming, web graphics, FrontPage software, website marketing, e-commerce and business management training. Participants interact daily with their virtual instructor and other members of the class through MSN Messenger real time text chatting, audio/video conferencing and virtual desktop sharing.

RESOURCES

For a minimal tuition fee, each participant receives all of the necessary books, software and on-line course materials for the program, including a web domain name and a site to publish their assignments. The participant is required to have a suitable computer with Internet connection, and knowledge of basic computer skills.

With funding from the Western Diversification's Entrepreneurs with Disabilities program and the Local Opportunity Fund of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, partnerships with six additional Community Futures offices in British Columbia were developed in 2004.

INNOVATIONS

The IBDE program allows individuals with disabilities to develop high-demand marketable skills and establish a home-based business—all within a short period of time and at a low cost. The only capital investment needed is in the minimal cost of the course, a computer and an Internet connection. Participants are then set up in their own home-based web design venture selling quality Canadian handcrafted products or artwork (without inventory or storefront expenses).

In addition to the chance to list their own web stores on the Virtual Mall, participants gain the skills necessary to earn an income designing simple websites for themselves or other small businesses in the community. A partnership with a local Internet project, e-Business Connections, allows the IBDE participants to be listed in a provincial Directory of Internet services. Through this listing, IBDE participants are advertised as new web designers able to create simple corporate web designs. The businesses that access the directory are typically small firms that want a simple, low-cost website, rather than those provided by the more elaborate and established web design firms.

BARRIERS

An estimated 3.4 million people in Canada over the age of 15 years report some level of disability. Many are unable to participate in full-time training or work in a more traditional environment because of the lack of accommodations. While there are some existing programs that offer personal development skills for individuals living with a disability, many participants say that these programs are not sufficiently stimulating or challenging.

Starting a home-based business—with a flexible schedule and low overhead—can provide the ideal employment opportunity for persons with disabilities. The existing barriers to full-time labour force participation often prompt persons with disabilities to consider starting a home-based business. However, the typical low pension incomes make it almost impossible to apply for entrepreneurial business start-up loans.

Despite its value for participants, a lack of funding jeopardizes the IBDE's long-term sustainability. Many national sources of funding do not consider training programs or only fund those that involve CAP (Community Access Program) sites. Also, because the IBDE program already exists in British Columbia, it is ineligible for some national expansion funding opportunities. Partnerships with other similar organizations are the key to growing and expanding this program.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

The IBDE program is successful because it appeals to participants and end users on many levels. The participants with a disability are given the opportunity to learn and work in a comfortable and safe environment—home. With minimal investment, they are able to increase their employability skills as they become website designers and successful entrepreneurs. Their success, the result of their own individual efforts, builds self-confidence, pride and independence.

The web design businesses growing out of the program have the potential to become self-sustaining ventures that provide financial security to the entrepreneurs and affordable marketing services to the artisan clients.

OUTCOMES

In the first class of 20 participants, 17 completed the IBDE program, and 16 created their own web store—15 of which are featured in the Virtual Mall. The stores on the Virtual Mall display more than 130 artisans from the Kootenay region of British Columbia and sell more than 1,700 products. Other participants are using their web design skills to develop websites for private clients. These results demonstrate an 85 per cent completion rate in the pilot IBDE program.

Both web traffic and sales on the Virtual Mall are increasing as a result of the IBDE program and the added artisan web stores. While the program markets the Virtual Mall locally, international orders show that the Virtual Mall is also being accessed through global search engines.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Both the entrepreneurs with disabilities and the artisans are excited about the potential for positive social and economic change in their lives as a result of participating in the IBDE program. Through the collective marketing exposure of the Virtual Mall, both parties have the potential for increased incomes and international business opportunities.

In addition to developing and growing their home-based businesses, the graduates of the IBDE program have found a new avenue for social and professional interaction with their peers through the Internet. The mutually valuable relationships that result from the business connection between the entrepreneurs and the artisans have a tremendously positive impact on the entrepreneurs' self-esteem and overall health. They clearly value increasing their social and economic connectedness through their new business ventures.

Since the success of the initial IBDE program in the Central Kootenay region of British Columbia, other Community Futures offices from across Canada have

expressed interest in establishing partnerships to offer the program in their local regions. Each of the other offices sees the IBDE program as a good opportunity for persons with disabilities in their community to obtain marketable entrepreneurship skills, and for local artisans to gain access to affordable web designers.

USE AS A MODEL

There are nearly 300 Community Futures offices in the pan-Canadian network that could partner with Community Futures of Central Kootenay and benefit from a program such as IBDE. Persons with disabilities in other regions of the country would be able to have access to a program that gives them marketable skills and entrepreneurial opportunities. Artisan clients would also benefit from increased access to affordable web designers who would help them market their unique products.

There is the additional opportunity of expanding the existing program beyond the link to local artisans to include any small business looking to expand its market potential.

About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of community learning and highlights an award winner from the Community Learning Awards, funded in part by the Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

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by *Alison Campbell*

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