

Taking Care of Business in the 21st Century: A New Service Model for Entrepreneurs at the Free Library of Philadelphia

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Summary

The Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP) recently launched the Business Resource and Innovation Center (BRIC), a new programming model which combined the resources of the nonprofit and small business assistance centers. The goal is to reduce the barriers to local entrepreneurship by creating more accessible points of entry into organizational development. Staff librarians provide personal guidance to clients by engaging them in research appointments geared towards grant funding, proposal writing, demographic and market research, and competitive analysis. By maintaining strong partnerships and curating local resources, librarians guide and advise clients on area offerings to fit their organizational needs. With resources that span the fields of for-profit and nonprofit, the BRIC is uniquely poised as a hub for social entrepreneurship in a region with great potential for local

innovation.

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Libraries evoke nostalgia. At first glance, your public library may appear to resemble the libraries of your youth. There are books arranged in Dewey Decimal order, patrons reading quietly at tables, and a librarian (probably wearing a cardigan) staffing the reference desk. Appearances aside, modern libraries are at the forefront of the fight for digital equality and information access. The BRIC at the Free Library of Philadelphia is one such 21st century library. As the library's nonprofit and small business resource assistance center, librarians who work

in the BRIC specialize in assisting patrons with digital research. We believe that everyone deserves access to the information and resources that they need to pursue their goals.

Philadelphia is a city of neighborhoods, each with their own personality and culture. These neighborhoods reflect the diversity that makes Philadelphia a great community. There are people with great ideas and concrete experience who may not have the traditional MBA background that would generally be associated with organizational development, but who have the potential for entrepreneurial success. These individuals are underserved in the current startup climate, and statistics show that they are not being reached. The 2016 Kauffman Index of Startup Activity ranked Philadelphia near the bottom, at number 34 of 40 areas surveyed.¹ Additionally, the Census Bureau's first entrepreneurship survey results ranked Philadelphia second to last in minority entrepreneurship, and second to last in female-owned businesses.²

The BRIC, with the resources of the Free Library of Philadelphia system, is in a unique position to reach these individuals as the epicenter of accessible knowledge in Philadelphia. Potential BRIC entrepreneurs do not fit the corporate image. Picture someone who has no background in business, but has a good idea. They think about their idea in the shower, on the way to work, and before falling asleep. The spark is there, but the concrete

structure is missing. She is a yoga instructor who wants to market corporate classes to business owners. He is a designer and athlete who wants to open a neighborhood bike repair and apparel shop. She is a chef who wants to come to your home to teach your family how to cook healthy meals.ⁱ

We learned from our clients that finding the right help to make the leap into entrepreneurship is not easy. Potential entrepreneurs face information overload and confusion. They are overwhelmed with choices, or are intimidated to approach traditional business development centers. In contrast, the library is a welcoming and familiar environment. At the BRIC, the entrepreneur is greeted by friendly and supportive librarians. We see ourselves as "Sherpas" working to reduce barriers and provide an intentional and comfortable space to learn. Our role is to guide and navigate.

Whether you are starting, growing, or sustaining an organization, research is key. It is a skill in which librarians specialize. It is a different skill set from the ones learned on the traditional path to entrepreneurship. We provide a unique angle to answer the tough questions entrepreneurs face. What's more, we can show you how to find the information and data to answer those questions. We expanded upon the classic reference interview to sit down with clients individually to create a personalized roadmap to guide their journey. Each guided research appointment is unique to the individual's

enterprise and goals. Librarians provide the instruction and tools to write or enhance business plans or proposals.

Since we are not your typical business professionals, we cultivate and maintain key partnerships with local business and nonprofit organizations to curate information and provide professional recommendations from expert colleagues. We work with the Small Business Administration on financial, lending, and healthcare topics. We partner with the Corzo Center, an exceptional resource for arts and media-based entrepreneurial ventures, to bring grant-funded entrepreneurship courses to the community. We also work in conjunction with Corzo's network of free consultants to help prepare entrepreneurs prior to meeting with business mentors. Since legal questions are common among entrepreneurs, we have partnered with Philadelphia VIP/LawWorks to host small business and nonprofit clinics where clients are matched with attorneys to provide free legal services.

One of the best kept secrets of the library, the Regional Foundation Center (RFC) is a core asset to the BRIC. Since 1974 the RFC has been serving the Greater Philadelphia area by providing access to Philadelphia's largest publicly accessible collection of print and electronic resources on fundraising, nonprofit management, and general philanthropy. The RFC strives to connect individuals and nonprofits with the resources and data they need to grow and manage their organization. Librarian assistance allows patrons to

uncover new funding opportunities, analyze trends in philanthropic giving, research potential partnerships, and tap into individuals who are interested in supporting the social sector.

Philadelphia is well-positioned to be a hub of social enterprise activity, but the area lacks a cohesive driving force to unite this community. A study from earlier this year ranked the top social enterprise ecosystems in the country, and only nine cities delivered enough data to be included in the rankings; Philadelphia was not one of them.³ A major detriment is the lack of physical space where this community can gather. The BRIC hopes to address this need in the social enterprise ecosystem. We are excited to be working with the Social Innovations Journal and the Philadelphia Area Metropolitan Chapter of Social Enterprise Alliance to host the Soцент Philly Meetup group as an ongoing gathering place where this community can jointly find funding opportunities, learn about flexible business structures, and conduct business research.

Making this vision a reality is not without challenges. Since launching, staff has spread the word about this new programming model through community outreach, social media, and light stalking, but getting people to see the public library in a new light has not been easy. The purpose of libraries has shifted over the past decade from repositories of information to buzzing hubs of knowledge-sharing and collaboration. This shift, while well known in

the library world, is still making its way into the zeitgeist. It has also been difficult to launch a new initiative within a government institution. Struggling with bureaucracy and red tape is a daily reality. This is in addition to making adjustments after getting feedback from our stakeholders: leadership, partners, clients, and staff. New ventures rarely come without any iteration. We welcome the opportunity to tweak and adjust our approach and offerings to better meet the needs of our stakeholders.

In spite of these challenges, we are confident that an increase in local entrepreneurship can be achieved by making organizational development more accessible to a wider audience. As a preliminary measure, we began tracking data via free statistical tools (primarily Google Forms) to help guide the creation of our service models. By recording data on visitors, appointment requests, and programming we have been able to tailor our message and find our strengths. Since the soft launch of our program in February, we have held appointments with nearly 200 individuals in the areas of grant research, demographic research, competitive analysis, and target marketing. Monitoring where in the city these individuals are coming from, what their challenges are, and the types of programs they would like to see has been invaluable in planning future expansion and targeted outreach.

The next three years will see a phased expansion of services which will be scaled and developed based on the information we are deriving from this statistical data. With

54 locations throughout Philadelphia, programming can easily be brought to neighborhood libraries which see a need for small business and nonprofit knowledge. A select number of these locations will be strategically positioned as satellite resource centers to better serve areas of the community with commercial corridor viability. Additionally, the BRIC itself will see the creation of a new facility at the Parkway Central location which will be designed to fit the needs of the local entrepreneurial audience.

By reducing the barriers to involvement, the BRIC aims to create a more engaged and diverse community of local entrepreneurs, a more collaborative nonprofit community, and a stronger social entrepreneurship movement. Doing so will help ensure that Philadelphia retains the individuality and local flavor that make it such a special place.

Author bios

Caitlin Rietzen, Gillian Robbins and Caitlin Seifritz are librarians in the Business Resource & Innovation Center at the Free Library of Philadelphia specializing in small business and nonprofit research assistance, as well as coordinating outreach and programming opportunities.

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Notes

i. Research appointments held on 06/17/2016, 07/29/2016, 08/18/2016