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**Boot camp for entrepreneurs**

A federally funded employment program that works

**Peter Kuitenbrouwer**  
 Financial Post

OAKVILLE - The entrepreneur boot camp, squeezed between El Spero Family Restaurant and Younique Hair Design in this strip mall in Toronto's western suburbs, is a drab place: windowless rooms, colourless carpet, beige walls.

The entrepreneurs, though, are looking great: Smart jackets, patent leather pumps, neat haircuts, manicures.

Only one man is dressed casually, in a checked red shirt and jeans. But it turns out his business builds to-scale steam locomotives -- big enough to ride in -- so for his line of work, he, too, is dressed for success.

In the past year, all have lost their jobs. Many were middle management at banks, insurance companies and technology firms. Ask them about the past, though, and they'll tell you about the future.

They've been working day and night for eight weeks at The Enterprise Centre, a kind of hothouse for would-be business owners, funded by the Human Resources Development Canada.

They're here today to hand in their completed business plans. They easily talk about markets, numbers and targets. And each speaks of "we" -- as though a staff of 20 were already hard at work - and they all say the Enterprise Centre has brought their business plans to life.

"The support you got from the group was awesome," gushes Christiane Deschènes, who lost her job last November. "Now, I'm more confident. There is no way that I cannot succeed. Now I just have to follow the path."



Yvonne Berg, National Post

**Isabel Kemper, from left, Maurice Chaput, Christiane Deschènes, Jim Asselstine and Mary Hull have all completed an Ontario government course that teaches unemployed people how to be entrepreneurs.**

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Nine years ago, a group in Oakville, Ont., founded this centre, on the premise that people who lose their jobs are often experienced, motivated and able to forge their own businesses. But lacking money and confidence, they head right back into job-hunting.

Those accepted here get a guaranteed 52 weeks of Employment Insurance while they're starting up their business. They can collect roughly \$17,000 in benefits in a year, and are permitted to earn another \$42,000 from their business, after which they would have to start repaying EI.

It's tough to get in. Of every five applicants who submit a business plan, go through an interview and prepare a presentation, just one gets a spot. The program is also demanding. If you miss a session, you have to bring a doctor's note. And if you fall behind, "you have to go before a panel and say why you should be allowed to stay in the program," says Laurie Morrison, the executive director.

According to the centre, 82% of graduates are still in business three years after completing the course. More than 600 businesses have been started out of here.

National statistics are harder to get. Jane Weldon, director of labour market operations and initiatives at HRDC headquarters in Gatineau, Que., says HRDC spent \$51-million in 1999-2000 on self-employment programs across Canada. The feds directly fund 107 programs in five provinces plus the Yukon; other provinces run their own self-employment centres with federal cash.

Ms. Weldon knows the "cost per intervention": \$12,195. But how many people across the country succeed every year in launching themselves into business? "There is no current audit on this particular program," she says. "We haven't done one in a number of years."

She says the monitoring is local: programs that don't have a high success rate don't get contracts the following year.

Back in Oakville, people rave about the Enterprise Centre.

"I would have probably done it without them, but by God I would have crashed and burned a lot more," says Sue Acton, who owns Varmaat Kadet, a hauling company with 12 18-wheeler trucks, plus drivers. "It's been a great support and networking facility. This country was built on people with guts and a bit of vision and it will remain that way."

Ms. Acton moved to the Toronto area from England in 1981. In 1995, a single mom with two kids, she lost yet another trucking company job.

"When I got fired from the third company, I thought, 'Never again.' I was knocking 40 and I thought, 'What if I get fired again? Nobody will want to hire a 50-year old.' "

So she went down to the unemployment office. "I went to one of those seminars where they tell you how to fill in the little boxes and I heard about self-employment. I was flabbergasted that someone would pay me to start my own business."

After completing her course at The Enterprise Centre, Ms. Acton started a consulting firm to the trucking business, and then heard about a company that needed five trucks. She knew someone with three trucks to sell. "I put my house in hock," she says, and the rest is history.

The Enterprise Centre's success appears to hinge on a smart recycling plan: the grads do most of the teaching. That, in turn, helps them market their own services: the guy teaching the accounting course trolls for business among the recruits; the marketing guru sells his services.

Ms. Acton says she loves going back to talk to the recruits at their graduation. "I tell them straight out, 'Stop wallying around in the back row, and get out front, because that's what entrepreneurs do.' "

Eric Bilajbegovic Sana immigrated from what is now Bosnia in 1987. After leaving a job at The Aldo Group, the shoe chain, in 1996 he enrolled at the Enterprise Centre with a plan to open an alterations shop. They took him in; that year he opened his first Altered Image. Today there are 11 Altered Image shops across Ontario.

"They gave me an opportunity to enter the business life in Canada -- to learn and to understand the mentality, the system, the social skills, finances and marketing," Mr. Sana says. "They took my hand and said, 'Okay, you can do it.' "

Wayne Clancy of Future Strategies Inc. offers a two-day seminar "entrepreneurial marketing" to each group at the Enterprise Centre. He says the stipend does not cover his effort; rather, it is worth his while because he frequently hires the students as subcontractors on his consulting projects.

"Every class, there is some kind of business relationship that comes out," he says. "A lot of the people are very driven."

Some fundamentals of business come in handy, too. Mo Chaput, for example, has been a scale model railroading buff for many years. He built a scale steam locomotive in his father's basement in Sudbury, Ont.; since then he has built three more engines. Each is big enough to ride.

"This is the ultimate in model railroading," he says. "You have to shovel coal, pump water into the boiler."

The Enterprise Centre has given him a business model, he says. He has lined up an "angel" investor (a train buff) and created a Web site to presell the trains before he builds them.

"The first time I was like, 'I'll stay in the shop and build engines and hope that somebody buys one,' " Mr. Chaput says. "This time people have to put their money on the table."

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