



Writing Sample

CALGARY STARTUP WEEKEND COMES TO MOUNT ROYAL UNIVERSITY

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Over 100 aspiring entrepreneurs put their business ideas to the test in a 54-hour startup showdown.



Calgary Startup Weekend participants look on as their competitors pitch ideas to a group of judges from Calgary's business community.

You've got an idea for a business. But is your idea any good? That's what over 100 aspiring entrepreneurs came to find out.

On February 7, 2014, the organizers of Calgary Startup Weekend set a new attendance record when 113 people descended on Mount Royal University's Bissett School of Business to pitch startup ideas and develop an MVP (minimum viable product) — all within a period of 54 hours.

Peter Calverley, a successful entrepreneur and chief financial officer of California-based Tela Innovations, flew to Calgary to volunteer as a judge and to help coach participants.

“We don't really see the same kind of enthusiasm for events like this in Silicon Valley,” says Calverley. “What is happening here is special.”

The event commenced with inspirational talks by Patrick Lor, chief executive officer and co-founder of Dissolve, and Anette Ceraficki, founder of Confab.

Lor talked about the stresses entrepreneurs face and suggested, “finding the middle ground” as an effective way to solve problems. Ceraficki, a human resources (HR) professional and winner at the February 2012 Startup Weekend, provided guidance on what participants could expect over the weekend.

The event was well attended by aspiring entrepreneurs, university students and even one high school student. Event organizer Kylie Toh says “we want to plant that entrepreneurial bug early.”

It seems to be working: two of the three winning ideas, Cup Canvas and Whimee, were conceived and pitched by university students.

“Winning proves that [these students] are motivated, creative, competitive and can work in a team,” remarked Roma Sobieski, digital communications manager for Startup Calgary. But according to Sobieski, that’s only the beginning. Becoming as successful entrepreneur also requires “leadership, tenacity and passion.”

Lor agrees that the lessons learned at Startup Weekends are just the beginning. “If the best team doesn’t win, that’s life. Business isn’t always fair. It doesn’t mean that you should give up on best practice; you simply keep trying over and over again.”

As a past winner, Ceraficki is a good example of someone transforming an idea into a business. In early 2012 Ceraficki was looking for an HR performance management tool. After searching high and low for existing products, she realized no one offered the features she needed. “There was a small gap in the market and it led me to an idea,” she recalls.



As if by destiny, the February 2012 Startup Weekend was held in the same Kensington office building where Ceraficki worked. A few of her co-workers were planning to attend, so she decided to see what it was all about.

As Ceraficki learned, Startup Weekend is a 54-hour intensive whirlwind of activity bringing together designers, developers, and business people with the goal of refining raw ideas into functioning startup companies or working prototypes. It is a global phenomenon with events being held regularly in hundreds of cities, each run by volunteer organizers.

The events are both collaborative and competitive. Participants pitch their ideas to fellow attendees and — if they are lucky enough to be selected after the initial pitch



— to a panel of judges. Winners are awarded prizes such as additional business coaching and tickets to seminars and workshops.

The people who attend Startup Weekend are diverse. Some are idea generators, while others are more suited to building out the ideas. Almost all are working full-time jobs.

“Most participants have established careers but are looking for something more,” said Toh. “Startup Weekend helps them take the next step.”

Toh started out as a participant. Now she’s one of the people working behind the scenes to organize the events.

As for Ceraficki, she didn’t have high ambitions going into her first Startup Weekend.

“I was never interested in starting my own business or being an entrepreneur. That was never my thing.” However, the positive response she received was more than she expected.

The event Ceraficki attended kicked off with a one-minute pitch delivered by each person with a business idea. There were no PowerPoint presentations, no fancy props. Everyone in the room was supplied with three sticky notes. The goal was to get people to vote for your idea with a sticky note. The top 12 ideas were then developed over the weekend. With the ideas selected, teams of five were formed.

“To my delight and complete surprise, mine was one of the ideas selected,” says Ceraficki. “There were people I’d never met before asking if they could work on my idea.”



By Sunday, the last day of the 2012 event, Ceraficki and her group had eight screen shots of the HR tool, which they dubbed Parley, and were ready pitch



their product to a panel of 12 judges made up of investors, business professors, and other established business people. Impressed with what they saw, the judges handed the Parley team the win.

As a reward, Ceraficki's team was offered a chance to take courses at Innovate Calgary, plus a chance to present their business idea to more than 300 executives at the Canadian Cloud Council. Ceraficki won first place there too. This win "solidified and validated our idea," she says.

Startup Weekends have been hosted in Calgary since 2011.

Toh says the early events drew around 30 to 50 people. Now, with the increased popularity of the event, organizers of Calgary Startup Weekend are planning to host four events per year.

Organizers attract people to the events by using social media like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. Word-of-mouth is also a very important means of spreading the message.

"It's a hands-on opportunity to experience what it's like to be an entrepreneur working on a startup," Toh says. "Plus, startups and tech in general help to spur the industry and stimulate the overall economy."

"It changed my life," Ceraficki says. "It can change other people's lives, for sure."

Parley, since renamed Confab, underwent extensive testing last fall and will be launched this spring. As for the winners from the past weekend's event at Mount Royal, only the market can decide if their startups will take off.