



PROJECT INSIGHTS REPORT

Teaching vulnerable SMEs the innovation skills to develop sustainable, long-term remote work strategies

SME Adaptability

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Small and medium-sized businesses owned by women and persons with disabilities were disproportionately affected by COVID-19, with a higher percentage reporting that they were unable to operate during the pandemic. To address this issue, pointA developed a virtual, 4-week course to help small business owners develop remote work strategies.

While it was difficult to assess the effectiveness of the course, pointA found that many businesses still had questions and sought support for remote work solutions three years after the pandemic started. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were also willing to pay hundreds of dollars per month for services if they had concrete benefits for their business.

As an initiative designed to expand pointA's support across Canada, this project also showed the importance of leveraging other community-based organizations to recruit program participants and the benefits of using an iterative approach that allows frequent adjustments to be made.

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PARTNERS

pointA

LOCATIONS

Pan-Canadian

INVESTMENT

\$138,876

KEY INSIGHT #1

KEY INSIGHT #2

KEY INSIGHT #3

Three years after the pandemic started, many businesses still had questions and sought support for remote work solutions.

If SME support services are sufficiently practical and effective overall, SMEs are willing to pay hundreds of dollars per month.

Leveraging other service providers to help recruit program participants was more effective than social media ads.

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The Issue

During the COVID-19 pandemic, small and medium-sized enterprises were disproportionately affected by the crisis, especially SMEs owned by women and persons with disabilities. These enterprises were more likely to be in service industries, information and cultural industries, accommodation and food services, among those hardest hit by the pandemic. In addition to the impacts of the pandemic, SMEs owned by women and people living with disabilities tend to be smaller, with less financial capital, fewer employees and HR capacity, meaning they had fewer resources to pivot when lockdowns began.

What We're Investigating

To address this issue, pointA developed a virtual, 4-week course in which business owners could participate at no cost. The project focused on engaging women and persons with disabilities who own small businesses in industries most impacted by COVID-19.

The course content emphasized innovation skills that are relevant for establishing long-term, sustainable remote work strategies. This was intended to support SME owners in developing a remote work approach that suited their contexts, and also provide them with skills that could be applied to other aspects of their business.

Moreover, pointA had extensive experience advising organizations in the Greater Toronto Area, but felt their knowledge could benefit many more businesses across Canada. As a result, this project represented a kind of feasibility test for scaling pointA's programming through dedicated online channels. The team also worked with the Future Skills Centre's Accelerator Program to explore how the organization might create a sustainable, longer-term offering from this project's insights and assets.

What We're Learning

Recruitment

73 participants participated in the 4-week virtual course over two cycles, far short of the original target of 350. pointA originally promoted their course offering through webinars, newsletters, and referrals, but this proved to be less effective than expected in reaching the targeted groups. Working with a marketing advisor, the project team developed other communications materials, including paid social media ads. Ultimately, the most effective approach was to send direct, targeted emails to 500 organizations across Canada and invite their members or stakeholders to register for the course. As a result, organizations such as Magnet, StartUp Canada, Mentor Works, Imagine Canada, Go Forth Institute, Indo-Canada Chamber of Commerce, Women Entrepreneurship, Canadian Association of Women in Construction, and Women's Enterprise Centre of British Columbia helped to promote pointA's course to their networks.

Engaging a network of other organizations across Canada was critical for pointA's ability to attract participants and expand its offering across the country. More time for community consultations to identify participant needs and potential solutions could have helped the organization to refine its course more quickly.

Similarly, lower recruitment targets (at least initially) could have produced an attractive Canada-wide offering in a shorter period. pointA had challenges meeting their original participant targets and setting more manageable goals could have reduced stress on project staff and enabled more project improvements based on early implementation. This approach would have also encouraged the recruitment of participants most likely to benefit from services. By validating and refining its course earlier in the process, pointA could have expanded its reach across Canada more easily and efficiently.

Digital literacy

pointA's initial online platforms inadvertently created barriers for participants. Many participants struggled with the online registration process and with Google Classroom, particularly those without a google account. The project eventually switched to email-based communication and a simpler webpage, which proved to be more effective and inclusive.

Practical, personalized support

The language used in course material was very important. Terms such as “innovation” and “strategy” were vague and unclear to end users, stakeholders, and supporters, and pointA found better results with more concrete and descriptive language. In addition, pointA learned that many SMEs run by women in particular were interested in coaching or consulting to address their specific remote work issues. Consequently, the project team introduced a tailored one-to-one session for individual business needs, which made the course more useful for participants.

Effectiveness

Many participants were reluctant to complete formal surveys and systematic data on course completion or participant success. While it is difficult to determine whether participant knowledge and skills regarding remote work has been enhanced, pointA did see evidence of SME demand for remote work solutions as they were still seeking support three years after the pandemic started. Many business owners had few other people with whom they could discuss this issue and many felt isolated as they navigated this issue.


In addition, SMEs who participated said they were willing to pay hundreds of dollars per month for services if they had concrete benefits for their business. Among those who were interested in this support, pointA did not find trends within particular industries or business sizes, but did find that interested SMEs often had strong cultures and/or management who were open to new approaches and desired an intentional strategy for remote work. Though it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of pointA's course offering, the persistent demand for remote work support suggests these types of services remain relevant and attractive to SMEs.

Why It Matters

Given that SMEs are responsible for a large portion of private sector employment in Canada, pointA's experience offers key insights on serving these businesses and scaling SME support across the country.

For policymakers and practitioners, it's clear that SMEs seek practical content and personalized support. The language used carries an outsized impact on the ability to engage business owners as well. This project provides an example of criteria that encourage SMEs to make investments, in this case, if it very immediately or directly affects their bottom line, e.g., moving to remote work during a pandemic.

Funders should specify a clear learning and evaluation approach and provide support to funding recipients for implementing the evaluation approach as appropriate. To assess program effectiveness, projects should set an expectation that participants will need to provide feedback on their experience and longer-term outcomes.



The project also offers hard-won lessons for scaling projects to new geographies. Leveraging existing service providers to reach target communities and recruit program participants is a promising strategy. This is especially relevant because many organizations have had difficulty recruiting program participants.

What's Next

After working with FSC's Accelerator Program to explore how pointA's remote work support could become a longer-term offering, pointA now offers a full suite of services related to remote work.

HOW TO CITE THIS REPORT

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The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

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