



**Future
Skills
Centre**

Centre des
**Compétences
futures**

Project Insights Report

Taking IT Digital



PARTNERS

EntrepreNorth



LOCATIONS

Northwest Territories
Nunavut
Yukon



INVESTMENT

\$499,500



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☰ Executive Summary

Northern Indigenous entrepreneurs have the potential to be catalysts of prosperity and drivers of social change within their own communities. Moreover, the development of sustainable enterprises can create local economic opportunities to help break through poverty, address social challenges and strengthen Northern ways of life.

However, Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs frequently encounter significant obstacles to entrepreneurship. Part of the issue lies in the fact that many of these would-be entrepreneurs are based in remote communities, making it difficult for them to establish business connections and leverage networking opportunities. They are also confronted with limited educational offerings and face additional constraints in accessing support from financial and related institutions.

This project started with the recognition of the importance of building a culture of innovation that is rooted in Indigenous knowledge and Northern capacity to deliver culturally relevant business education and mentorship in a restorative and healing way.

To that end, the project developed an app to support Indigenous entrepreneurs and social innovators. The app intends to offer a place for users to develop circular business models, hone their business strategies and create intentional social change with the support of an online community. In particular, the app will offer entrepreneurs a more streamlined process of applied learning and a way to engage online with a network of certified EntrepreNorth facilitators, mentors and coaches to support their business growth journeys and scale their community impact. The ultimate aim is to help these Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs build and grow sustainable businesses with purpose.

A prototype for the app has been developed and, based on the lessons learned to date, the next phase of work will focus on refining the app to increase reach and access across rural and remote Northern communities.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Technology can provide essential support to Indigenous entrepreneurs, including help to modernize business practices and facilitate access to networks and financing.
- 2 Involving community voices in the design process ensures that the technology, in this case the EntrepreNorth app, effectively meets the specific needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs.
- 3 Indigenous-led approaches can drive social change and promote economic independence among Northern and Indigenous communities.

▶ The Issue

Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs often face challenges and barriers in accessing business education, support and networking opportunities. Many of these entrepreneurs live in remote communities and struggle to build business connections and raise capital. Additionally, Indigenous entrepreneurs often face structural barriers when it comes to securing support from business and financial institutions.

At the same time, there is a growing demand to better support Indigenous entrepreneurs and design culturally relevant business programming that honours Indigenous knowledge.

To address these needs, EntrepreNorth, which has been offering a cohort-based entrepreneurial growth program for Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs, launched a project to develop an app to support their learners and alumni in building businesses, raising capital and creating impact within their own communities. The project sought to develop an accessible and inclusive business tool that would provide a streamlined way for these entrepreneurs to share and access resources to support the growth and impact of their businesses.



What We Investigated

In Phase I of this project, EntrepreNorth tested a web-based application to support Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs and social innovators. The goals of the Taking IT Digital project were to:

- present a pathway for making business learning and supports more accessible and inclusive in Northern and remote communities;
- capture new insights on how to best mobilize a community of practitioners to support Northern entrepreneurship and innovation;
- identify how to strengthen the connections between EntrepreNorth facilitators, mentors, coaches, entrepreneurs and investors.

The project aimed to investigate the following issues:

1. How can technology support Indigenous entrepreneurs to create thriving businesses and overcome systemic barriers in the North?
2. How can technology be designed in a manner that is inclusive and accessible for Indigenous entrepreneurs with diverse needs and backgrounds?
3. Can technology be developed in ways that uphold the cultural integrity of Indigenous worldviews, cultures and values?
4. Can a safe online space be created for Indigenous entrepreneurs to connect, share ideas and collaborate with peers, mentors, advisors and investors?

In Phase II of this project, EntrepreNorth 1) produced culturally relevant and engaging e-learning content designed for Northern Indigenous entrepreneurs in rural and remote communities, and 2) continued to develop the app.

This phase of the project sought to understand the following:

1. How can EntrepreNorth create engaging e-learning content and skills-development resources that meet the diverse needs and learning styles of Northern Indigenous entrepreneurs who feel isolated and excluded from existing education systems and business support services?
2. How can EntrepreNorth empower learners to apply their new knowledge and skills to develop their ideas and grow their businesses?
3. How can EntrepreNorth foster human-to-human engagement and mentorship across the North through a distance-based learning format?
4. Through this work, how can EntrepreNorth support Indigenous entrepreneurs to demonstrate impact in ways that align with their worldviews?

Overall, the project sought to provide continuous business planning support and strategy development to Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs. Ultimately, the project aimed to dismantle barriers for Indigenous entrepreneurs, promote digital inclusion, uphold cultural integrity and create a safe online space for collaboration and idea sharing among Indigenous entrepreneurs.

What We're Learning

This project underscored several critical lessons regarding the design and development of applications of this nature.

Collaborative engagement between designers and developers is valuable

Bringing together these two disciplines in a cohesive manner, and at the project's inception, made for a more seamless delivery of EntrepreNorth's vision for the design of the app. This collaboration also facilitated more robust user testing, which was essential for tailoring the prototype to the specific needs of Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs.

The app's design centred Northern and Indigenous voices

The project team used a variety of methods to hear from Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs, including a brief survey to assess whether the app would uphold standards of digital access, inclusion, learning opportunities, innovation and connection. Indigenous and Northern entrepreneurs also participated as advisory committee members who tested the app and reviewed curriculum. Elders and Knowledge Keepers were also engaged in the teaching and curriculum development, making important contributions and furthering the integration of traditional practices and ceremony.

The app supports learners holistically

To support the development of the e-learning content and app, EntrepreNorth developed a wellness framework intended to teach learners strategies related to gratitude, affirmations, values and movement. The framework is divided into lessons that include a wellness quote, wellness questions or prompts, tools, strategies and/or activities, a wellness affirmation, helpful tips and supportive resources. Following guidance from an Elder, the framework now incorporates information about how to use traditional medicines, like sage, tobacco, cedar and sweetgrass, in ceremonies to support learners.

★ Why It Matters

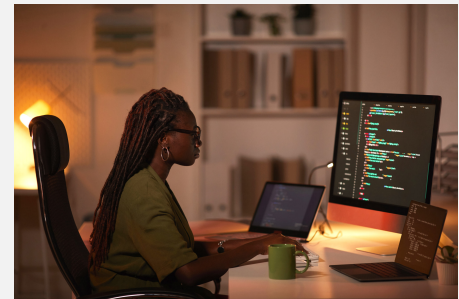
The project holds key lessons for a number of stakeholders. It employs an innovative approach that leverages technology to support Indigenous entrepreneurs, thereby helping to support the modernization of business practices and equipping individuals with essential tools for growth. Indeed, the project results thus far showcase the importance of improving accessibility and interconnectivity in the North. Individuals and organizations outside the project's immediate network, including entrepreneurs, program facilitators, advisors, investors, funders and other business/entrepreneurial organizations, have shared their excitement for the project and its potential.

The project also underscores what is possible when empowerment and impact are central to the overall objectives. The significance and value of the technology being built in the North through Indigenous leadership and with a majority of Northern staff and contractors extend well beyond the aims of this project. It highlights how an Indigenous-led approach can drive social change and promote economic independence among Indigenous communities. This empowerment is vital for fostering long-term, positive impacts beyond individual successes.

Community engagement is another crucial aspect of the project. By involving community voices in the design process, the project ensures that the application addresses the specific needs of Indigenous entrepreneurs. This inclusive approach enhances the app's relevance and effectiveness, making it a more valuable tool for its users. Prioritizing Indigenous representation and ownership ensures that the solutions developed are authentic and aligned with community values, reinforcing the project's commitment to cultural integrity.

In sum, the insights gained from this project underscore the crucial role of Indigenous-led initiatives, the need to promote digital inclusion, and the importance of preserving cultural integrity. These elements should be considered essential ingredients for any project dedicated to fostering sustainable growth and driving positive change in Northern and Indigenous communities.

▶ What's Next



State of Skills: Digital Tools in the Skills Ecosystem

There is considerable promise in the role digital tools and virtual career services can play in improving access to training and career development, particularly for those with geographic barriers or constraints such as family care or other work responsibilities.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

EntrepreNorth continues to implement its app and e-learning content while providing entrepreneurial skills training to cohorts of Northern and Indigenous entrepreneurs. It is currently working on developing culturally relevant student learning outcomes and a clearer program structure that includes modular learning. EntrepreNorth is also spearheading the Northern Impact Fund, a 0%-to-market-rate interest loan paid out over the course of five to ten years in fixed or revenue-based installments—created by Indigenous Peoples for Indigenous Peoples.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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