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## Influence of Networking on Starts-Up Development in Incubation Hubs

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### ABSTRACT

This study on the role of networking in entrepreneurial incubation hubs was aimed at validating the influence of networking on start-up development in Harare, Zimbabwe. The research targeted start-up founders that had gone through the process of incubation in Harare. The study used a qualitative research method. A case study approach was then adopted in which the participants were purposively selected. An interviewing guide was used to gather data. The study involved three focus groups with a total of twenty-one start-up founders. The research established that start-ups tend to develop better through the infusion of ideas and experiences either through peer-to-peer or peer-to-coach or vice versa. Networking in incubation hubs aided learning as incubates had the chance to learn among themselves. The interaction created lifelong learning exposure which proved to be effective in creating personal development. In conclusion, it was found that networking forms a fundamental basis for start-up business success as it provides the bedrock for collaborations and the sharing of ideas that aids in the development of startups.

### INTRODUCTION

Networking is the lifeline of any start-up as it provides them with both tangible and intangible benefits. The creation of linkages that are mutually beneficial to the start-ups as well as the incubation hubs is essential. It is argued that the influence that social links play in idea development, the basis of the start-up and its success, is significant, given that people who engage in more social contacts are more likely to start enterprises (Bhagavatula et al., 2010). This is based also on the concept that start-ups with a large network are open to more ideas and that idea creation in the early stages may be aided by the support of others. There is an argument that entrepreneur social networks may encourage an orientation toward new business ventures, which influences the individual's inclination to start a firm as a start-up flanked by other start-up entrepreneurs (Baraldi et al., 2019). In practice, the influence of social ties on company ventures and idea production is frequently researched concerning incubation hubs.

Starting a new entrepreneurial venture and navigating through the various possibilities and difficulties that arise along the process can be difficult. Networking connections provide ideas, expertise, and materials, as well as customers, suppliers, collaboration partners, and competition. However, they represent both possibilities and threats for any start-up (Baraldi et al, 2019). In truth, no enterprise operates in a vacuum; rather, it requires several ties to originate, develop and sustain its business. In the same vein, a start-up cannot operate in isolation: it must make and exploit network linkages to thrive and grow. These linkages provide vital life support during its infancy and remain critical throughout the business's life cycle.

These networks enable the exchange of information about emerging markets, breakthroughs, and opportunities in a local area and help young businesses gain the formalized and non-formal skills necessary to be high-tech entrepreneurs (Stam and Spigel, 2017). Entrepreneurs must therefore understand and embrace digitalization to assist business growth

(Muzanenhamo and Rankhumise, 2022). Entrepreneurial and business connections make information transfer easier, enabling the effective allocation of labor, resources, and expertise. These relationships can be examined from a range of viewpoints, such as network structure, enterprise interconnectedness for the generation of new values, and the percentage of venture businesses working together through innovations in a particular region (Stam and van de Ven, 2019).

A lack of appropriate networking may lead to a loss at the very initial stages of the new enterprise and a prospective entrepreneur may struggle to make appropriate and useful contacts since the enterprise's potential, needs, and specifications are not known (Salamzadeh et al., 2017). Salamzadeh et al. (2017) further asserted that the entrepreneur may spend time on meaningless networking events, while proper networking may allow the intended person or entrepreneur to reach the market and verify the effectiveness of the idea or concept. Having a strong network is crucial for the development of entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial skills.

New start-ups that lack networking expertise prefer to use short-term orientation, do not participate in network-enhancing acts, or pursue operational advantages from their networks to reduce technical and start-up unknowns. On the other hand, new start-ups with good networks are driven by a long-term orientation as well as the network-enhancing act (Zheng et al, 2020). James (2018) opined that networking is effective in a wide variety of respects because not only can new business owners be inspired and energized after going to special events or gatherings but they can also be alerted to the many excellent open doors for their companies. The role of networking in supporting entrepreneurial ecosystems in start-up growth is therefore vital if they are to develop successfully.

A social network is a broad term for a collection of nodes or actors linked by social ties that connect people or businesses. How social actors build and use their connections to gain access to other social actors' resources and capabilities demonstrates the extent of sociocultural capital (Pillai and Ahamat, 2018). Social capital relates to resources that can be seen as tangible or intangible and are only accessible via social interactions.

These assets include information, concepts, and interpersonal support. The central meaning of social capital is based on the complex aspects of interpersonal relations and their outcomes and it is based on linkages that have varying degrees of interconnectivity, complexity, and range. The network approach recognizes the importance of both vertical and horizontal links between individuals, as well as relationships within and among community organizations and businesses (Pillai and Ahamat, 2018). Social capital often accumulates as a result of specific cultural features in the area, and the level of confidence, beliefs, and conventions in a given area may support the formation of social capital as well as the creation of newer entities (Nicotra et al, 2018). Interactions of intermediaries within and between ecosystems are commonly studied using the social network theory (Hayter 2016).

According to Hayter (2016), the social capital to which network connections are linked makes it possible for companies to access the technical, human, and financial resources required for spin-off growth and performance. Related ventures and angel investors are more inclined to partake in spin-offs they know or have been linked to by credible sources or shared network relations in which they have confidence. Theodoraki et al. (2018) distinguished expertise and business ecosystems as initiatives that help them connect to establish locally viable ecosystems. As a result, networks become critical for creating a competitive advantage in both expertise and business ecosystems. Academia plays an important role in knowledge ecosystems by promoting technology transfer.

In its social context, network theory recognizes three network dimensions in the entrepreneurship domain, namely, structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions each of which contributes to the activities of an ecosystem in its own right but works collaboratively to improve the ecosystem's overall efficiency and sustainability (Theodoraki et al., 2018). Each dimension is discussed in detail below.

The structural dimension, according to Rodrigo-Alarcón et al. (2018) refers to the firm's network of connections which includes the social interactions that are generated in the network while at the same time concentrating on the resources of the social system and network of interactions. The structural component is concerned with social

structure resources, which include various kinds of social organizations that comprise the society. In addition to boosting the possibility for trade, structural social capital enhances access to many parties for knowledge sharing and transmission (Claridge, 2018). Examples of such resources include ecosystem ties, ecosystem configurations, and ecosystem stability (Theodoraki et al., 2018).

Claridge (2018) notes that a kind of social capital known as cognitive social capital links resources that enable persons to share common representations, meanings, and understanding systems. A higher level of cognitive social capital facilitates a shared awareness of how to communicate, allowing network actors to avoid possible misunderstandings in communications. As a result, the higher the norms, goals, and shared culture, the more likely actors are to perceive valuable information and expertise and become innovative (Rodrigo-Alarcón et al. 2018). When it comes to mutual reality representations, the cognitive component is intangible. Cognitive social capital frequently manifests itself in the usage of distinctive jargon and codes. For instance, some terminology used within an enterprise could be distinctive yet have little meaning outside the company (Claridge, 2018). Cognitive social capital helps firms to comprehend outside information properly and eliminates misunderstandings. All this is attributed to common norms, priorities, and culture amongst factors. This boosts the firm's entrepreneurial orientation by encouraging activities like innovation and imagination as well as the propensity to be first to market with new ideas or goods and a positioning that maximizes the possibility of capitalizing on future opportunities (Rodrigo-Alarcón et al. 2018).

The substance and constancy of connections that have developed through time are called social capital (Claridge, 2018) and manifest themselves in behavioral characteristics like trustworthiness, common group norms, responsibilities, and identity. Relational social capital defines interpersonal trust, common norms, and identity with other people as well as the essence or consistency of networks or associations. Rodrigo-Alarcón et al. (2018) observed that when businesses trust each other, monitoring costs are minimized, allowing more time and resources to be spent on other things like creativity. Therefore, relational social capital

encourages innovation, learning, and imagination as well as the dissemination of new information that can enhance proactiveness when combined with prior knowledge. Some actors will be able to gain access to new knowledge and perceive entrepreneurial opportunities as well as resolve structural barriers in the entrepreneurial process and acquire access to important sources of critical information (Theodoraki et al., 2018). Other aspects of the relational dimension include norms, obligations, and identity.

Focusing on a structural dimension may strengthen resource accessibility and the ecosystem's optimal design, while concentrating on a cognitive dimension may strengthen relationships between ecosystem users. Finally, concentrating on a relational dimension can enable ecosystem participants to retain interconnectedness, trust, and purposeful involvement (Theodoraki et al., 2018).

Social network theory served as the foundation for this study's theoretical framework. Start-ups benefit from development initiatives because they assist them in forming support networks. The intricate ties developed between actors enable technical innovation and growth, consequently boosting the development process (Mahmood et al., 2019). The insight that comes with social network connections is extremely valuable to start-ups (Steiber 2020). The backing of the network is highly valued by start-up firms. The start-up's success is aided by the perspectives and advice of internal and external connections (Chen et al., 2017). External network alliances may assist start-ups in better responding to the market and achieving comparable economic benefits and advantages for start-ups (Karambakuwa and Bayat, 2022).

Networking is critical during incubation as it helps in the cross-pollination of ideas. Carvalho et al., (2018) noted that the networking process helps incubators to strengthen the network of start-ups; for example, by offering referrals or coordinating networking events (van Rijnsoever et al., 2017). Growth and development are driven by a close and economically rewarding working partnership between an incubator and the business (Olkiewicz et al. 2019). In their study of entrepreneurs under a mentorship program Hammoudeh and Benedek, (2019) found that workspace sharing, mentoring and networking were the main factors for start-up ventures' success in Jordan. They found that

entrepreneur networking provided several opportunities, and it was through networking that they would eventually gain clients, team members, and even investors. Therefore the purpose of this study is to validate the influence of networking on start-up development.

## **METHODS**

The study employed the qualitative research methodology. A qualitative technique can connect with individuals who do not often cooperate with the research, such as start-up enterprises at incubation centers. Incubated start-up firms in Harare were the study's target group. Respondents in the study were carefully chosen among start-ups that had undergone incubation, which is why the non-probability sampling technique was utilized to collect data. Data was gathered from the respondents through focus groups. The research used three focus groups selected from the databases of all start-ups that would have been through the incubation process. Each focus group had between six and eight participants from post-incubation start-ups based in Harare. Mishra (2016) and Plummer (2017) agreed that a focus group of six to eight participants excluding the researcher is ideal although focus groups can comprise as few as three and as many as 12 respondents. The study's primary research tool was the interview guide. During focus group interviews, more questions may be posed as prods or probes to elicit clarification. NVivo was used for data analysis. Data analysis helps the researcher to move from simply discussing the phenomenon to conceptualizing and abstracting themes based on the voice of the respondents (Ravindran, 2019).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The NVivo software was used to analyze data. The findings focused on networking in incubation hubs, the benefits, and how networking help to improve processes and learning.

### **Networking**

Networking was seen as a factor that eases the whole process thereby making the system work seamlessly. As start-ups network, they tend to develop better through the infusion of ideas and experiences. Networking in incubation hubs aided learning as incubates had the chance to learn among themselves. The interaction provided a lifelong

learning opportunity which proved to be effective in creating personal development throughout their careers. Collaborations can only succeed once start-ups start to network. The findings from the study are discussed in detail below.

### **Networking with start-up peers**

This sub-theme looks at the importance of networking with start-up peers. Networking with start-up peers was seen as important and informed by the following critical factors.

Sharing ideas and opportunities was the most highly ranked factor. Networking promoted sharing of business ideas and opportunities. People were able to brainstorm ideas and identify opportunities for each other. Resources could also be shared, and this could lead to the saving of money. This is backed by the responses shown below.

#### **Focus Group 1**

We were able to meet others with whom we still share opportunities. Networking has helped us to come up with new business ideas and innovations. This has helped us to find new opportunities and get new markets through others. We now market each other's products. Networking started when we were at the hub, but it has gone beyond that as we have now continued to meet and share business notes. During the training, we met individual start-ups who had already gone past the incubation process, and we are now in production. They would socialize with us on how they were faring in business and would give us advice on how to succeed in our start-ups.

#### **Focus Group 2**

Networks help you to know where to get the resources that you need for your business.

#### **Focus Group 3**

It has helped me to save money and money as well. I have saved money because there are certain opportunities that I am getting without paying for them and am now getting a lot of business through my networks.

The creation and success of start-ups rely heavily on networks and entrenched social capital. In entrepreneurial networks, three favorable forms of social capital, including historical links, similar aims, and facilitated networking, tend to promote the creation of tech start-ups (Scillitoe 2019). Providing network help to entrepreneurs to overcome challenging hurdles was determined to be the most common form of assistance activity.

According to Haneberg and Aaboen (2020), networking helps start-up businesses avoid major technological hurdles, and external players are vital to the incubation process's efficacy.

Collaboration and relationship-building were seen as important parts of networking. Collaboration fosters innovations, ideas, and solutions. It can also facilitate team-based relationships. This is reinforced by the following reactions from the focus groups.

#### **Focus Group 1**

It helped me with the skill of collaboration, that is, working together with others to achieve more in a win-win situation. We did networking through meetings, conferences, expositions, and virtual interactions through social networks. I was able to interact with international exhibitors. Some of us have been able to collaborate and come up with newer innovations. We now use social media platforms to interact.

#### **Focus Group 3**

Networking provides start-ups with a platform for collaborations even though you can still be committed to your start-up. We have managed to get a connection from the hub, and some mentored us. Being in an environment where we had others who shared the same vision as us, we were able to do collaborations and got market and business connections. Some of the companies we did not know have been uncovered to us through networking. Networking has also helped us to keep relationships with various presenters open and we have managed to keep in touch to date.

Sentiments of the respondents were shared by Akanle and Abraham (2017) who stated that sufficient support for incubation centers should be offered by the commercial and governmental sectors through collaborations to enhance space synergy and boost productivity. Networking and linkages may minimize the unpredictability of engagement and increase collaboration among start-up ventures due to local mindset, a system of production, and start-up center policies (Zhu et al. 2021). Collaboration positively influences the development of start-ups. Hubs must be managed through collaborative and competitive initiatives because they are important to their growth (Ogonda, 2020). Collaborations are important in the development of new products. No start-up can be entirely self-sufficient, and these synergies will help

start-up ventures to grow big by pooling resources together.

Networking could promote the development and sale of products between start-ups. This was through joint marketing and the sale of products. It also promotes the diversification of products as highlighted below.

#### **Focus Group 1**

We would network among ourselves and even go to business meetings together. Through networking, we were able to demonstrate and market our products with the support of the incubation center. I did poly-ethylene terephthalate (PET) bottle manufacturing and would always work hand-in-hand with those doing water purification at the hub.

I also had the chance to learn about soymilk production through networking with a business that I felt was also good for me. Through networking we met individuals who could help us in marketing our products, the exposure gave us insights into the potential of what was learned at the hub and the opportunities that were there which not known.

Networking has helped me in marketing my products. In my case, we assist each other in marketing each other's products. We have been able to know other incubates better and we share whatever opportunity comes in terms of business.

#### **Focus Group 2**

Networking has helped me to get new ideas to better my products and even got suggestions on how to better my products. We would market each other's products, and this has improved our reach as we now have so many marketers out there.

#### **Focus Group 3**

Through networking, I have been able to learn that I can improve my business through the segmentation of the products, and I now have packages.

Being able to make more money is critical. Networking helps in creating a better service for your customers. One can give value to customers through superior products and services. According to Shafiei and Modarres (2020), network marketing is an important concept that relies on the expansion of a range of distribution channels. Respondents noted that they used their peers to market their products which provided them with a wider sales network as well as access to the market. The product must, however, be marketable.

When people come together to network, solutions to problems can be found. One can learn from others how to do certain things or to find a way around problems. This is noted in the responses below.

#### **Focus Group 2**

Networking has helped us to be successful in developing solutions to the challenges that we would face, something that I could not do on my own before enrolment at the hub. Networking is very critical in start-up businesses. This helps you in that you know people who know certain things that you do not know.

#### **Focus Group 3**

I am into the design, and I have designed several websites which is functional product. So as people access the website, they may get interested in it, and this has improved my business. Networking helped me to get different ideas on certain aspects that I wanted to know, and the results were amazing.

Through networking, you will get a lot of business insights and it opens and corrects your business model. I had the opportunity to know about intellectual property rights through networking. I did not have many skills in information technology and online networking helped me to link up with other people. I was able to link up with others outside the country and with data we were able to work from home. With my team, we were able to brainstorm, throw questions and get answers at the same time.

Accordingly, Klaasa and Thawesaengskulthai (2018) agreed that partnership networks are critical for linking the start-up to its internal and external networks, allowing for the exchange of ideas and discussions about collaboration or investment with people like alumni, industry experts, and marketers. Successful teams, according to research, must have complementary skill sets and a variety of methods to boost creativity (Kalyanasundaram, 2018). When a group lacks diverse viewpoints, determining an optimal market fit is challenging.

Prospective customers came through referrals. Referrals create links and connections in the business that help start-ups to grow and act as a strong recommendation to a prospective customer; hence, business thrives in that way as expressed below.

#### **Focus Group 1**

Once I identify an opportunity, I can refer someone to a fellow incubated and we normally use calls, meetings, and of late group chats through platforms like WhatsApp and Zoom.

#### **Focus Group 2**

Through networking, we would get new business, get new customers through referrals, and myself referring certain customers to my peers.

#### **Focus Group 3**

At the hub we would also collaborate, find connections and at times we would get referrals coming from those that were with us for business or opportunities. Networking helped me to get clients. I was able to get customers, and some would come as referrals.

The views shared above were supported by Kaul (2021) who noted that when it comes to marketing a start-up, having similar experience and knowledge may assist since it improves communication. Incubatees would assist each other to find business in their network. This collaboration played a critical role in getting new business opportunities. People could also share past experiences, which is good for start-ups in enhancing their business skills. Start-ups learn a lot through such interaction.

#### **Focus Group 2**

Knowing my peers at the hubs was most critical as we would share even past experiences. Conferences and platforms became strong platforms for networking and knowledge exchange.

#### **Focus Group 1**

There is one entrepreneurship conference that I attended, and I think it provided me with the best platform to network. It is called the Zimbabwe Entrepreneurship Economic Conference (ZEEC) and it is done annually but because of Covid-19 lockdowns, the conference has not been held since 2019.

#### **Focus Group 2**

There are certain opportunities, meetings or forums, and expos that we learn through networking with my peers. Networking with peers allowed people to work together on projects and connect with like-minded people or people with similar interests.

### **Focus Group 1**

Networking has made us more of a single-family where we have accepted each other, and we are working together.

### **Focus Group 2**

We could communicate with others who shared our views. At the hub, we would network among ourselves by discussing our businesses and I feel that was important because this was done in an environment that was free and open.

### **Focus Group 3**

The informal meeting created good platforms for networking. We were able to understand each other informally in an environment that was open and suitable for discussions. Networking also allowed participants to streamline business processes and determine what could be improved or outsourced.

### **Focus Group 3**

Networking improves business processes and I now know people who can do certain things. I can outsource certain processes from my networks in the hub knowing very well the product and expertise they possess and that way it helps to build valuable products.

Networking allowed people to tap into each other's competencies and expertise. It helped us to organize ourselves as incubators as we could share a lot. Some of us wanted to form new companies, tapping into our areas of expertise. Networking built confidence by allowing thoughts to be shared with peers first.

### **Focus Group 2**

Networking improved my confidence in doing business as I was no longer shy to share my thoughts with my peers. Networking also allowed one to see things differently through the eyes of peers.

### **Focus Group 2**

Your peers help you to see certain things differently as they tell you to improve on certain things that you take for granted but are very useful. My mind was stimulated to view certain things differently because of the discussions we made with my peers.

A start-up may not know how to contact each network such as where to source funding or which technology may help them realize their vision and, as a result, the start-up incubator should serve as a network hub where start-up entrepreneurs connect

with the right people (Klaasa and Thawesaengskulthai, 2018). Each entrepreneur needs unique incubation services such as training, coaching, networking, and advice which are then provided by the hub to improve entrepreneurs' business processes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Understanding the value of networking in incubation hubs was made possible by the research. It was found that through networking, start-ups were able to leverage relationships for the success of the business. Networking provided a range of opportunities that could not be accessed without the assistance of others. Meeting like-minded start-ups created an environment that enhanced communication and boosted the confidence of the incubates. It is critical to note that the sharing of ideas among peers was found to be fundamental in the sense that it broadened the understanding that peers had on certain issues. It can safely be concluded that incubation hubs should create time slots that allow incubates to share and interact as this proved to be useful in the success of the incubation programs.

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