

Canadian Ecosystem Gathering

Discussion Highlights and Key Takeaways

2019

Canadian Ecosystem Gathering

In collaboration with Startupfest and the Secrétariat du Québec aux relations canadiennes (SQRC), Mangrove brought together 34 leaders from 13 cities across 6 provinces throughout Canada to participate in the first Canadian Ecosystem Gathering. Together, the participants discussed collaboration between innovative ecosystems across the country.

After a short portrait of Canada's entrepreneurial ecosystem by Startup Canada and a case example of collaborations inside an ecosystem by Bonjour Startup Montreal, the leaders were divided into three discussion groups.

This document is a collection of the different elements that were discussed.



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We hope you enjoy the read!

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What is collaboration all about, and how is it relevant?

Collaboration is about connection

Building bridges between people, companies, cities and different actors of diverse ecosystems

Core idea that we can do more together than we can do apart

Collaboration needs an open and positive mindset

Sharing with each other, rather than competing against each other

There is no cost or risk to collaborating, since each actor brings something important to the table

Accepting that you cannot do everything alone and allowing others to fill in the gaps, a partnership where one complements the other

Collaboration to help entrepreneurs

Empowering entrepreneurs and giving them the tools to be more successful

Collaboration is not only relevant but necessary for startups to succeed

It gives startups access to expertise and resources, and it helps them develop, expand and build company ownership

It helps break down barriers and challenges to entrepreneurship, it offers entrepreneurs the information and resources necessary for their success

What does a good collaboration look like?

Collaborating for the right reasons and with the right people makes for a “win-win situation”

- This is what came up the most often in all the discussion groups!

Wanting to give rather than take

- Every discussion group mentioned this!
- Building an altruistic relationship, where everyone involved wants to bring in value
- Each organization is founded by individuals who have specific interests in mind, so it is important to know your collaborators intentions

Valuing communication & meeting in real life

- Every discussion group mentioned this!
- Collaboration means to share your plans and to partner up, it's an open book and an open network
- Openly sharing information and knowledge is vital

Shared vision, shared benefits

- Every discussion group mentioned this!
- Share a “North Star”: It is central to have a shared purpose, a common interest and to have every collaborating actor work toward a mutual goal
- Make collaborations based on what you want to achieve in common
- See the “big picture”: Identify your organization's needs and pursue pertinent partnerships to build connections that are high value for everyone involved
- Remember that it is not all about the money, it is about educating each other — everyone needs to learn and has room to grow
- That way, mutual benefits can emerge from the collaboration

Building a trust relationship

- At the end of the day, it is about human relationships — identify partners to whom you can relate and with whom you want to work
- In a good collaboration, each actor feels fulfilled and valued
- Work with like-minded people and organizations, allow yourself to form organic collaborations instead of going after partnerships with the organizations with whom you think you are supposed to work — the biggest player in the game will not necessarily be the best partner for you
- Keeping in mind that collaboration goes both ways, it is an equal-to-equal relationship no matter who are the actors involved
- Get to know your partner well: share strengths and weaknesses, good practices and challenges

Valuing the community

- Seeing the potential impact of a collaboration on the community can be a good way to form partnerships and generate new ideas
- It is important to be community-driven in the collaboration's vision and strategy
- It is key for startups to connect with organizations such as incubators and accelerators who know their community well

What does a bad collaboration look like and what are some barriers to collaborating?

When actors of the ecosystem act too competitively, it makes for a bad collaboration

- Every discussion group mentioned this!
- “Pulling on the blanket on one side, instead of sharing the blanket”
- Having a tunnel vision for your own success
- Seeing the partnership as a zero-sum game, as if there were a winner and a loser
- Mindset of wanting to take rather than give
- Selfish attitude towards the collaboration
- Self-interest rather than mutual interest

Barriers to a good collaboration

- Lack of a common vision, objective, and strategy — it can happen when the actors did not discuss the collaboration in detail before jumping in
- Wanting to follow your goals without compromising
- Wanting to go fast without stopping to think about or listen to your partner’s needs — If you are only looking for speed, maybe you should not collaborate

There is a danger to over-collaborating

- Over-collaborating can create a certain “groupthink” which can turn what could have been an open collaborative spirit into a negative mindset and non-cooperative actions
- Over-applying common best practices could strip you of your own individuality and uniqueness, which are central to your success

What does collaboration look like in the Canadian Ecosystem?

There are specific challenges in the Canadian context

- Every discussion group mentioned this!
- Mobility issue: when it is cheaper to fly to Europe than to the other side of the country, it becomes hard to meet with other actors within the country
- Organization issue: Canada has a sum of local or provincial ecosystems, but lacks a common ecosystem
- Mentality issue: Startups and companies usually compete to succeed rather than collaborate to succeed
 - Collaboration needs to be perceived as a need
 - It should be more about cooperation and not about competition
- Government issue: opposing interests, lack of understanding of startup challenges & lack of patience regarding the outcomes of their investment and funding initiatives
 - From a provincial government point of view, there can be political barriers to collaboration since each province and each actor of the ecosystem has specific interests; balancing sometimes opposing interests can be complicated from a government position
- Investor and Venture Capital issue: they are hard on startups regarding Return on Investment, there is a cash in/cash out mentality
- Country-wide differences: provinces and cities are very different (geographically, culturally, socio-economically, language-wise...) – it can be hard to understand others realities and issues, which poses a challenge to collaboration within Canada
 - Example: DigiHub Shawinigan does a lot of collaboration within Quebec, but also with certain cities in France not only because a lot of their startups are already global, but also because of the language barrier which makes it harder for some startups to collaborate with the rest of Canada than with French-speaking countries and cities
- Market size issue: the Canadian market is very small – that is the main reason why actors should collaborate to succeed rather than compete to succeed
- Thinking small issue: there is a will to keep innovation and jobs in each province and in Canada
 - There is a sense of competition between cities and between provinces, which keeps companies from thinking global
 - Example: Rimouski has a cluster that attracts smaller nearby cities and helps these cities economically, however this cluster also needs to develop more outside and global partnerships. Looking too much on the inside can make your ecosystem focus too much on the local or regional level, losing sight of the startups' needs and hindering their expansion

But these challenges should not and do not keep Canadians from collaborating

- Every discussion group mentioned this!
- Language issues and other socio-cultural divisions within Canada can be perceived an extra cost to collaboration, but there are great opportunities to overcoming these barriers and working together, collaborating within the country
- Collaboration is particularly relevant for Canadian companies, since it is such a small country in terms of population
- Collaboration is about being “team Canada” and expanding together, rather than competing among ourselves
 - The government is starting to understand the complexity of issues around startups and willing to evolve in their thoughts to be more active when dealing with entrepreneurship, inter-provincial collaboration and the need for global expansion for Canadian companies and for Canada as a whole
 - Canada has more free trade agreements than any Western countries, so there are real opportunities to going global
 - We need companies that expand nationally and globally right from the start, for startups to succeed and for Canadian companies to be known internationally

Some cases of successful collaboration in Canada

- **Next AI: finding a place in the larger Canadian ecosystem and achieving collaboration between cities**
 - Specialized area of expertise
 - Focus on creating a network between Canada's main artificial intelligence ecosystems: Toronto and Montreal
- **SOPER: different levels of collaboration & successful project-driven collaboration**
 - Collaboration with: Stratégie maritime du Québec, Port de Montréal, Port de Québec, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Canada's Ocean Supercluster...
 - Collaboration on a case-by-case basis: they do not limit their activities to a specific sector and services are customized depending on the collaborating actors – relationships built on unique projects
 - Project-driven collaboration is interesting because everyone has a different way of working, so if partners focus on a specific project it can go smoothly
- **Accelerate Okanagan: building successful collaborations based on best practices**
 - Mindset of not wanting to “reinvent the wheel”, but rather learning from others' experiences
 - They mainly choose to collaborate with entities that have already successfully collaborated with other accelerators, taking successful best practices and adapting them to their specific needs
- **Platform Calgary: the value of bringing in external resources**
 - Sharing mentors, experts and coaches to educate startups and accelerators on key aspects of business
 - Participation in training programs offered to different accelerators and startups, which helps them develop a common language and vocabulary when collaborating – a level set facilitates collaboration for everyone involved
- **The Memorial Center for Entrepreneurship: bringing concrete work to the table**
 - They offer help to student entrepreneurs who want to pitch their startups and offer them pre-incubation support
 - Also, they expose these entrepreneurs to real corporate market issues and learn on the field by sending student entrepreneurs to successful companies
- **Further examples of successful resource sharing collaboration**
 - Espace CDPQ brings together 15 Venture Capital firms which are all supposed to be competitors, but choose to share resources and expertise to benefit startups and entrepreneurs
 - SOPER has an innovative initiative where companies participate in joint projects to get joint funding and to be able to expand further together

There are resources available in Canada to encourage entrepreneurship and support startups

- **Accelerator Summit: event across Canada and globally for resource-sharing and best practice sharing**
- **Accelerator fest: a part of Startupfest**
- **There's an accelerator program from the Canada Board of Trade, they work with different cities to share best practices**
- **Startup Canada: a nationwide organization and community**
 - Startup Canada nurtures collaborations from industry, culture, language...
 - Mindset that people are willing to contribute and deliver value
 - They foster the development of organic relationships, not forced ones: organizing annual meetings and supporting relevant connections
- **However, the composition of the ecosystem is a main issue, it can be complicated to know whom you have to call and how you can get to them – everyone needs references to know whom to work with, and people need to know about the events and resources available to them in order to participate and benefit from it**
 - Startup Canada works to be this connector that understands different realities from different ecosystems and to be able to form the right connections
 - It is also important to map out the ecosystems to know what is out there and in here to be able to create the right connections: on a more local note, Bonjour Startup Montréal has the vision of fulfilling this role

What are some concrete actions that can improve collaboration?

Communicate & meet in person

- Every discussion group mentioned this!
- Setting up regular meetings within ecosystems and with the larger Canadian ecosystem to share news, best practices, resources and opportunities, and to open the discussion
 - Example: The Calgary Innovation Coalition brings together 30 to 40 organizations which are all pushing towards the same goal — they sit together to share in quarterly meetings, some of which are tactical meetings where they collaborate on concrete solutions to issues such as funding, and some of which are strategic meetings to elaborate a shared vision that is always evolving

Enhance transparency & open collaboration

- Every discussion group mentioned this!
- Collaborating can be easy because people like to share, but measuring collaboration can be difficult
 - Sharing Key Performance Indicators can help guide the strategy in a collaboration and surpass the challenge of measuring collaboration
- “Let’s open the gates”: sharing data about ecosystem mapping and news can help key actors save time and resources, and it can help them get the correct and valuable information that they need to move forward
 - The ecosystem moves and changes very fast, it is not static mapping of the ecosystem needs to be agile, online and ongoing; it needs to put startups and entrepreneurs in the middle of the conversation so, data-sharing and collaboration is necessary
 - Idea of sharing the same canvas to put together and enhance existing mappings and make one big mapping for instance, through a collaboration between Startup Canada, Bonjour Startup Montréal, and other localities

For example, the Town of Innisfil Economic Development is mapping out their ecosystem and will be launching a detailed visual and description on their website; however, much can be gained by sharing information and knowledge in an open way as to create a more efficient canvas

Be community-driven & build from the ground up

- Ask yourself what is best for the community when building a common vision and strategy for a collaboration
- Share with and listen to the community, form bonds with the community
- Invest in relationships with community leaders
 - Remember that leaders influence, but influencers do not necessarily lead
- Develop bottom-up or grassroots initiatives
 - Example: the BC Accelerator Program is a successful fund for startups that started as a community-based initiative, and then the government joined in after

Ask for help

- Desperate people can also talk to each other — you cannot be afraid to ask for support and advice if you want to move forward
- Interconnectivity is key to a good collaborative network
- Ecosystem mapping and organizations that support entrepreneurs have very important roles to fulfill
 - The government’s role is to make sure to give entrepreneurs the information on what grants and funding are available to them
 - Sometimes companies are hesitant to ask for help, the reaching out part is often reactionary after negative experiences but this needs to change

Be aware of your ecosystem & find your place

- Stay up-to-date on what is going on, be informed about ecosystem mappings
 - If other actors are already doing something, you should not be in the business of doing the same exact thing — complement rather than compete
 - It is important for each actor to know their individuality and to try and keep it alive, instead of trying to blindly following trends or best practices
- Accept that you cannot do everything, so specialize and form connections that complement your organization
- There needs to be a balance between macro ecosystem mapping and the “going for it” aspect where ecosystem actors partner up in exciting projects
 - It is important to know your ecosystem, but an “action-packed” collaboration project can succeed, and it can bring new interesting data to the table

Partner up strategically: Look for partners that are different from you as an actor, that can complement you and teach you but also learn from you

- Collaborate internationally when relevant
 - Bring in expats where their specific expertise is needed, build global teams
 - Participate in exchange programs for startups to extend knowledge, partners and market
 - Build diverse teams: diversity can counteract a certain groupthink and over-collaboration, bringing new perspectives to the table
- Do not collaborate for the sake of collaborating, but try and form long-lasting partnerships when there is a common goal and a shared interest
- Know when it is time to collaborate and when it is time to work on your own — partnerships are only valuable when and where they are relevant and necessary
 - Sometimes on your own it is easier to work hard and focus on the goals, to move faster
 - Timing is important

Think in decades, long time horizon

- If you want to go fast go alone, but if you want to be more successful work in a team
- If you run a marathon you need to pace yourself in the same way, partnerships and collaborations are long-term and need to be nurtured
- It can take longer depending on who you are working with (e.g. the government), so it is important to

understand the process and appreciate it to work with other people, you must accept common terms

Especially for incubators and accelerators: Create opportunities

- Have your default answer be “Yes”
- Be more open to every kind of entrepreneur, since entrepreneurship should be more accessible and encouraged
- This will help you find the “diamond in the rough”

Try to balance looking inside and looking outside in terms of collaboration

- Know what’s happening within your ecosystem to build relevant partnerships within, but also know what’s happening outside your ecosystem to build relevant partnerships with outside and to expand globally
- Keep in mind what is best for your ecosystem and community

Think outside the box & be flexible

- Going to certain meetups that may seem obscure can be a challenge, but it can develop into a great opportunity
 - Be open-minded to new collaborations, consider different partners out of the mainstream
 - Be curious to see what is out there, build relationships with people whom you do not already know
 - You never know it in advance when a connection will develop to become a great relationship
- Accept to change your course if that is the best choice
 - Example: Platform Calgary is constantly reassessing their strategy and changing their mandate, they engage with the entrepreneurs and talk about the common issues to make their accelerator service more efficient

Key takeaways

Collaboration in the context of the Canadian Ecosystem is about connection, a positive mindset and helping entrepreneurs

A collaboration is good when:

- It is a win–win situation for every actor of the ecosystem involved
- It benefits the community
- It is built on a shared vision and a common objective among partners
- It is a trust–based relationship that is about giving rather than taking

A collaboration is bad when:

- The organizations involved act too competitively

Collaboration in Canada means:

- Specific barriers that can be overcome when actors come together to expand jointly

Concrete actions to improve collaboration include:

- Communicate regularly
- Openly share experiences and data
- Form relevant and strategic partnerships for long–term success