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Innovation That Won't Break the Bank

Daryl-Lynn Carlson, Financial Post

The success of a small business often depends on its ability to innovate and advance. Yet the sheer time commitment needed to find means to move a business forward can be an onerous imposition, never mind the cash investment.

So when Jesse Moeinifar realized his Web-based company, WhoTheMan.com, needed to develop a new unique technology, he turned to the Innovation Synergy Centre in Markham (ISCM). WhoTheMan.com enables sports fans to log on the Web to interact and debate about players and timely developments in their favourite game. But a year after launching, Mr. Moeinifar recognized improvements were required.

"We quickly realized our company was falling behind on the technology and we needed to develop that," he says. "As an entrepreneur, there are not enough hours in a day and every dollar counts, so I wanted to find the most cost effective way of going about this."

The ISCM is a not-for-profit business advisory service provided to small businesses free of charge. Funded by Town of Markham, The National Research Council and the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation, the centre helps entrepreneurs identify grant programs and resources to help with research and development initiatives.

Through the ISCM, Mr. Moeinifar's company obtained funding to develop what he calls a "relevancy engine" to properly connect fans to their favourite topics. A computer sciences student from Ryerson University is working with the company to implement the technology. "This technology will take us to the next level and I'm sure it will set us apart from our competition," Mr. Moeinifar says.

Investing in innovation is a priority for most businesses, says Paul Rivett, chief liaison for ISCM's research and development partnering team. However, he acknowledges it's usually an expense that is one of the first to be cut during a soft economy.

"One way to stand out is through promotion but really at the end of the day, to stand out is to have a superior product or service and that takes a lot of effort, innovation and ingenuity, and that often involves an aspect of R&D."

While the term "research and development" can be intimidating, many innovations or solutions that can be implemented to advance a small business are quite straight forward, Mr. Rivett says. "You're not expected to see the results get published in a peer review scientific magazine."

Recently, upward of 40% of ISCM's clients have been entrepreneurs under the age of 35. "They've either been laid off or they're not happy at work, so they're looking to create an opportunity," he says.

Many Canadian universities have programs for small businesses to get assistance from students studying for a master's degree in business, technology or a related field.

The largest and longest-standing program of its kind, the Ivey Connects Program (ICP) at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont., places students with companies ranging in size from multi-national conglomerates to family-run ventures to assist with research and development. Students are coached on their work at a participating company by 15 former chief executives who volunteer with the program.

"We want the students to be challenged and thought about by the client as professionals," says Gerry Higgins, who headed the program for years before leaving last month to run KMW Energy Inc., a company he founded that produces cutting-edge biomass technology.

Western University's Faculty of Law this summer announced its partnership with the ICP to provide a pro-bono service through which law students will advise not-for-profit organizations on legal matters. "Many issues faced by non-profit organizations are complex and involve business and legal aspects," says Avneet Grewal, co-ordinator of Pro Bono Students Canada at Western Law. "By combining our expertise, we are able to offer a unique service to non-profit organizations that assists them with both their business and legal needs."

Beginning this fall, as many as 24 law students will be involved in the program.