

Innovation Teams Incubation Model

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Organisation: Natural Resources Canada

Country: Canada

Level of government: Central government

Sector: General public services

Type: Methods, Organisational Design, Public Service

Launched in: 2015

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Description

The Innovation Hub at Natural Resources Canada, IN.spire, has created a model for developing entire innovation teams within an innovation hub. These teams are effectively start-ups whose development timeline is accelerated under IN.spire's umbrella. Once incubated teams are fully operational, delivering results under a self-sustaining model, they are transferred to a partnering business line owner. As the umbrella organization, IN.spire's role is to provide incubated teams with quick access to a network of champions and supporters, just-in-time access to talent and resources, and protection from day to day bureaucracy that can limit innovation. Through these teams, IN.spire is able to expand reach of its lessons learned, human and technological resources, and culture across Canada's federal public service.

The incubation model is unique in terms of its structural design. Many teams that are successful in their mandate continue to grow until they are large enough to create spin-off teams. Spin-offs are predominantly smaller versions of the original team providing similar services as the parent entity. With the incubation model the core IN.spire team does not grow - the team hasn't grown at all since its original launch with 5 people - but the team still responds to organizational priorities. The incubation model is also unique in that it addresses a persistent challenge for the innovation community: - Should we focus on fixing culture or concentrate on business drivers to demonstrate relevance? - Should we set a team away from bureaucracy or stay embedded in the existing corporate structures where teams are closer to those they serve?

Why the innovation was developed

- The incubation model was developed for one simple reason: it's hard to innovate in government.
- The public sector is a huge, intertwined corporate entity with an entrenched culture. Those working in the system are subject to policies that govern everything from huge expenditures of public funds to the minutia of everyday. Mandates, employees and information are siloed. The list of challenges goes on - this makes it hard to get meaningful buy-in for new ideas, and even harder to advance through the process of responsible testing, sustainable growth and full implementation.
- Incubation is distinct from the traditional approach, where new teams working on priority areas would be set up independently, and struggle through start up challenges like logistic support, mandate clarity, staffing, achieving early wins, etc.

Objectives

Develop staff capacity, Improve effectiveness, Improve efficiency, Improve service quality, Improve user satisfaction, Other

- Increase innovation capacity in government

Main beneficiaries

General population, Government bodies, Government staff

Results

Efficiency

- The incubation model has yielded top quality, highly influential projects and teams, growing them from concept to sustainably independent entities in a very short time.
 - The first incubated team, ADAPT, was added in June 2015, shortly after IN.spire's first anniversary. ADAPT began turning out results just a few months into its mandate. ADAPT is expected to be fully operational and independent by March 2017.
 - The second team, Free Agents, was added in October 2015, with the program operational to recruit talent into the program by January 2016. Based on the success of the program's first cohort, Free Agents is moving to recruit its second cohort of talent in September 2016. The program is expected to be fully operational and independent by January 2017.
 - Capture.Canada is the most recent incubated team, and was added to IN.spire in January 2016. The app is being co-developed with many partners, and is expected to be publicly released in early 2017.
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Effectiveness

- Incubated teams boot up faster and have a higher level of impact sooner than traditional approaches, which create new teams in isolation under respective business line owners.
 - In its first year of operation, the incubation model has produced three teams - each of which is consider a government-wide leader in its field.
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Service quality

Accessibility:

- Leveraging IN.spire's broad network and communications tools, information and products produced by incubated teams are designed for inclusive consumption and reach a wide audience early on. This in turn increases uptake and dissemination of the products across a wide range of government departments.
- Incubated teams work together to create mutually reinforcing messaging. For example, Free Agents promote the policy instrument choice portal developed by ADAPT to increase and accelerate the uptake of new policy instruments in the many locations where Free Agents work across government.
- The reach, outward communications and end-user input associated with this model is significantly higher than the alternative model - a few individual teams, newly created low down in the organizational structure, trying independently to advance their agendas.

Responsiveness:

- The work of IN.spire's core and incubated teams responds directly to an innovation imperative in the Government of Canada - a need to radically reimagine how the public service operates. As a result of the incubation model and the hard work of all involved, the IN.spire ecosystem is able to respond quickly as priorities shift and new data is gathered. This leads to maximum flexibility without compromising delivery of results.

Reliability:

- To date, the incubation model has produced three teams, and each has established itself as a government-wide leader in its field.
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User satisfaction

- Demand for incubated team support has increased from business line owners as the incubated teams have matured. . For the Free Agents team- even unsuccessful applicants have followed-up to express appreciation for the process and promoting the concept. Responsible executives have been thrilled with the results, and communicate the work of the incubated teams liberally.

Development

Design

The idea for incubating entire teams in IN.spire was generated by the IN.spire team during a session where the team was trying to grapple with competing demands from three areas: - Requests for help from other departments that exceeded IN.spire's capacity (and diverted attention from the team's primary mandate to serve Natural Resources Canada) - The long list of signature projects already underway that needed advancing - Valuable project areas where there was a clear need, but the team had no more capacity to pursue (e.g. policy innovation) The team began to ask itself, "What if a new innovation team could skip all the bureaucratic and operational hurdles associated with IN.spire's first year and instead put all efforts into advancing its primary target? What if a team that was only a few months old could deliver as though it was a fully fledged, streamlined innovation team with years under its belt?"

Testing

- IN.spire ran a single pilot of an incubated team (ADAPT), and then proceed to add an additional two teams, one at a time.
 - Each incubated team explored a new priority area, and all are developing slowly but surely away from core team towards self-sufficiency.
 - Hard costs for the first incubated team pilot included the salary for a single project lead, a desk, laptop and phone. Onboarding took under one month, and core team support requirements fluctuated from a few days a week to no support at all during the first 4-months. Primarily, the major investment was trust and willingness to take risks.
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Implementation

Tools used:

- IN.spire uses a Concept Development Map based on human-centered design principles to advance its projects. When the incubation model was developed, it followed this process. IN.spire uses a combination of basic apps and technologies to track progress on projects and gather input from end users (e.g. Google Forms, Poll Everywhere, Slack, Lean Kit). The incubated teams use a similar process and technologies to advance each team's priorities.
- Co-location of the core team and incubated teams was also an important implementation factor. Access to IN.spire's space ensured that the incubated teams had an effective place to work, and proximity to core team to facilitate collaboration, knowledge and staff sharing.

Resources used:

- The incubation model relies primarily on creating a cultural and philosophical umbrella under which fledgling teams can flourish. While the operational implications of this draw some time and energy from the core team, the incubated teams contribute this back through shared effort on projects. As a result, the incubation model is effectively cost neutral for the host team compared to the status quo model where a team grows to support new functions. For the business line owner that will absorb incubated teams, this model significantly reduces opportunity costs as the incubated teams get to a state of value production faster than traditionally established teams.
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Challenges and solutions

- Over the course of the past year, each of the incubated teams and the core team faced staffing and financial challenges associated with start-ups, exacerbated by broader financial constraints experienced across the department.
 - The teams have also struggled inside Natural Resources Canada to secure stable long-term mandates, with corresponding positions in the department's organizational structure. As individual teams, these situations would almost certainly have caused the early failure of each of the incubated teams, and possibly the collapse of core team. But the incubation model allowed the teams to work together to solve issues, sharing talent and resources to advance priorities during crucial periods for each of the teams.
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Partnerships

Multiple partners

Other Public Sector

IN.spire has two primary types of partnerships - departmental experts and business line owners. When IN.spire or it's incubated teams take on a new project, departmental subject matter experts (e.g. HR, program design, science-policy integration, etc.) are involved in the design process from the very beginning. If the project involves transfer to a business line owner or has been initiated as a request from a business line owner, the business line owner is a key part of the project development process.

IN.spire's incubation model relies on a full partnership with business line owners, who assume shared costs and risks associated with the incubated teams. For example, IN.spire's first incubated team - ADAPT - was co-designed as a concept by IN.spire and the Strategic Policy and Results Sector

(SPRS) at Natural Resources Canada. The business driver - policy innovation - clearly fell within the mandate of SPRS, but IN.spire had the culture, technology and networks to quickly advance the work. IN.spire recruited the talent, which was approved by SPRS prior to offers being finalized. ADAPT's operating costs in its first year were absorbed by IN.spire, with salary for ADAPT covered by SPRS.

Lessons Learned

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- A well developed core team with an open, collaborative culture is a necessary prerequisite for the model to succeed.
 - The core team must also be strong and stable enough to absorb additional responsibilities and people without being pulled off course or overwhelmed; in the incubation model, the core team must remain focused on their mandate and able to deliver.
 - Collocation is a key ingredient to the success of the incubation model. By working shoulder to shoulder, the incubated teams and the core team build effective working relationships that result in strategic alignment in their work, and just-in-time sharing of knowledge and resources.
 - Also, access to a productive and inspiring workspace (we love our writable walls, big shared table and mobile desks) supports the production of high-quality work.
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Conditions for success

- An acute need by a business line owner to advance thinking or introduce a new function
- Leadership willing to take risks and give up a bit of control for the promise of a timely return on investment
- A stable core team with a strong team culture, trust and permission to operate and iterate; and capable leads for the incubated teams.

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