Boston's Innovation District Cultivating a Culture of Entrepreneurship

MAY 21, 2012

*November Congress of Cities to Spotlight Boston's Success*

by J. Katie McConnell

In January 2010, as Mayor Thomas M. Menino began his fifth consecutive term as Boston's mayor, he launched a new approach to spur economic development along the city's waterfront. The mayor called for a strategy that was more deliberate and experimental to create jobs, provide housing opportunities and build upon the city's many assets.

Coined the "Innovation District," this new model is designed to foster collaboration among firms to drive productivity, especially among start-ups and research-based companies.

City leaders will have the opportunity to see the new model first hand during NLC's Congress of Cities Exposition which will be held in November at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center, right in the heart of the Innovation District.

The conference will offer a range of learning and networking opportunities including mobile tours highlighting successful programs from the city of Boston, including the Innovation District.

"The Innovation District and Boston itself are giant invitations to start something new, create jobs, collaborate and change the world," said Menino. "I look forward to showcasing this new district and our entire city to the National League of Cities in 2012."

Much of the Innovation District's success hinges on attracting entrepreneurs to the area; the major draw is the many networking, accelerator and support opportunities located in one place. For example, MassChallenge, a global start-up accelerator and competition offers 125 finalists access to three months of free office space in the Innovation District, mentors, workshops and cash prizes totaling $1 million. This year's MassChallenge has attracted applications from 1,237 start-ups from 36 U.S. states and 35 countries, a 69 percent increase from 2011.

In addition to MassChallenge, the Innovation District offers a number of other accelerators, incubators and co-working spaces to provide working areas and support systems to a variety of fledgling start-ups - from non-profits to clean-tech to a microbrewery.
There is a culture of entrepreneurship that is bubbling up in the district, and it's being supported by the City of Boston. The mayor has communicated a vision for the area and is its number one public champion; he routinely attends entrepreneurial events, demonstrating his support for entrepreneurs and startups. The city also uses the Innovation District website, blog and active Twitter feed to promote the Innovation District and to connect space-seekers with the incubators. Additionally, staff from the city and the Boston Redevelopment Authority frequently meet with new companies to introduce them to the Innovation District and relay the mayor's vision for the area.

The success of Boston's Innovation District becomes evident in the numbers. Currently home to 33,000 jobs and generating over $10 billion towards the city's gross product, the Innovation District has attracted 100 new businesses adding 3,000 new jobs to the area since January 2010.

The district has also attracted large, growing companies, like Vertex Pharmaceuticals, whose new headquarters will reportedly house 2,000 employees.

Recently, plans for a $5.5 million innovation center came online. The center which will be managed by Kendal Square's Cambridge Innovation Center, will provide additional space for entrepreneurs to network, test new concepts and showcase innovative businesses and ideas.

Details: For more information and to register for the Congress of Cities, visit [www.nlccongressofcities.org](http://www.nlccongressofcities.org).

This article was adapted from a case study featured in NLC Center for Research and Innovation's recent publication, *Supporting Entrepreneurship and Small Business: A Tool Kit for Local Leaders*. 
2011 PUBLIC OFFICIALS OF THE YEAR

The Mechanics  
Nigel Jacob and Chris Osgood  
Co-Chairs, Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics, City of Boston

When it comes to government innovation -- especially during tough times -- some of the best ideas come from thinking small. That’s the notion behind the Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics, a unique Boston IT agency focused on finding innovative ways to deliver services and increase citizen engagement. It’s like an in-house R&D shop for the city, and the two-person team that leads the office -- Nigel Jacob (left) and Chris Osgood -- says that a flexible focus on micro-projects is key. Most of the projects cost about $10,000, which may be subsidized through a combination of city operations funds and contributions from nonprofit and private partners. “In order to get these products up and running as quickly as possible and start showing value as quickly as possible, we try to make them as bite-sized as possible,” Jacob says.

But Jacob and Osgood’s small-scale focus has yielded big results. Their signature product, a maintenance-request app called Citizens Connect, has been downloaded more than 16,000 times and replicated in more than 20 countries since it was launched in 2009.

Osgood, an urban policy guy with a Harvard MBA, and Jacob, a Canadian IT developer, both started as City Hall fellows in 2006 and eventually became advisers to Mayor Thomas Menino. When Menino conceived the idea of a nimble IT solutions shop in 2010, he knew Osgood and Jacob were the right people for the job. Now, the duo is tasked with developing partnerships within and outside of City Hall to quickly produce new apps and programs. “Come to us, pitch your idea, work with us and let’s see if it could work,” Jacob says. The office currently has 100 pitches to sift through. Working with small development firms, nonprofits and colleges, New Urban Mechanics is managing almost 20 projects that address needs in infrastructure, education and what Osgood and Jacob call “participatory urbanism.”

What the New Urban Mechanics office shows is that investing in small, calculated risks can have a major impact. The work of Jacob and Osgood could fundamentally change the way citizens interact with cities. “I think people are beginning to recognize there’s a whole host of opportunities that can shift the way government serves its constituents,” says Osgood.

— Tina Trenkner

Photo by David Kidd

*In this clip, Osgood and his Boston colleagues explain how GIS technology is helping the city's engagement efforts.*