Building an inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystem in Kansas City

by: Dell Gines

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Over the past decade, Kansas City has developed a strong entrepreneurship support system. The energy around entrepreneurship has increased significantly, and recently, we’ve also seen an emphasis on equity and inclusion. While the pandemic did not stop this momentum, it did slow it. As individuals and organizations struggled with health and economic challenges, the network of relationships among entrepreneurship support providers often was neglected.

Simultaneously, though, the pandemic brought a renewed emphasis nationwide on entrepreneurs and the support they need to start and thrive. New, often non-traditional, entrepreneurship support organizations emerged in Kansas City. Neighborhood organizations and churches added entrepreneurship training and support, and new initiatives like the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce Access to Capital task force were launched. Other organizations scaled up during this period: AltCap, a Community Development Financial Institution; The Porter House KC, a support organization for entrepreneurs of color; and the City of Kansas City, Missouri, KC BizCare office, which provides licensing and support to entrepreneurs.

Moving the ecosystem forward after the pandemic

While organizations were emerging and scaling up in Kansas City, however, the relationship network among organizations in the ecosystem was weakening. The Kansas City Fed recognized the need to reconnect the ecosystem after the pandemic. It partnered with SourceLink and KC BizCare on two separate events at the Bank designed to move the ecosystem forward.

SourceLink event builds relationships

SourceLink, headquartered in Kansas City, is one of the nation’s first and largest entrepreneurship ecosystem-building organizations. Michael Carmona, senior director for the local affiliate, KCSourceLink, led more than 160 organizations in a half-day ecosystem-building event. The event was designed to pull together traditional and non-traditional support organizations, build relationships, and provide insight into new programs and activities. A diverse group of organizations and individuals participated, arguably the most diverse group of entrepreneur-support organizations in the city’s history. These included small business support providers, economic development organizations, government officials, neighborhood groups, and more.
According to Carmona, “The pandemic, along with the push for social justice, saw many of us finding new ways to support entrepreneurship and build the ecosystem. It saw us forming new businesses, programs, partnerships, and ideas to do more in the entrepreneurship space than just starting businesses and creating jobs. The event was an important time for us to share the work we’ve done as a community, and plan for the work we still need to do.”

**KC BizCare event focuses on entrepreneurs of color**

The second event focused on building a stronger ecosystem for entrepreneurs of color in Kansas City. The Kansas City Fed, in partnership with Nia Richardson, managing director of KC BizCare, convened staff members from a small group of entrepreneurship-support organizations that focus specifically on entrepreneurs of color.

In a facilitated session, participants identified the strengths and weaknesses of the entrepreneurship ecosystem for entrepreneurs of color. In addition, they provided insight into a new city-wide survey that would collect robust data on entrepreneurship. The survey would also provide feedback on new programs coming into Kansas City to support diverse entrepreneurs.

The objective of the convening was to continue to develop relationships, programs, and data sources to ensure entrepreneurs of color are supported in Kansas City, and to ensure that supportive organizations are connected and resourced.

According to Nia Richardson, “Strategizing with my peers in this work is something I realized we are not doing enough of. We talk at them a lot, but we don’t always engage them in the work we are doing in the city. We learned in the pandemic how essential relationships are to our businesses, but the same goes for our ecosystem networks. We must figure out ways to work and grow together if we want to be a ‘City of Entrepreneurs.’”

**Other cities can learn from Kansas City**

Every city’s entrepreneurship ecosystem is different because every city is unique. These two events, however, provide a learning opportunity for other cities as they develop their ecosystems.

The first lesson is that relationships in the ecosystem take work to develop and maintain. Often it can be of great benefit for cities to pull as many of their entrepreneurship support organizations together just for the purpose of relationship building.

The second lesson is that it’s important to include a dedicated focus on organizations that specifically support underserved entrepreneurs. This requires focused attention on, listening to, and strategizing with these organizations.
Kimberly Miller is founder of Empire Dreams, a small community non-profit that helps single mothers launch businesses in her neighborhood. She had never connected with the larger entrepreneurship ecosystem until the SourceLink event. After the event she shared, “The summit was inspirational and encouraging, going beyond your typical ‘networking’ event to stand as a dynamic introduction to a new pattern for community collaboration within Kansas City’s entrepreneurial landscape.”

We have a significant opportunity in the United States to create economic equity, which can occur by building inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystems. While every community has work to do in this regard, Kansas City is one of many cities leading the way.

To learn more about inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystem building visit:
More than 160 organizations participated in the KCSourceLink event, which pulled together traditional and non-traditional support organizations.

The KC BizCare event drew individuals who want to build a stronger ecosystem for entrepreneurs of color.

Participants provided insight into a new city-wide survey on entrepreneurship.