

# Public libraries

## Launching entrepreneurs and their ideas

Public libraries are taking on a new image these days as incubators for a wide range of startups. According to a 2013 study by the American Library Association, there are about 16,000 public libraries in the United States with 95 percent of those institutions reporting offerings related to economic and workforce services. Roughly half of those libraries state that they also provide specialized support services to startups and small businesses.



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What can an entrepreneur expect to find at the public library? Services vary, but in general, the offerings can include database access, research assistance, classes and lectures, business counseling services, co-working space, access to capital, business plan support, networking events and pitch competitions with prizes. Some libraries even offer enticing programs for young entrepreneurs including Club Invention, robotics, and STEM experiences. If the new venture has a social entrepreneurship flair, many libraries are connected to Foundation Center through Funding Information Network, providing resources to give shape to the emerging nonprofit ideas.

Northeast Ohio has been on the forefront of this movement including establishment of the Burton D. Morgan Center for Entrepreneurship Research at Hudson Library and Historical Society nearly a decade ago. The Hudson Library hosts a lecture series and fields requests for one-on-one business counseling several times a week. In addition, 12 to 15 business customers are provided database training every month, either individually or classroom style in the library's technology lab. The audience for these programs varies widely — some attendees are in the planning stages; some have established businesses looking to grow; and some are retirees seeking to turn an avocation into a business.

Ellen Smith, Assistant Director, Hudson Library, shared "The Entrepreneurship Center was established in 2008, which proved to be serendipitous timing with the recession hitting the Northeast Ohio area hard soon after. Our audiences in those first few years were people who had been downsized from their jobs and were looking to start their own businesses. Since that initial heady time, the Center has found the right balance of services, resources, and education that has proven to be a winning formula for assisting Northeast Ohio entrepreneurs. The Center has served as a model for other libraries and institutions to follow when creating their own small business resource programs."

Other libraries in Northeast Ohio are providing services to support entrepreneurs. Opened in April 2016 with funding from the Knight Foundation, the Microbusiness Center and Co-working Space at Akron-Summit County Public Library is providing programs and assistance to new businesses. Cuyahoga County Public Library offers makerspace equipment in its Innovation Centers along with specialized programs, including one for Encore entrepreneurs. Stark County District Library in Canton also opened a co-working space in 2016, partnering with the Stark Entrepreneurship Alliance on a one-year pilot experimenting with a user fee model.

The great advantage of the public library system is that these institutions provide free resources accessible to all, setting the stage for aspiring entrepreneurs to not just dream, but actually transform their ideas into reality. ●