

STARTERSLABO (Belgium) : Activity Co-operatives : Tailor-made coaching for unemployed people to become entrepreneur

Context :

Activity Co-operatives started in 2004 as a pilot project that hired unemployed people and recipients of minimum income support as employees. Since 2009, it supports self-employment by providing entrepreneurship training, individual and group advisory services, individual coaching and continued guaranteed access to unemployment benefits and minimum income supports during the first 18 months of business operation.

Activity Co-operative “ Starterslabo”, Kortrijk, Belgium : website www.starterslabo.be . Financed by the regional government.

Coaches : Bart Lemey, Les Verhamme

Target group : people who receive unemployment money or state income support and belong to the most vulnerable groups. They have not only lack of the financial resources needed for business start-up. They have also greater difficulty sustaining themselves and their businesses during the early stages of business development.

Description :

Activity Co-operatives support business start-up by unemployed/low skilled people and people receiving state income support in Belgium. It provides a tailor-made suite of training, business advisory and coaching. During a period of 18 months they get guaranteed access to social benefits while they check the feasibility of their business idea (to become entrepreneur).

Approach :

The participants takes different stages :

1/There are info sessions and participants are selected through an interview process in which they are assessed on how realistic their entrepreneurial goals are; whether they have any experience or expertise related to their business idea; and the amount of capital that is required for business start-up.

2/ The preparatory period (up to 6 months) focuses on improving entrepreneurial competences and developing a business plan. Participants must attend at least 12 collective workshops (idea development, analyses of the market, organization development, financial plan, personal development plan, administration and accounting,...) and training sessions. He get also tailor-made individual coaching. After 6 months the entrepreneur give a presentation of his business idea for a jury of experts, coaches and other participants.

3/ During the next phase, the “billing” period (12 months), participants start their entrepreneurial activity. Activity Co-operatives provide a tax number, help entrepreneurs fulfill administrative requirements and offer advisory services.

4/ After 18 months the entrepreneur have to decide if he really starts his own business.

Interviews :

- Starterslabo is undoubtedly one of the best things I've ever done. It made me dreams come true. With the support of the coaches my business idea growth from nothing to a booming business. Starterlabo had a positive impact on my live and gave me confidence to start my own business.(Helen Simpson)
- The ultimate methology to make your dream come true with little risc, good coaching, nice participants and a lot of support/input. (Joke Velghe)

Outcomes and evaluation :

The results are very good. Among those who completed the training and coaching in 2013, 77% started as entrepreneur.

Activity Co-operatives provide an opportunity to test a business idea while maintaining income benefits. This minimizes the consequences of business failure for an individual and offers an incentive for people to try self-employment.