

Nottawasaga, Ontario Project: Business Excellence Resource Centre (BERC)

Nottawasaga (South Simcoe Area) Population: 103,925
Focus of Survey: Cross section of businesses
BR&E Drivers: Nottawasaga Futures, a partnership with a federal agency of Canada

Background

Nottawasaga Futures¹ of Ontario, Canada ran their first BR&E visitation program in 1998. They canvassed 50 businesses in one of South Simcoe County's municipalities through the efforts of 66 volunteers. The report was compiled and presented to the area in 1999. In this first set of surveys, it became clear that local businesses shared a common challenge of business development and communication. Every business in the survey expressed a desire for professional assistance in areas such as financing, marketing, and business planning.

In response, the 33 member task force of the BR&E program – comprised of Chamber members, elected officials, appointed officials, and other various organizations – decided that they would pursue the development of a single location where new and existing businesses could go for professional support and services at no cost.

The need for such a center was supported by the business communities of the next seven BR&E visitation programs that Nottawasaga Futures ran over the next few years.

¹ Nottawasaga Futures is a partner of Industry Canada. Nottawasaga refers to the Nottawasaga River watershed that connects all five municipalities in the South Simcoe area, approximately a 30-minute drive north of Toronto, Ontario Canada.



The Project

The CEO of Nottawasaga Futures began soliciting support for the new Business Excellence Resource Centre after the first municipality's BR&E visitation program in 1999.² She visited the local Chambers of Commerce with a proposal for the new center, using the data from the BR&E visitation program surveys to demonstrate businesses' need for the center. For various reasons (e.g., no money, staff, space), none of South Simcoe County Chambers were willing or able to contribute. At that point, Nottawasaga Futures decided to implement the Business Excellence Resource Centre (BERC) themselves, since the need for it was reinforced by each successive BR&E program.

After an initial pilot in 2000, Nottawasaga Futures opened the new Business Excellence Resource Centre in April 2001. At that time, the Centre was supported by Nottawasaga Futures with just one office and three staff. But, as previously mentioned, six more BR&E visitation programs have been completed by 322 volunteers in other municipalities since the first for a total of 473 South Simcoe businesses visited. The findings stimulated the development of three different BERC locations. Each of the seven different BR&E visitation programs, while revealing very similar business development issues, also highlighted different service needs that would eventually be adopted by the BERC.

² Many thanks to Valerie Ryan, CEO of Nottawasaga Futures, for interviewing with us.

Today, the services offered through the Centres include government information and forms, reference and informational books, access to professional business consultants, access to the Ontario Business Connects Workstation, support for financial sourcing, knowledgeable staff and resource people, and over 20 other types of assistance.³ Through Industry Canada's Community Futures Program, the BERCs also have access to a community investment loan fund that approves loans to businesses up to a maximum of \$150,000.⁴ These loans are made available to local businesses for start up, stabilization, or expansion plans and are specifically for those businesses unable to find approval at one of the existing financial institutions.

Results

Since the first BERC was set up, there have been 4,066 contacts with the Centre lasting less than thirty minutes and 955 unique people have used assistance and stayed at the Centre for longer than 30 minutes. Additionally, the Centre has provided 3,940 hours of one-on-one consulting at no cost to 1,245 businesses. In fact, an impressive 48% of the 2,600 businesses in the area have utilized the Centre's one-on-one consultation.

According to the Nottawasaga Futures CEO, the majority of the businesses served have been small businesses, though in one Centre-related project, 80 medium-sized exporting businesses were assisted.

In just 2005 and 2006, 809 local jobs were created or maintained in the area, due in large part to the services of the Centres. Loans of \$770,605 have been made to high-risk businesses, but the Centre has also leveraged just under \$2 million from other sources for local businesses.

³ Includes: on-line business registration/renewal computer workstation, on-line business name search through the computer workstation, human resources information, agricultural business information, financial/lending institution information, Chamber membership information and applications, Human Resources Development Canada information, statistical/demographic information, women in business information, Better Business Association information, workplace safety and insurance board information, Business Consulting program, Revenue Canada publications, marketing information, business consultants, import/export information, Industry Canada/Strategies, business planning guides, incorporation information, networking information, franchise information

⁴ All dollar amounts are expressed in Canadian dollars.

One spin-off of the BERC has been the formation of the South Simcoe Economic Alliance. The Alliance brings together two elected representatives and an appointed representative from each municipality in South Simcoe County. These delegates, along with representatives from Nottawasaga Futures, work to attract businesses to the area – something that has never happened before in the area. Another spin-off has been Small Business Week, through which over 1,200 businesses have participated in educational seminars and sessions. Through these kinds of activities, Nottawasaga Futures has developed solid relationships with South Simcoe County businesses, elected and appointed officials and government departments and ministries. This is an example of business attraction as a secondary economic development strategy after success with BR&E as a primary strategy.



Resources

At any given time, Nottawasaga Futures runs between 23 and 25 different projects, many of them related directly to the results of the BR&E visitation programs. It becomes difficult to tell where the BEREC begins and ends in terms of resources. Nottawasaga Futures employs 22 people, six of whom assist in the day-to-day operations of the BEREC. About 40% of Nottawasaga Future's revenue comes from NT Temps Inc., a for-profit business that is owned and operated by Nottawasaga Futures. All of NT Temps Inc.'s profits go towards community development projects, including the \$60,000 needed to fund the Centres' professional one-on-one consulting. The next largest source of funding (27% of Nottawasaga Futures' revenues) comes from a federal government program that helps support the Centres and the community investment loan fund. The rest of the revenue is received from ten different contributors including various government agencies, municipalities, Chambers, and some corporations, as well.

A large part of the Business Excellence Resource Centre's success is due to the consultants they hire. BEREC consultants are not full employees of the Centres, but are hired by them as needed. The criteria for selection of consultants is high. It includes significant business consulting activities within two years of application, and consultants must have started both a successful *and* unsuccessful business. Significant time is spent checking references for all activities of the consultant before hiring.

According to the Nottawasaga Futures CEO, the largest factor in the Centres' success has been the availability and skills of her staff. Even though she appreciates the work of volunteers, she found that having a professional organization manage the administrative component of the BR&E program (e.g., communications, volunteer training, and data entry) surveys took roughly half the time. The outcomes of the BEREC are shared through Nottawasaga Futures' website, and also through an annual report that describes updates on all of their ongoing BR&E projects.

Additional Information

For more information, visit www.nottawasaga.com, or contact:

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