

At a time where policy makers are asking where the new jobs will come from, we go to Rotterdam to find out how the Chamber of Commerce has been co-creating with young entrepreneurs.

A funny thing happened in Rotterdam about a year ago. In the midst of an economic slowdown, and at a time when the banks weren't lending, the city's Chamber of Commerce noticed a sharp rise in the number of business start ups. In the Netherlands – like most EU states – new businesses are required to become members of the Chamber, regardless of their size. However, although the figures showed a leap in start-up numbers, Chamber staff weren't seeing many of them through their doors. When they decided to investigate what was behind these surprising statistics they got good and bad news.

The good news was that a high proportion of these businesses were started by young entrepreneurs – 30% of new starts were led by people under 30 which was a 5% increase on the previous year. Almost half of these entrepreneurs were under 25. The bad news was that once registered these young business people had little or no further contact with the chamber. As a city with a reputation for innovation and creativity – as well as a strong co-ordinated youth policy – Rotterdam partners decided to find out more.

Through contact with the work of the [URBACT My Generation project](#), Chamber staff had been exposed to techniques they thought might work with these young entrepreneurs. In particular, the co-creation workshop model was identified as being a potentially useful tool. As a consequence, they organised a co-creation event aimed at these new businesses so they could find out more.

There was a good response to the workshop session which filled in some of the gaps around these businesses. Many were in the creative industries sector, headed up by young people working from home and in the various social hubs – cafes, clubs, and galleries - across the city. Many were utilising social media and developing business models which required minimal start up costs – hence the boom when banks weren't lending. Around one third of those who participated were from minority backgrounds – often from enterprising families – who had struggled in the mainstream labour market but for whom setting up in business was a natural thing to do.

The Chamber session brought together 20 young entrepreneurs with 20 chamber officers. Using creative problem solving techniques they focused on identifying the type of support that

young entrepreneurs would find valuable and together they identified three priorities. The first was the need for regular face to face contact with a trusted adviser. Despite their comfort using social media, the young business people still saw this face to face dimension as being important – their top priority. The second was access to good networks – the opportunity to mix with like minded people in business. The third was access to coaching services.

Nothing new there – and all of the identified priorities were services which already formed core business for the chamber. Yet the session confirmed that these young entrepreneurs had not previously thought about engaging the chamber's services. It was clear that they saw the chamber being mainly for established businesses and for older people. At the second session they focussed on how the menu of services could be tweaked to best meet their needs – coming up with a concept of 'go to guys' and 'go to gals' who would be the young entrepreneurs' first port of call in future. Based on the workshop outcomes, the chamber is introducing other new services and refreshing current ones.

Their plans include assigning five new businesses started by young people to each of their account managers; holding two co-creation events a year with young business people and ensuring that their web-based services reflect what these young business people need. Other plans include the development of a live chatroom to give instant feedback on problems and joint work with the Art College to support graduates. As Bengu Manjeet-Ozcan from the Chamber noted, "All artists have to be entrepreneurs, but although the college focuses on their creative talents nothing has ever been provided to support their commercial knowledge."

Contact with young entrepreneurs through the My Generation project suggests that attitudes towards the chambers and other formal business support networks echo those of the young entrepreneurs in Rotterdam. It also suggests that there is latent potential amongst young people from minority backgrounds which can be tapped into. Across the My Generation network we have been applying these techniques with young people to identify and explore opportunities to improve levels of entrepreneurship across our partner cities.

Most analyses of the short term future indicate bleak prospects for young people. Noises about a private-sector led recovery would be easier to believe if we had a better track record of new business start up. The My Generation experience provides an example of what can be achieved through modest investment, and creative thinking in order to connect with young entrepreneurs, reshape support services to better meet their needs and – ultimately – to support business growth.

Check out My Generation www.urbact.eu/my_generation

Feel the atmosphere of the My Generation way of working in co-creation with young people, by watching the [Valencia workshop video](#) .

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