



**Economic
Development and
Growing the
Economy**

**UW
Extension**

Profiles of Best Practices

Internet Interactive Small Business Development

Community, County

Oneida County

Area of Project Impact

Oneida, Vilas and Lincoln counties

Population Affected

94,390

Situation

Individual one-on-one business counseling is needed to stimulate and support entrepreneurship, particularly in economically distressed times. However, the distance separating small business support services from people seeking to start and to continue operating small businesses often poses a barrier to entrepreneurial service delivery in Wisconsin's sparsely populated northwoods.

Economic Development Strategies

Technology has been identified as a means to transcend locational barriers in order to extend access to the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point's Small Business Development Center (SBDC) to remote northern Wisconsin regions. "Distance Counseling" is envisioned to expand essential business mentoring and counseling services to isolated communities in targeted northern Wisconsin counties.

Implementation

The Oneida County UW-Extension Office and the Oneida County Economic Development Corporation have united with the UW-Stevens Point Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in order to advance a technological breakthrough in the delivery of entrepreneurial services. In a novel form of real time distance learning, the SBDC and Oneida's Extension and Economic Development Corporation are working to facilitate virtual counseling via the Internet. Rhinelander, in Oneida County, will soon host the very first long-distance, interactive Internet counseling service for small business start-ups, operations, and expansions. There are still some wrinkles in the novel technology making possible long-distance entrepreneurial service delivery, but it is expected that in June of 2003 Rhinelander will feature a "polycon unit." This unit will allow individuals interested in starting, continuing the operation of, or expanding small businesses in northern Wisconsin to utilize interactive face-to-face counseling sessions with small business development professionals. In addition to providing virtual counseling sessions, the "Distance Counseling" technology will also allow for the instantaneous sharing of documents through "net meeting" programming.

It is expected that "Distance Counseling" will build the region's small business capacity by offering information and resources to individuals in small business development who might not otherwise have access to such services. This innovative project dramatically expands the SBDC's capacity to facilitate entrepreneurial skill development because the Internet infrastructure is essential to extending small business service delivery to remote sites in northern Wisconsin. As a result, this project is likely to result in the development of business and financial plans and ultimately new small businesses as well as more efficient existing small businesses. As the first of its kind in the Midwest, this project is expected to successfully facilitate entrepreneurship. In fact, this project, patterned after a University of Washington Extension business-counseling program, is already set to open another long-distance site in Langlade County.

Partners and Leadership

A number of entities partnered to make this innovative project possible, including the Small Business Development Center at UW-Stevens Point Extension, Oneida County UW-Extension, Oneida County Economic Development Corporation as well as support from a number of local lending institutions.

Outcomes

The technology for this interactive Internet service delivery system is expected to be up and running in June of 2003. This entrepreneurial service will not only provide revolutionary means to counsel small businesses in northern Wisconsin, it also represents a major breakthrough in educational technology in general. In fact, this project is the first of its kind in the Midwest. It is expected that once the system is up and running, up to 44 entrepreneurs from Oneida, Vilas and Lincoln counties will utilize Rhinelander's Internet unit in Oneida County each year in order to receive instantaneous counseling from economic development professionals at the SBDC in Stevens Point, over 90 miles away. As the technology is installed in more locations throughout northern Wisconsin, entrepreneurial service capacity and delivery can only increase over time.

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