

Top N.B. business leaders will guide entrepreneurs

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Telegraph-Journal

Published Friday January 18th, 2008

Appeared on page B1

Top business leaders from New Brunswick and abroad will guide an elite list of up-and-coming entrepreneurs through a formal training program aimed at ensuring the success of small business in the province.

The year-long training program, run by the G. Wallace F. McCain Institute, is being billed as the back-stage pass to entrepreneurship.

At the secluded Square Lake Resort in Alma, 15 winning applicants will gather for two days every month to learn the success stories of candy maker David Ganong, Mariner Partners chairman Gerry Pond and NB Power head David Hay, among many others.

These informal exchanges will be complemented by more formal presentations provided through a lecture format. Different business gurus will educate the promising entrepreneurs on topics ranging from business model development to marketing tactics, from strategic planning to financial management.

The McCain Institute opened the application process for the program this week with the launch of its new website. The institute, which operates from the University of New Brunswick, plans to announce the winning candidates in April and begin the business training in July.

"We're able to generate a better, stronger local economy by helping these entrepreneurs, who have a ton of energy and a ton of initiative, to become more successful than they otherwise would have been," says Doug Somers, a Toronto-based executive slated to deliver a key note at the program.

Somers is the co-president and chief executive of Cassidy Bay Group Inc., a consulting firm that works with companies to improve their overall performance. He also co-founded Bridgewater Systems, an Ottawa-based supplier of telecommunications software for global customers.

Somers says he will advise the boot camp trainees on how to hire a team that can best guide the company through its desired stages of development.

"A lot of startups feel a great deal of pressure to grow pretty quickly, especially if they have to establish a market share before any potential competitors," he says. "Good hiring practices are often short-circuited for expediency to get a warm body to fill a position."



Gail Bremner says she needs the entrepreneurial skills that she hopes to gain from a year-long training program run by the G. Wallace F. McCain Institute as she makes the transition from vice-president to owner of Aquila Tours in Saint John.

The major thrust behind this program is a recognition that small businesses do not have enough contact with experienced leaders in their sectors.

Nancy Mathis, executive director of the McCain Institute, ran a series of focus groups across the province last fall with 100 entrepreneurs representing small and larger firms. She found in an informal survey that 75 per cent of participants believed they do not have enough of that contact.

Roughly 35 per cent of participants believed they should be investing in developing a strategy for their business, while just 20 per cent carry out the process. A stunning 70 per cent don't have any formal business training.

These results, Mathis says, indicate entrepreneurs must be encouraged to place a much greater emphasis on their plans for growth.

The Wednesday launch of the McCain Institute's website has already garnered significant attention from small business executives looking to learn the ropes from the pros.

Gail Bremner, one of those star-struck executives, is in the process of taking the reins of an award-winning Atlantic Canadian tour operator.

Aquila Tours has been operating out of Saint John for more than 25 years under the direction of out-going owner Beth Kelly Hatt.

Bremner, who joined the company about 13 years ago as a salesperson, says she needs the entrepreneurial skills to effectively make the transition from now vice-president to owner.

"I have the entrepreneurial spark," quips Bremner, "and I feel that this opportunity would definitely ignite the flame."