

FUNDING AND CONVENING A SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB

Lessons from Calgary's
Collaborative Funders' Table



CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE



In 2017, a group of family, corporate and community-based foundations and funders – the Collaborative Funders' Table¹ (CFT) – came together to launch an initiative with the goal of improving employment prospects for Opportunity Youth in Calgary. The goal is to ensure that Opportunity Youth seeking work are better prepared to meet the needs of employers, and that employers are better able to recruit, support and retain these youth, ultimately increasing diversity in the workforce and enabling young people to find and keep meaningful work.

Improving employment outcomes among youth facing barriers is a complex challenge requiring collaboration among multiple stakeholders. From the beginning, the CFT knew it would be important to engage employers, youth serving agencies, employment intermediaries, Indigenous groups, young people and other community resources as essential participants in any process to design innovative solutions. Instead of going with conventional approaches to grantmaking (e.g., design or feasibility grant to a single organization, letters of intent, requests for proposals), the group decided to explore the process of funding and convening a social innovation lab.

This learning brief captures lessons from the CFT process and other research related to labs as a promising approach to the creation of collaborative, community-based and justice-oriented solutions. It is designed with public and private grantmaking organizations in mind. It begins with a short overview of why social innovation labs are promising in their potential to help address complex challenges, shares lessons learned through the CFT experience with the Calgary Youth Employment Lab, and ends with a series of considerations and recommendations for other funders interested in exploring this new territory.

¹The Collaborative Funders' Table was established in 2015 to test and develop a collaborative approach to funding initiatives related to vulnerable youth. Since its inception it has grown in membership and refined its focus to promoting solutions to youth unemployment in Alberta and beyond. Current members of the table include the Calgary Foundation, the United Way of Calgary and Area, Burns Memorial Fund, the RBC Foundation, the City of Calgary, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, and other anonymous donors.



Innovative approaches – more important now than ever

Many of the most important social challenges facing the world today require radical innovation that cuts across organizational, sectoral, social and disciplinary boundaries. Conventional approaches to ‘expert-led’ program design are limited in that they do not typically include a range of perspectives (especially from people with lived experience of an issue) and they are often driven by pre-conceived ideas about the right solution.

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Social innovation has become even more important for sustainable economic growth in recent times. This is partly because some of the barriers to lasting and sustainable economic growth (such as climate change, youth unemployment, aging populations, and increased social conflicts) can be overcome only with the help of social innovation, and partly because of rising demands for alternative models of economic growth that enhance rather than damage human relationships and well-being”. (pg. 10)

KEVIN CHIKA URAMA & ERNEST NTI ACHEAMPONG SOCIAL INNOVATION CREATES PROSPEROUS SOCIETIES. STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW SUMMER 2013 [BIT.LY/31OOWUH](http://bit.ly/31OOWUH)

²Kevin Chika Urama & Ernest Nti Acheampong Social Innovation Creates Prosperous Societies. (p 11) Stanford Social Innovation Review Summer 2013 bit.ly/31poREF

³Alex Ryan, VP of Systems Innovation at the MaRS solutions lab. bit.ly/3lx6bw5

⁴Findings from the Canadian Social Innovation Labs Landscape Survey. Radius (2018) bit.ly/3lbCACH

⁵Social Innovation Labs Produce Solutions Ready for Scale. Social Innovation Canada. (2018) bit.ly/3lx6bw5

Social innovation labs come in many shapes and sizes but all are built on the premise that we need to bring together diverse perspectives in a 'safe zone' to ask questions, test assumptions, experiment with solutions, fail, learn, adapt, and experiment again. If ideas and solutions emerging from this process are promising, they can then be scaled and tested more broadly in the community, with the ultimate goal of systemic change. Labs help to move groups from ideas to action “[T]here are people who want to solve problems by talking about them, and people who want to move into action as soon as possible. If it’s a complex issue, then no matter how long you talk about it, you’re never all going to see it the same way. And if it’s genuinely complex, we don’t actually know what action we need to take to solve it. So the lab offers a third path: let’s jointly experiment. It’s about finding breakthrough innovations with unusual partners. Bringing people together who wouldn’t necessarily talk or work together.”³

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To aid the move from roundtable talks to action, a promising approach has been emerging in the social innovation ecosystem. Often called a social innovation lab, the approach draws on the strengths, empathy, creativity, and wisdom of a collective to explore new ways of making progress on a complex challenge. These labs are guided by convening diverse perspectives on an issue, gaining insight from people with lived experience of a challenge, facilitated ideation, building prototypes of solutions, and testing them to see how they work on the ground with people”. (pg. 6)

BEN WEINLICK & ALEEYA VELJ SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB FIELD GUIDE. [BIT.LY/3XMNMF6](https://bit.ly/3XMNMF6)

There has been exponential growth in labs in Canada and worldwide. Governments, funders, and change leaders are embracing this approach to diverse, collaborative, and adaptive problem solving. They like the contained risk, diversity of participants and skills, and the promising solutions coming out of labs. For these reasons, the CFT believed a lab was the right approach to tackle the challenge of youth unemployment and the disconnect between the supply side (youth and youth serving agencies) and the demand side (employers) of this complex issue.

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One of the strengths of the emerging models of labs in Canada is how they often bring together funding from across sectors. While internationally, many labs are hosted in Government, one of the intriguing things about Canadian labs is that they have given rise to many more collaborative funding models – often where philanthropy and entrepreneurial non-profits incubate labs with core philanthropic partners, and then seek academic, government and private sector participation, funding and in kind supports as they grow. This is happening alongside an increasingly vibrant government lab ecosystem from the city level, through provinces and up to the federal level.”

[BIT.LY/3LX6BW5](https://bit.ly/3LX6BW5)

³Alex Ryan, VP of Systems Innovation at the MaRS solutions lab. bit.ly/3lx6bws

⁴Findings from the Canadian Social Innovation Labs Landscape Survey. Radius (2018) bit.ly/3lbcACh

⁵Social Innovation Labs Produce Solutions Ready for Scale. Social Innovation Canada. (2018) bit.ly/3lx6bws



Why a lab?

The CFT chose a social innovation lab because labs are designed to balance traditional ways of problem solving with new approaches to co-designing solutions. Research and conventional practice related to youth employment were predominantly focused on engaging youth and building their pre-employment and employment skills without much connection to industry and employers. The CFT knew there were employers engaging in promising approaches to hire and support Opportunity Youth but that they were not well connected to the youth serving sector.⁶ The lab approach created an opportunity to bring diverse stakeholders together in a space where they could share experiences, make sense of each others' perspectives, challenge assumptions, ask difficult questions, experiment with solutions, fail in a safe space, and adapt as learning emerged.



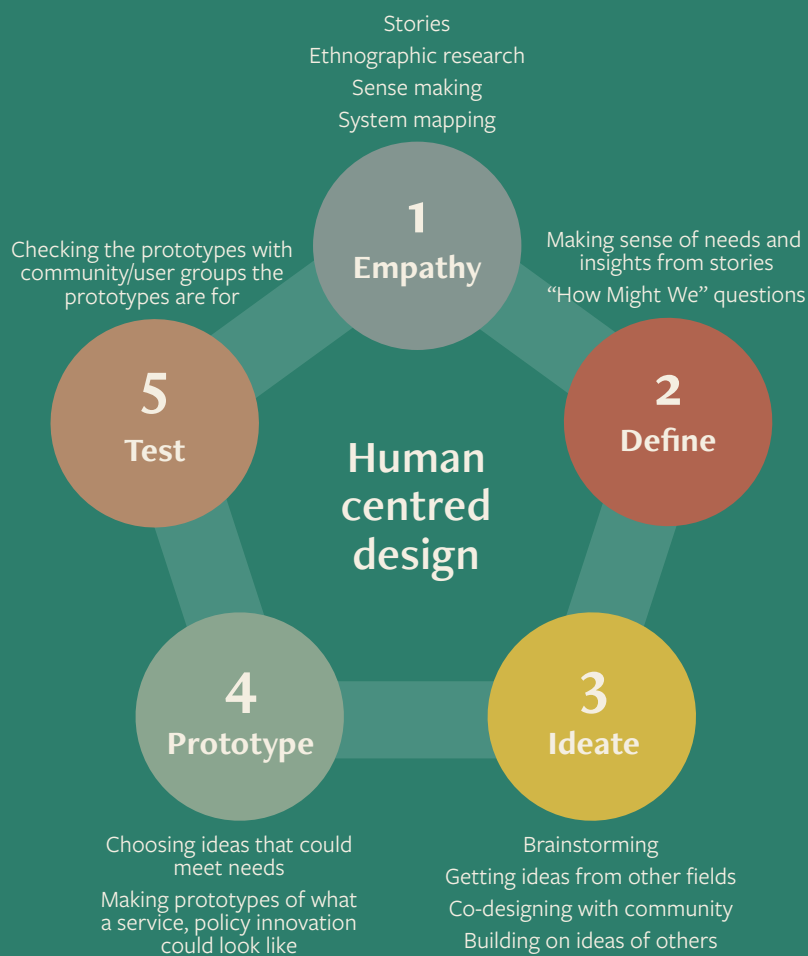
Labs are spaces for experimentation with innovative approaches. They resonate a transformative promise that challenges our thinking and behaviour in systems, and their safe havens offer their staff and participants a sense of control.”

KIEBOOM, M. (2014). LAB MATTERS: CHALLENGING THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION LABORATORIES. AMSTERDAM: KENNISLAND. (P. 13) [BIT.LY/3rDINC6](https://bit.ly/3rDINC6)

⁶Starbucks, H&M, Home Depot and RBC are employers who have embraced their commitment to changing practice and creating opportunity for youth in their workplaces. Check-out the case studies related to HireNext. bit.ly/3rDINC6 and this story about Starbucks efforts bit.ly/33196ao

The Calgary Youth Employment Lab (YEL) was comprised of three interconnected phases, each phase equally important and all based on the principles of human-centred design. The lab was supported by a Stewardship Group⁷ and facilitated by Ben Weinlick of the Think Jar Collective⁸ in Edmonton.

Labs are typically based on human-centred design (HCD) principles (empathy, collaboration, experimentation, testing assumptions, making ideas tangible and action) and work iteratively through five stages.



ADAPTED FROM THE TAMARACK INSTITUTE: EXPERIMENTING WITH HUMAN CENTERED DESIGN WORKBOOK. [BIT.LY/3F52lP9](https://bit.ly/3F52lP9)

⁷The CFT created a sub-committee of its members to coordinate and convene the YEL – the Lab Stewardship Group. This group worked closely with the lab facilitator, engaged the stakeholders, were guided by the Indigenous Elders and were knee-deep in the lab process for its duration.

⁸[/bit.ly/3oMuQ8l](https://bit.ly/3oMuQ8l)

The **Exploration Phase** took about six months and included:

- Research related to the current state of employment pathways for youth facing barriers.
- Identifying and engaging stakeholders who needed to be involved.
- Convening a sense-making workshop that brought together 60 stakeholders in a facilitated process to surface and make sense of challenges, opportunities, gaps and tensions in the current system.
- Identification of challenge areas uncovered during the sense-making workshop and figuring out which ones would benefit from a lab process.
- Engaging Indigenous Elders, youth, and agencies to guide the development of more meaningful and distinction-based prototypes. The CFT recognized Indigenous youth as an important subset of Opportunity Youth. They also wanted to honour the members' growing commitment to reconciliation.
- Curation of the lab teams to take on the challenge areas. The Lab Stewardship Group was thoughtful in the composition of the teams, working to bring together the right combination of youth, employers, intermediaries, and youth serving agencies.
- Contracting Lab Coaches to support each team in the design and prototyping process.

The Lab was comprised of four sessions over four months, plus field testing in between each session.

- There were four 'lab days' that were highly facilitated half-day sessions where lab team members were supported to build their capacity for human centered design, dig deeply into their challenge areas, and began to design and scrutinize possible solutions (called prototypes).
- Ideas developed in the lab were then field tested out in community. Field testing is typically about connecting with people who will use or be affected by an intervention to understand more about their experiences, gather their insights and ideas, and bring these to bear on the prototypes being developed.
- Prototypes were refined and further developed, or discarded, during each consecutive lab day. All of this culminated in a process to scrutinize and evaluate the prototypes and decide which ones were worthy of further support and development.

Prototypes to Pilots – The CFT made a commitment to provide pilot funding to those prototypes that showed promise. This phase had two parts and is on-going.

- Pilot design – This included further testing of each prototype in community and then the development of pilot implementation plans and budgets. These plans were presented to the CFT, and three of the four ideas were granted funding for a three-year pilot phase.
- Pilot implementation – The pilot projects that emerged from the YEL are currently being implemented by contracted agencies. They have the support of a developmental evaluator and have formed a community of practice to tackle challenges, share promising practices, and coordinate their efforts to engage Opportunity Youth and employers in Calgary.⁹

⁹ For more information on the Calgary Youth Employment Initiative that emerged from the lab process, please check out bit.ly/3JVGRd6

Is a lab the right choice?

The experience of funding and convening the Calgary Youth Employment Lab, and working through the three phases generated important learning for the CFT that has relevance for other funders and organizations keen to explore new ways to support social change. Below are several things to consider if you are a grantmaking organization interested in supporting a social innovation lab.

Labs are not the right approach for every challenge.

Human-centered design and social labs are relatively new and exciting and have lots of potential to enable genuine collaboration to tackle complex problems.¹⁰ However, not every challenge requires a lab to find the solution. For example, one of the issues to be addressed by the YEL was employer capacity to effectively hire and retain Opportunity Youth. The challenge question was framed as, *how might we create a community of practice or an industry council?* Creating a community of practice is complicated but not necessarily complex, and many in the lab felt this challenge could have been addressed in a less labour intensive, more conventional way. Given that communities of practice have been around for decades and there are several models to support this approach, this particular challenge may have been better addressed through a small design team that adapted best practice with support from employers and input from youth.

“Our question did not require much innovation. It felt like it was mismatched with the social lab process.”

LAB MEMBER

Alternatively, it may have been that the question was too narrowly framed. It could have been left more open-ended for the lab team to explore a broader range of solutions.

“The solution was included in the challenge question ‘how might we develop a community of practice?’ so the group kind of had their work laid out for them. It would be interesting to see how it would have turned out if the question was framed as a problem: ‘How might we build the capacity of employers?’”

LAB PARTICIPANT

When deciding if a lab is the right approach to address a challenge, it is important to consider the nature of the challenge. Labs are meant to tackle complex challenges and ask wicked questions.¹¹ They can be expensive and labour intensive, and the results are unpredictable. For this reason, they can feel like overkill when addressing simpler, more straightforward issues.

¹⁰ Kieboom, M. (2014). Lab Matters: Challenging the practice of social innovation laboratories. Amsterdam: Kennisland. bit.ly/3lvaCHY

¹¹ It is important to distinguish between simple, complicated and complex problems when deciding on the best approach to tackle a social challenge. Labs are intended to address complex problems which typically involve many stakeholders with different values and priorities; have interdependent causes and drivers with lots of uncertainty; and, do not have clear or obvious solutions. See the Living Guide to Social Innovation Labs that has been developed by MaRS at bit.ly/3lWxuu2

Labs must manage the tensions of co-design.

Co-design is a process wherein potential solutions are generated with insights and input from people with lived experience of the challenge and who will be impacted by or using potential solutions. In the employment lab, this was Opportunity Youth (including Indigenous youth), employers, and Indigenous and youth serving agencies. Developing feasible, effective, and sustainable solutions to youth underemployment required employers to hear from and be influenced by youth to change some of their processes. Equally, for youth to provide meaningful input and suggestions, they needed support from employers to understand employer systems. Creating space and authentic opportunities for divergent voices to be heard is an enormous challenge. Labs must be structured and facilitated in ways that build trust and respect among participants so that they can share ideas and perspectives without blaming or offending.

“It [the Youth Employment Lab] wasn't always perfect and sometimes some voices were much louder than others, but overall, I think the lab teams did an excellent job of creating space for divergent perspectives to be heard and considered. I think the process helped us to understand each other better and to surface ideas that reflect our different needs and priorities.”

LAB PARTICIPANT



Labs involve lots of uncertainty.

Labs are emergent processes, and it is difficult to know at the outset if anything tangible or scalable will emerge. Funders, conveners, and lab participants must all be comfortable with risk and ambiguity. There needs to be a tolerance for failure and recognition that learning that a possible solution doesn't work is as important as learning that it does. Funders need to be willing to trust and stay committed to the process even when it's unclear where the process is going and if it's going to generate anything meaningful. Managing this uncertainty was an ongoing challenge for the CFT and especially those who were part of the Lab Stewardship Group. In the words of one Lab Steward, *"I was so far out of my comfort zone I couldn't even see my comfort zone."*

“We had really smart people on our team, and we developed our ideas but then when we tested them, they failed. We learned so much. In a conventional program design process, we would have just gone with what we thought was a really good idea and funded it, but it would not have actually addressed the problem.”

LAB PARTICIPANT

Uncertainty in the Lab: Questions that kept us up at night.

- Will this end up being a good use of resources?
- Will we get anywhere? Are the prototypes going to lead to successful pilots that will lead to scale?
- What happens if this does not amount to anything?
- What if we get attached to ideas and move forward with them even if they aren't any good?



Labs are time and resource intensive.

Calgary's Youth Employment Lab cost close to \$120,000¹² and required the in-kind support of one 0.8 FTE coordinator over the ten-month period. This kind of investment in a lab is typical and yet unlikely to produce immediate and quantifiable results. Those investing in a lab need to understand that the main outcomes may be increased clarity about a complex challenge, stronger, more diverse relationships among relevant stakeholders, and provisional solutions that require further development, testing, and investment.

“The lab process is long and hard and complicated. A smaller design group may have gotten their idea farther more quickly but the ideas we generated were so much better. The connections and networks that were built are real and have long-lasting value. When we talk about cross-sectoral collaboration, this lab was a big step in breaking down silos.”

CFT MEMBER



¹² This amount includes all the work in the pre-lab phase right through to include the design of the pilot projects. Funding for each of the pilot projects is not included in this amount.

How best to invest in a lab?

If a social innovation lab is the right fit for the challenge you want to address, consider the following as you take on the process of funding a lab.

Build capacity of staff and boards.

Social innovation labs are different from conventional non-profit projects and so it is important to build understanding and capacity among staff and board members to effectively review and evaluate funding requests to support a lab. These requests can come in many forms and are likely to be high-level, setting out the challenge to be addressed, the rationale for a lab, potential stakeholders and an overview of proposed lab processes. They are unlikely to include specific outcomes or targets or a clear implementation plan. Supporting applicants to work through some of the details and develop a reasonable budget may be part of the supports you provide as a grantmaker and assessing the quality of the proposal may require more dialogue than usual with the applicant.¹³

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One of the many strengths of a social innovation lab is that it doesn't seek to predict in advance precisely what will happen. This means that specific outcomes are not likely to be able to be presented up front. However, a lab should be able to generally describe its outputs. How many people do they anticipate being involved? How many meetings? Planned products and communications pieces?”

[BIT.LY/3E2WFHS](https://bit.ly/3E2WFHS) (PG.11)



¹³The Edmonton Shift Lab report on funding social innovation labs bit.ly/3E2WFHS



Invest in the prologue and the epilogue.

The work required to set the stage for a lab and provide follow-up support for the promising ideas that emerge, are as important as the lab itself. Clearly framing the challenge questions at the beginning and supporting further development of promising ideas at the end, are key to gaining a return on the investment that's been made in a lab. For the YEL, the 'prologue' (exploration phase) included a literature review and scan of the current state of youth employment in Alberta; a carefully curated and facilitated sense-making workshop that brought together more than 60 stakeholders from across relevant sectors; an analysis of data generated by the sense-making process; and, identification of six key challenge areas. The questions posed to the lab teams were tightly framed and enabled the lab teams to stay focused on their specific challenge areas.

While the lab generated many important insights and partially developed prototypes, the work was far from over and it was important for the CFT to support and invest in the 'epilogue' (the post-lab period) to ensure that these gains were not lost.

“It's exciting that there was funding in place to support things going forward. In other labs [that I've been involved in] nothing tangible comes out of them. Things just drop off because there is no follow-through. It was really exciting that the CFT was in place to take these promising ideas forward.”

LAB PARTICIPANT

Consider being an embedded funder.

Grantmakers who choose to fund labs, may also choose to be part of the lab. This makes sense, as often funders are a key stakeholder within the context of the social issue being explored. Several of the CFT members were able to participate in YEL as part of the Lab Stewardship Group, as members of lab teams, and in efforts to engage with the Indigenous Elders guiding the lab. This direct involvement by leaders with decision-making capabilities meant important decisions could be made without delay. It also meant that the rest of the CFT could be briefed about the lab by known and trusted colleagues.

“ I feel as if I had a much deeper understanding of the issues and therefore could help us [the CFT] to make better funding decisions. I think we were able to ask much better questions and as we went to an RFP [request for proposals] process we were able to make better decisions.”

CFT LAB PARTICIPANT

Being part of the process also comes with risks. Having funders as members of a lab team can affect the quality and candidness of conversations among these teams, especially if agencies who receive funding from that funder are also part of that team. The power dynamics are complicated. Autonomy and equality among lab members are key and if you, as funder, choose to be an embedded part of the process, it will be important to find ways to mitigate these risks and ensure everyone who is part of the process is able to participate freely. *“Letting go of these expectations can be difficult [for funders], but a social innovation lab is the wrong tool if these expectations of control are present.”*⁴

⁴ The Edmonton Shift Lab report on funding social innovation labs bit.ly/3EzWFHs (pg.9)



Should funders convene and embed themselves in a lab?

The CFT chose to become an embedded funder, and both convene and participate in the Youth Employment Lab. This experience generated extensive learning and several recommendations for other funders considering this approach.

Do your research.

Understanding more about a social issue and scoping out the specific challenge are essential first steps in any lab process. The CFT commissioned research to understand more about the current state of employment programming for youth aged 15 to 24 years who face multiple barriers to entering and succeeding in the work force.¹⁵ This research helped to surface the gap between supply and demand and shape an early understanding of the challenge. The CFT then hosted the sense-making workshop that helped to refine the issues, identify key stakeholders and highlight the importance of engaging Indigenous youth and the communities that support them. Engaging in this early work is a critical component of a successful lab process.

Consider creating decision-making sub-groups.

Being adaptive and able to make decisions quickly is important in the emergent context of a lab. To support this, the CFT created a Lab Stewardship Group to which they delegated responsibility and decision-making powers. The creation of this smaller group enabled timely and coherent decision-making and helped the lab to adapt to the needs of its participants. The broader CFT trusted the Stewardship Group to make good decisions on its behalf. *“The lab conveners really listened to the stakeholders. They really lived adapting to emergent learning. The stewards’ group nailed that part of the process.”* YEL Facilitator

¹⁵ Merrill Cooper, Guyn Cooper Research Associates. (2018). Improving Employment Outcomes for Vulnerable Youth. Burns Memorial Fund. Available bit.ly/zZftNgK

Choose participants carefully.

The same qualities required of funders of a lab— comfort with ambiguity, process orientation, commitment to social change – are needed among participants in a lab. Conveners need to invest considerable effort in selecting, recruiting and engaging the right people to participate in the lab. For the YEL, this investment, paid off in terms of participant commitment to and engagement with the lab process.

“The teams were self-motivated and self-directed. I was so impressed that people kept coming and they kept working together in-between the sessions. I was so surprised by people’s willingness to embrace the ethnographic research, to go out and actually talk to people and try to understand more about what they need and want.”

LAB FACILITATOR

“Team members were so invested in really understanding the dynamics and what was important to all of the stakeholders in the system.”

LAB PARTICIPANT

Be clear upfront about expectations.

Labs require deep commitment from participants. Although it is difficult to know beforehand what exactly will be required throughout, it is important to be as clear as possible about the time, effort, and collaboration needed from people before they are asked to commit. YEL participants stated that they had not anticipated the amount of work required between lab days to do the ethnographic work and test prototypes. Participation, especially among employers, dropped off over the course of the lab. Although there are many reasons for this attrition, the time requirement was an important factor.

Further, there is often significant behind-the-scenes work required to coordinate each lab day to ensure that the venue is set up, required materials are available, and participants have what they need. It is important from the outset to clarify who is responsible for this work and to decide if it is the role of the lab facilitator or the conveners. *“It would have been good to know more about what’s needed to organize each lab day. I felt constantly surprised by the extent of what was required.”* Lab Steward

Commit to the creation of 'ethical space.'

Responsibility to advance reconciliation and to include Indigenous ways of knowing is now understood as an essential part of all collaborative processes. The CFT acted on this commitment early in the process by seeking advice and guidance from the Indigenous community. The CFT reached out to Miskanawah, an organization that embeds Indigenous teachings, ceremonies, and guidance from Elders into its service delivery model. Staff and leaders from Miskanawah helped the CFT to connect with Elders Reg and Rose Crowshoe so that the YEL could benefit from their wisdom and advice. Reg and Rose engaged with the CFT, read the lab briefing documents, hosted a smudging ceremony, established some of the principles to guide the lab, and brought together other Elders from across western Canada to provide feedback and guidance to the lab process. This early and sustained relationship with the Indigenous community was an important part of the YEL's success and led to several positive, unanticipated outcomes. The creation of 'ethical space' helped to establish positive norms and ultimately changed the nature of the lab by balancing Indigenous and conventional ways of listening, sharing, and learning.

“It feels like we began with the right intention, we wanted guidance from the Indigenous Elders, not at the end but at the beginning. We began in the right way, with the right intention. We created ethical space and [Lab Facilitator] did a fantastic job of consistently bringing us back to that and keeping [the Indigenous Elders'] guidance alive in every lab day.”

LAB STEWARD



Hire a great facilitator.

Labs are typically fast paced with lots of divergent perspectives, tough questions, and a range of inter-personal tensions. This environment requires skilled and dynamic facilitation. The YEL facilitator was able to manage tensions, create a generative space, and inspire people to keep moving through the process. His understanding of human-centered design processes was crucial to maintaining the group's engagement. *“Ben [the Lab facilitator] gave us enough direction to keep us moving but he was so careful not to take over. He created a safe container that let us take risks, explore things that seemed impossible, and be really creative”* Lab Participant. Be sure to look for these kinds of qualities in a lab facilitator.

Invest in coaches.

Labs are typically comprised of teams working on different elements of the same social challenge. Each team needs a coach who is an excellent facilitator, understands ethnographic strategies and techniques, and can support the prototyping process. The CFT faced several challenges engaging and retaining experienced coaches to support the YEL teams. There was not enough clarity about the role of the coaches at the outset and, with the facilitator based in another city, it was harder for him to draw on his direct network. If the conveners had understood more about the purpose of the role and skills required from coaches, they would have hired experienced facilitators from their Calgary-based networks. *“If I were to do it again, I would get much clearer about the role of the coaches and I’d hire consultants to support the process and pay them properly.”* Lab Steward

Ensure each team has a coordinator/motivator.

Each of the YEL lab teams included a ‘git-er-done’ person – a team member responsible for coordinating and mobilizing action between the lab days. These coordinators organized conference calls and meetings among lab teams between lab days, arranged venues, and provided honoraria to stakeholders that were interviewed or took part in testing prototypes. They took notes and highlighted action items. They kept things moving, and supported the teams to collaboratively engage in the field work and testing required to develop the prototypes. This kind of coordination support was considered important by members of all of the YEL teams. Being explicit about this role and finding resources for these positions either from within your own organization or from within the lab team is key to keeping things moving along.

Invest in food, and an inclusive and appropriate venue.

The YEL had a great space for days and invested in delicious nourishing food. This is important for many reasons. First, lab work is hard and good food, and a bright airy space, help to keep people motivated. Second, lab participants are often volunteering their time or working within a lab in addition to other full-time jobs, child-care responsibilities, or school. Food helps to acknowledge and thank people for the sacrifices they make to be engaged. Finally, sharing meals helps bring people together and builds trust and rapport.

“Food is life. When you give people food, good food, you create relationships. You honour people.”

LAB STEWARD

One serious drawback of the YEL space was an inability to smudge. Fire regulations for the building made it impossible. The Elders and Indigenous youth who participated in the process made it clear that smudging is central to any kind of gathering. As groups do more to support reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, we need to address these kinds of constraints and find places to gather that respect the needs and wishes of those who want to take part – this includes smudging, ceremony, accessibility, and spaces that feel welcoming and signal inclusion.

“It felt disrespectful and such a contradiction to hear the Knowledge Keepers describe the importance of smudging and then to work in a space where this wasn’t allowed.”

LAB STEWARD



Sustaining engagement is a challenge.

Engaging and sustaining participation in any social lab can be challenging. This was especially so in the YEL context, where employers were volunteering their time and youth had many competing priorities. Listening to lab participants and adapting the process to meet their changing needs is important to sustaining engagement. Consider some of the following as you design and implement a social innovation lab:

- Time of year. Try to avoid hosting labs over the summer or in the late spring. Create space for slippage in timelines. A lab originally designed to take four months can extend to six months.
- Structure the lab around full days and plan for more days than you think you need. The YEL conveners agreed to shorter days and fewer days in an effort to increase engagement, but this resulted in the process feeling rushed and parts of the work feeling unfinished.
- Include time during the lab days to integrate findings from the ethnographic and prototyping work. For some participants in the YEL, it felt like decisions about specific insights were sometimes made too quickly by the lab teams. *“So many insights were generated and there was not nearly enough time to integrate these fully into the prototypes.”* Lab Team Member. Make sure this valuable information is not lost.
- Consider a series of ‘sprints’¹⁶ with ethnographic and testing work in between. This means bringing stakeholders together for several days to do the sense-making, ideation, and early development of prototypes all at once instead of over the course of several weeks or months.



¹⁶ Design sprints are like a lab in that they are designed to bring together diverse stakeholders to understand, ideate, prototype and test solutions over a short, but intense, timeframe, typically 4-5 days. bit.ly/3mJWVFJ

Conclusion

Labs are a powerful tool to support innovative social change. They can bring together diverse perspectives in a generative space where ideas are shared, assumptions are challenged, failure is tolerated, and unique solutions can emerge. They are also time and labour intensive, and there is no guarantee of tangible results. Supporters of labs need to be process-oriented and see value in relationship-building and the generation of new ideas. For the CFT, the Calgary Youth Employment Lab created new connections and relationships among unlikely partners, and fostered empathy, goodwill, and commitment that led to new collaborative initiatives.¹⁷ Often there were divergent perspectives and conflicting priorities, but by embracing trust, authenticity, and curiosity, the YEL participants developed creative solutions that accounted for the complexity inherent in the issue. Building on the rich lessons learned from others involved in funding and convening social innovation labs, we can continue to refine and strengthen this approach to collaborative social change.

“ Proactive philanthropy allows foundations and funder groups to convene the whole system, to push for analyses that make sense of that system, and to broker the resulting relationships or choose to fund intermediaries to broker such arrangements. In this regard, foundations can act as ‘institutional entrepreneurs,’ simultaneously assessing system barriers and opportunities; framing them through sense-making processes; identifying innovations with the greatest system impact; and helping those to address policy, cultural, and political issues.”

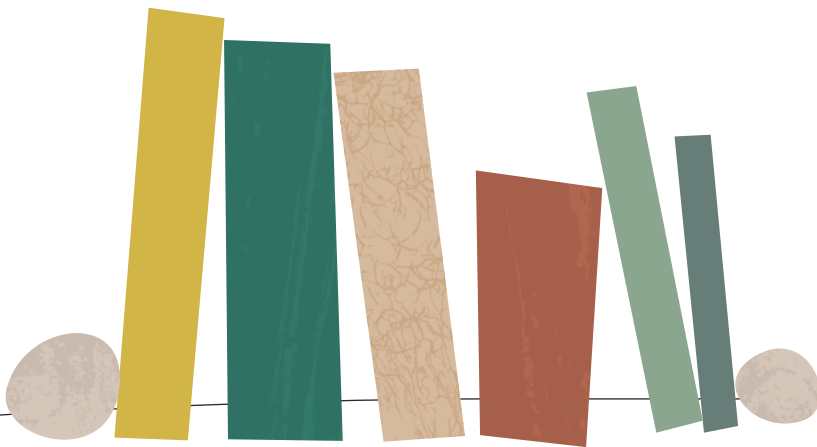
ANTADZE, NINO & FRANCIS WESTLEY. (2010) FUNDING SOCIAL INNOVATION: HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT TO GROW? (PG. 352) THE PHILANTHROPIST. VOLUME 2021 [BIT.LY/3JCHDWQ](https://bit.ly/3JCHDWQ)

¹⁷ The CFT has gone on to fund four pilot projects building on the prototypes that emerged from the Youth Employment Lab. These pilots, although disrupted by Covid 19, continue to be implemented and are showing promise in connecting Opportunity Youth to meaningful and sustainable work and creating more diverse and inclusive workplaces.

Further Resources

Interested in learning more? Check out these other resources related to social innovation labs.

- The Edmonton Shift Lab report on funding social innovation labs bit.ly/3E2WFHs
- Living Guide to Social Innovation Labs bit.ly/3!Wxuu2
- The Edmonton Shift Lab bit.ly/3J91qCZ
- The Social Innovation Lab Field Guide created by the Think Jar Collective in Edmonton. bit.ly/3xMnMF6
- Learnings from CONVERGE Canadian Lab Practitioners Exchange: Report September (2018) bit.ly/3oMo3vK



About the Calgary Youth Employment Initiative

In 2017, the Collaborative Funders' Table (CFT) launched a collaborative funding initiative with the goal of improving employment prospects for Opportunity Youth in Calgary. The initiative focuses on the interface between 'supply' (youth and youth serving agencies) and 'demand' (employers). The goal is to ensure that youth seeking work are better prepared to meet the needs of employers, and that employers are better able to recruit and retain youth. For more information on the Calgary Youth Employment Initiative (CYEI) and resources related to Opportunity Youth employment please go to bit.ly/3IVGRd6

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