

Entrepreneurship Forum of New England: Building a Community of Creativity, Innovation and Entrepreneurs

By Robert Leaver, New Commons

We are in the Fourth Economic Era: Creativity

Historically, our economy has passed through the eras of farmer/artisan, laborer and clerk. In the eras of farmer, artisan and early laborer, creativity and community were bountiful. Creativity was required to get the work done. Community was present because workers relied on the oral transmission of applied and the teaching of the elders. In the second half of the industrial era, and with all of the information/service era, mechanized work took out thinking, creativity and connecting in conversation with others. Creativity and community went dormant. Now, by necessity, they are back.

Building on the economies of the past, we enter the fourth era of creativity shaped by the convergence of many forces including the demand for new combinations of art and science in shaping products and services, the emergence and use of innovative human networks, and the risk taking power of the entrepreneur. In the agrarian era, the prime source of value was land. In the artisan era it was craft. In the industrial era it was materials. In the service era it was process. In the creative era, the prime value is innovative products and partnerships born of the creative mind. The added value must be on both creative *and* innovation as inseparable partners.

In the fourth era, creativity is the source material and innovation is the output. Creativity is the evolution of new connections or combinations never seen before. Convergence of disciplines is the new order. Value results from the use of our mind more than hands alone. Innovation demands independent judgment and not mechanized, mindless solutions. The mind directs the use of our hands.

We live in a world of new combinations, where information will be integrated and processed at greater than lightning speed, where illness will be diagnosed and medicine dispensed by tiny computerized mechanisms created through nanotechnology, where life and work will be improved by advances we can only now begin to imagine. Business, social and aesthetic problems are no longer solvable with a single discipline or function. Andres van Dam the Vice President of Research at Brown University is fond of saying “the whisper in the 60’s was plastics. The new whisper is nano, info and bio combined in one elegant solution.” The new whisper is convergence and collaboration.

Producing fourth era products and services requires fewer raw materials from the earth. Less mass and more knowledge and art make the value. A sustainable planet is more possible.

Our Next Order is Building a Community of Diverse Entrepreneurs

The beginning of the 21st century will be defined and punctuated by those rare souls among us who dream and do, imagine and create: the entrepreneur. Our success in the next economy depends on our ability to carry the genetic memory of our economic and cultural past into our future, re-integrating art and science, to create an economic system based on innovation, sustainability, tolerance, and diversity. This evolving synthesis of art and science manifests in an economy built by entrepreneurs and companies working in local and regional niches such as design, technology, art and culture, biomedical science, ecology and innovation services. *Call to Action: Building Providence’s Creative and Innovative Economy*, a new report based on a series of recommendations developed by a multidisciplinary public-private workgroup and endorsed by Mayor Cicilline of Providence, presents the action plan for shaping the city’s next economy.

At the top of the list: creation of a vibrant, self-nourishing community of entrepreneurs. These are the ones who assume the risk without knowing where all the resources will come from, or even all the bends in the road. These are the ones for whom a passionate calling and innovation are like food and drink. These are the ones who are constantly building the next way – whether they’re running a startup tech firm, leading an established company, or growing a community. These are the ones for who risk and failure is second nature.

Our economy is in Joseph Schumpeter’s “creative destruction.” We are at the end of a cycle where the economy is bloated with goods and services. Talent is tired of downsizing. For them independence is less of a risk than the threat of an axe by a corporation. Enter the entrepreneur with fresh solutions, creatively destructing the old way to build a new order. Many kinds of entrepreneurs are creating: Design entrepreneurs. Social entrepreneurs. Artist entrepreneurs. Moral entrepreneurs. Biomedical entrepreneurs. Ecological entrepreneurs. Neighborhood entrepreneurs. Youth entrepreneurs. Immigrant entrepreneurs. Technology entrepreneurs. Each type represents one niche of the region’s next economy.

Entrepreneurship is a profession and a practice. There is a body of knowledge to learn and transmit, which goes beyond a specific discipline like technology or design. The knowledge is best stored in a professional community for universal access. The community welcomes the emerging and middle-aged entrepreneurs. It embodies the serial, seasoned entrepreneurs. These elders hold out ladders of access for the younger entrepreneurs to grab. The wisdom of older entrepreneurs as mentors makes the community rich. They are Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, Samuel Slater, Moses Brown, and all the modern-day heirs to the entrepreneurial vision. They are Rhode Island. They are New England. They are our own.

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A Long-Standing Culture of Tolerance and Risk-Taking Shape the Ongoing Economic Story

New England's tolerance for unconventional ways of thinking and living – what Roger Williams called “a bold and lively experiment “with” soul freedom for all” – built a place of creative ferment, where old money and new immigrants eventually launched the American industrial revolution in Samuel Slater's cotton mill on the banks of the Blackstone River in Pawtucket RI, subsequently bringing wealth to the rest of the region. As Kip Bergstrom Director of the RI Economic Policy Council describes it: “Tolerance breeds diversity. Diversity of ideas and talent colliding is a pre-requisite for innovation. Several decades later, entering the space of tolerance and innovation is Moses Brown, the first venture capitalist, who invests in Samuel Slater, the first industrial entrepreneur. Slater got a piece of the company.” Slater, expressing his soul freedom, gave birth to the industrial era. This revolution quickly spread up the Blackstone Valley to Worcester, Lowell and Nashua, NH and over to Fall River.

As Carnegie Mellon economic policy expert, Richard Florida has eloquently noted in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, the creative thinkers of the next economy long for that kind of authenticity and community. They long for places like New England. Places like Providence. Places like Nashua, NH. Places like Northampton, MA. The need goes beyond our soul's desire for community. The creative economy requires what Robert Axelrod of the Brookings Institute calls “a clustering of creative agents” – ensembles of talent that form and morph to build the next new thing. Creative companies thrive in places that support a creative ecosystem of investors, irritants, scientists, artists, talent, and catalysts – all of the diverse and mutually dependent elements that fuel innovation and business building, organized as a network of networks. Authentic places throughout New England where ideas and connections move fast, where creative agents come together without impediment, and where creative resources are plentiful. Places that can feed the entrepreneurial soul, where the creative economy will ignite from the combustion of diversity and talent colliding.

Talent comes together based on trust and respect, which is earned from knowing in one's gut, or by trusted referral, that the person will stand, shoulder-to-shoulder, with you. Effective clustering of talent occurs in places where there is thick network of layered relationships connected by trust. This is a creative community.

There is an old and new story of entrepreneurship. The old story was access to capital, and land was the only way to get started. This required the entrepreneur to be initially connected to wealth. The old story was select, solo entrepreneurs. In the 80's and 90's, the story was of bold and successful technology entrepreneurs on very quick ramp-ups. Their story was about the single entrepreneur: finding the angel investor; getting the right business plan; building the team; courting the venture capitalist; doing an IPO (initial public offering) and cashing out. This story still has legs; it just is not universal enough to carry the diverse array of entrepreneurs who must work as a community to build the creative economy.

Today, this community of tolerance seeds a new story of entrepreneurship. It is a future story with some possible threads more than a prediction. Some threads: The conditions are ripe for innovation – the collision and combustion of ideas and talent. Regionally, we are in this together: Local, regional and global economies nest. Authentic places matter: creative agents want to live and work where they connect and feel the presence of others. Town centers matter again. Be in-synch with nature: A sustainable, natural ecology is a natural outcome in an era of creativity, which relies on less mass of materials and more knowledge and aesthetics. Authentic places like Providence hold the cultural and economic ingredients to take innovations to scale.

Economic democracy is more possible in an economy of innovation where businesses start in the mind with an idea more than with land and capital. Bootstrap the business by getting customers and using cash flow will be equally, if not more prevalent, as recruiting investors. Every employee is an owner with a stake in the outcomes. Learning and cash are equally vital for success. Today's entrepreneurs are about difference and diversity in ethnicity, disciplines and scale of business.

Some further threads to weave for the next entrepreneur's story. Business building will follow a long-term, patient gestation cycle: Firms last longer built from the inside out. Entrepreneur as "Lone Ranger" is mostly dead; new game is forming an ensemble of entrepreneurs at the start, each with a piece of talent essential to providing the complete business solution. Elaborate, formula-based business plans are optional, but continuous real-time planning is essential to hone focus and the pitch.

Above all, community is vital. A community is essential where tools, resources and talent coalesce, cluster, collide and combust to shape the fourth economic era – an era of creativity.

The Entrepreneurial Forum of New England–The EFNE – is About Community-Building

The theme of each year's EFNE Festival is "Entrepreneurship is a tough way of life...but we wouldn't have it any other way!" It is tough because no cushion of support exists underneath you like a corporation. It is tough because it requires enormous levels of energy and commitment when the rewards are not fixed, but dependent on performance and the vagaries of many forces not in your control. It is tough because you cannot blame the boss. But we would not have it any other way because of the joys, passion, independence and community you experience. Entrepreneurship is way of being. There is longing for work life integration. There is a desire for a sense of community and connection to our fellow entrepreneurs.

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On September 18, 2003 entrepreneurs from throughout the region converged in Providence for the first annual EFNE Festival. They shared stories, swapped resources, discovered talent, and began to build a regional professional guild based on tolerance, risk-taking, and our long, proud heritage of entrepreneurship. It launched the birth of a larger, organic regional movement.

The Forum is a community of practicing entrepreneurs. Simply said, it is a space and place shaped by sharing practical learning among colleagues. The focus is learn-by-doing and reflection. It is a community of practice. It is about fun. It is about shaping the next story of entrepreneurship in the region. It is about meeting your next partners. It is about the power of associating with others who are practicing the profession of entrepreneurship. It is about culture building.

The community is more than a yearly Festival and monthly events. The events seed the community, which takes shape, over time, through use and trust building. It continues throughout the year, in monthly events and online at www.efne.org and in October of 2004 for the second EFNE Festival. Tolerance, innovation and risk taking shape the entrepreneurial culture we are building together. The creative era is about convergence: both the entrepreneur and the community are symbiotic – joined at the hip. The success and failure of each helps the other learn and get stronger. One can't succeed without the other. We are a guild of professionals devoted to the craft of entrepreneurship.

Visit us on the web at www.efne.org. Be part of shaping the next economy.

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