

[Invest Atlantic Looks at Challenges of Region’s Entrepreneurial Ecosystem](#)

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Nancy Mathis, Nicole Osmond, Joanna Nickerson and Claudia De Fuentes. Image: Cherise Letson

MONCTON– Atlantic Canada’s entrepreneurial “ecosystem” is often boasted as being collaborative, supportive and friendly.

By most accounts, it definitely is. It’s also an ecosystem that’s far from perfect. . . but would we even want it to be?

This was a topic tackled on a panel at Invest Atlantic, [which kicked-off on Wednesday](#) in Moncton, called *Ecosystem- Changemakers & Generational Divide*. The panel was moderated by Wallace McCaine Institute’s Nancy Mathis, along with [Joanna Nickerson](#), social innovation manager of the Pond-Deshpande Centre, [Nicole Osmond](#), Atlantic director of Futurpreneur and Claudia De Fuentes, assistant professor at the Sobey School of Business.

The panel turned into an open discussion with audience members ranging from entrepreneurs to the program developers who help them. A common thread throughout the discussion was how there seems to be a disconnect when it comes to entrepreneurs and the programs and services that are the best fit for them. There are many programs in all the provinces that can help, but how do they know which one to go to? Is there a specific route to take?

“I think the entrepreneurial experience is not a straight line for anybody. It’s a different curved path and you might come at this as your second time around and you know things somebody else doesn’t at the same stage,” Mathis said. “I encourage you all to talk to your organizations, explain what your needs are and make sure if they are not servicing them, push them and say ‘make a connection for me. Pass the baton. Move me along in this thing.’ ... I don’t think we can ever have a map that says ‘step one, do this”

But it's not that no one has tried to make a map, a handbook or cheat sheet. Nicole Osmond said many people she's worked with have tried to create one, but it never works. She says it's the organization's responsibility to hook entrepreneurs up with the programs and people they need, even if it's not theirs. Entrepreneurs also need to push for it.

"I just shake my head when I hear that. The minute you put it in print it's outdated. There is constant movement happening. So there's no easy answer I think for that," she said. "I think it's just putting yourself out there and don't be afraid to make the connection and say 'ok, you can't help me, who should I be talking to?'"

Mathis also added that to have a set or "perfect" ecosystem to begin with would stunt growth and could prevent future entrepreneurs from getting in. However, programs and organizations need to be straight-up about what they can offer.

"I think we have to make sure that it's organic and we continue to have conversations where we educate each other, especially the program members, about what's out there [and what we offer]," Mathis said. "It's important to be as crystal clear about that as possible and try not to boil the ocean and take everybody. It's as strategic to say what you don't do as it is to say what you do do."

That being said, Mathis said what could be helpful is a self-maintained database of programs. Sort of like the Expedia or Airbnb of programs and resources for entrepreneurs that would be continuously updated and maintained by the programers themselves. It was an idea that came about at a hackathon she took part in a few years ago, but it didn't come to full fruition.

"I would love to be involved in anything that was around in being a self-served, self maintained, like an Airbnb," she said. "I do think it's enormously challenging, if not impossible to ask one organization to be a collector and the keeper and the curator of the information. It changes too fast."

Mathis said programers need to work together to share their offerings and expand their reach, while the participants in the program also have the responsibility to share them with others. But if all else fails, you need to pick up the phone and just call around.

It's the only method that works according to former Major Drilling CEO Francis McGuire, who spoke from the audience. McGuire also served as deputy minister of economic development and tourism under former New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna.

"It's a lot simpler than you think. If you can't make four phone calls to get the right answer, something is wrong with you," McGuire said.

"It's amazing if you dare to get out and do things, because we've tried to do all these maps and stuff, and it never works. It never will work. You're wasting your time. We've abandoned it. Just tell people to get on the phone, start contacting people, go pluck yourself in somebody's office. You'll get there. That's what it takes. It takes a little nerve."

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