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**DEVELOPING EVENT MARKETING PRACTICES ACCORDING TO EVENT
IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS**

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis was to gather data from event participants to determine the impact of Oulu Innovation Alliance's Agile Commercialization Ecosystem's events on the attendees to enable improvements in event marketing practices according to the needs of the participants. The topic had not been previously studied although it was considered valuable information in order to develop the commissioner's operations. The objective of the thesis was to understand the impact of the events on the event participants to provide comprehensive information for the commissioner to support organizational development.

The theory includes an insight to two topics: event marketing and personal development. Event marketing chapter provides an understanding on how the commissioner works and what improvements there may be according to theory. Personal development chapter introduces the perspective of the event participants and what they might have to gain from the events. The theory was gathered to support the planning of the research.

The methodology used in this thesis was qualitative method. To gain an understanding of the perspective of the participants theme interviews were conducted. The research data was gathered by interviewing both individuals and teams, and the information was then analyzed in order to come to a conclusion on what the impact was.

The findings resulted in the fact that the events had a variety of impacts from changing the participants' mindset to gaining professional skills and from personal growth to expanding networks. This led to the conclusion that many things are done right in the organization, although there is always room for improvement. Suggestions for developing the operations resulted after evaluating the research data. The findings and conclusion will be thoroughly discussed within the commissioning organization and appropriate measures will be taken to improve the events in the future.

Keywords: event impact, event marketing, personal development, networking, entrepreneurial mindset

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1 INTRODUCTION

Due to major changes globally, such as digitalization, people are forced to look at things from a new perspective, as the ways of working are no longer the same. Short term work contracts are becoming more common despite the preferences of the unemployed to achieve more stability. However, traditional nine to five jobs are becoming more uncommon as people are in need for more flexible hours to support independence and more satisfying life in general. Digitalization enables working on smaller projects at a time as well as connecting buyers and sellers regardless of their physical location. This not only supports people in need for change but also the ones not able to find a permanent job in traditional ways. (European Political Strategy Centre 2016, cited 25.5.2018.)

To support the global trends of changing working life in Oulu region, Oulu Innovation Alliance (OIA) boosts new business creation, business development and internationalization while utilizing local knowhow and creating an extensive network. OIA consist of five ecosystems that represent a range of different fields from healthcare to information and communication technology and more. (Oulun Innovaatioallianssi 2017, cited 25.5.2018.) One of the five ecosystems is known as Agile Commercialization, which is the commissioner of this thesis. Agile Commercialization Ecosystem aims to support the commercialization of new innovations and development of existing companies, as well as enhancing the development of sales knowhow and bringing together companies locally, while also networking internationally (Oulun Innovaatioallianssi 2017, cited 25.5.2018).

To reach the set organizational goals within the Agile Commercialization Ecosystem, events are organized to involve desired stakeholders and to meet their needs, resulting in new innovations, better developed companies and a wide network for all stakeholders' benefit. Event marketing is the main tool to promote the organization's operations, providing a platform for a variety of seminars, workshops, get-togethers, keynotes, mentoring, coaching and much more. Boosting business development and new innovations are the core tasks of the ecosystem, and events are the main way of delivering such knowledge and education. The stakeholders and the event participants of the ecosystem consist of a wide range of people from students to company representatives and entrepreneurs to anyone interested in starting a company of their own.

The objective of this thesis was to determine how the before mentioned events impact the participating stakeholders, what they gain and how they are affected, to be able to provide

development ideas for the commissioner. This topic was suggested by the commissioner to be able to develop their event marketing according to the needs of the stakeholders. It is in the commissioner's objectives to tempt people in participating more events than one to enable long term relationships and expanded network. Feedback had been gathered from participants after many events in the past, but a thorough research on the real impact of the events on the attendees had not yet been determined. However, the commissioner was interested in finding deeper impacts resulting from attending the events to provide guidelines for possible strategic updates in organizational operations.

The author of this thesis works for the commissioner as a project planning officer planning events and thus benefits from the results professionally – a fact to be considered while evaluating the objectivity of this research. Due to the author working within the ecosystem and events, some facts in this thesis originate from personal experiences. The acquired data for this research was gathered using qualitative research method and conducting face to face interviews with a selected group of people in both individual and group interviews. The data was then processed by the author to provide improvement suggestions for the commissioner's use. Valuable information was revealed during this process, leading to some adjustments in event marketing and strategic approach in the organization. This report was executed in a tight schedule which impacted on some of the decisions made during the process, such as the chosen research method.

This thesis begins with an introduction to the ecosystem and the commissioner along with an overall presentation of the events provided by them and the definition of event participants. The introduction is followed by two chapters of theory to provide an insight of the topics in the core of the research problem. The theory is divided in two parts: event marketing, which is considered from the perspective of the commissioner, and personal development, which gives an overall look on the individual's side on what the impact could be. Chapter 5 consists of the methodology used in the research, including gathering and analyzing data, after which chapter 6 covers the results and analysis of the research, leading to the conclusion and discussion at the end of the thesis.

2 COMMISSIONER

This chapter introduces the Oulu Innovation Alliance (OIA) ecosystem along with the commissioner of this thesis, and the operations they provide as well as the definition of event participants, all from the point of view that is relevant to this thesis. The ecosystem consists of several parties working individually in their field but simultaneously in collaboration with one another. The stakeholders of the commissioner's interest come from all five ecosystems and their networks, which consists of a vast amount of people. The following subtopics will help clarify the concept of the ecosystem.

2.1 Oulu Innovation Alliance

The OIA innovation ecosystem is a major actor in the Oulu region with a goal to enhance the attractiveness of Oulu by boosting new business creation, business development and internationalization while exploiting the Arctic and Northern potential. The ecosystem is a collaboration of eight partners:

- City of Oulu
- University of Oulu
- Oulu University of Applied Sciences
- VTT Technical Research Center of Finland
- Technopolis Plc
- The Oulu Region Joint Authority for Education (Osekk)
- Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke)
- Oulu University Hospital

OIA is divided into five separate ecosystems:

- Industry 2026
- Oulu Health
- Northern City with Attractive Opportunities
- ICT and Digitalization
- Agile Commercialization

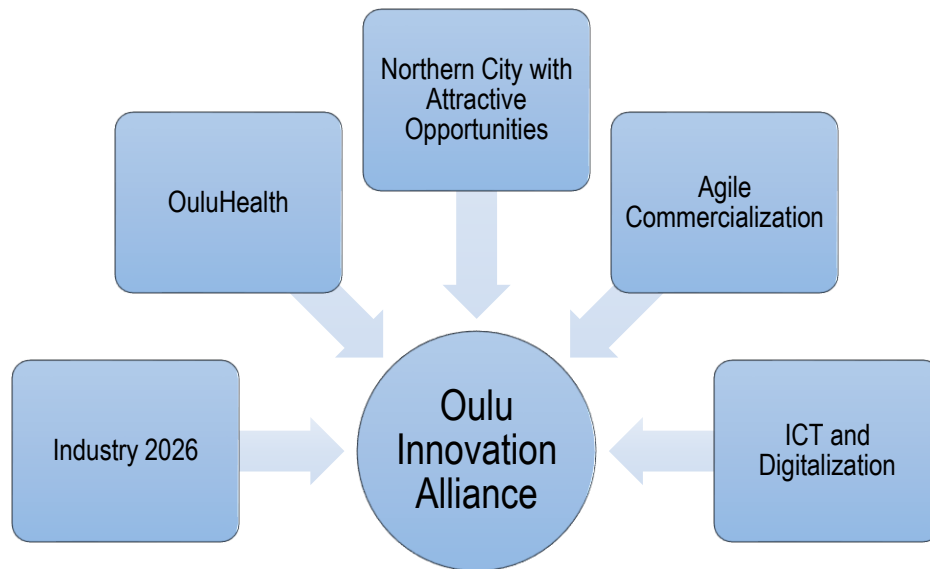


Figure 1 Oulu Innovation Alliance ecosystems

Figure 1 above illustrates the different ecosystems in Oulu Innovation Alliance. Industry 2026 is managed by the University of Oulu, focusing on top research and providing knowhow for industrial needs. OuluHealth is the ecosystem of Oulu University Hospital boosting business creation and development in health tech and healthcare, bringing together people with knowledge from health, natural sciences, IT and business. Northern City with Attractive Opportunities is run by City of Oulu and provides innovative infrastructure together with test environments for the use of businesses. ICT and Digitalization Ecosystem is facilitated by VTT Technical Research Center of Finland and aims to make Oulu the FinTech hub of Northern Europe. The commissioner of this thesis, Agile Commercialization Ecosystem, is introduced in more detail in the following subtopic. (BusinessOulu 2018, cited 11.5.2018.)

2.2 Agile Commercialization Ecosystem

The Agile Commercialization Ecosystem as a part of the Oulu Innovation Alliance focuses on operations which help commercializing business ideas, support business development, boost sales know-how, bring companies together and network internationally (Oulun Innovaatioallianssi 2017, cited 25.5.2018). The currently active project to support the reaching of the goals of the ecosystem is called the ITV-project (Innovaatioallianssin Toiminnan Vauhdittaminen – Acceleration of Innovation Alliance activities), which employs several people including the author, who mainly innovates new events as well as implements existing ones. Figure 2 below illustrates the structure

of the entire ecosystem. Oulu Innovation Alliance is the top organization under which the Agile Commercialization Ecosystem works. ITV-project executes the operations to reach the set goals of the Agile Commercialization Ecosystem, and Business Kitchen is the entrepreneurship hub which is the home of most events and programs that will be introduced in the next subchapter. Each step works in close collaboration with one another to support the objective of the innovation ecosystem – new business creation, business development and internationalization.

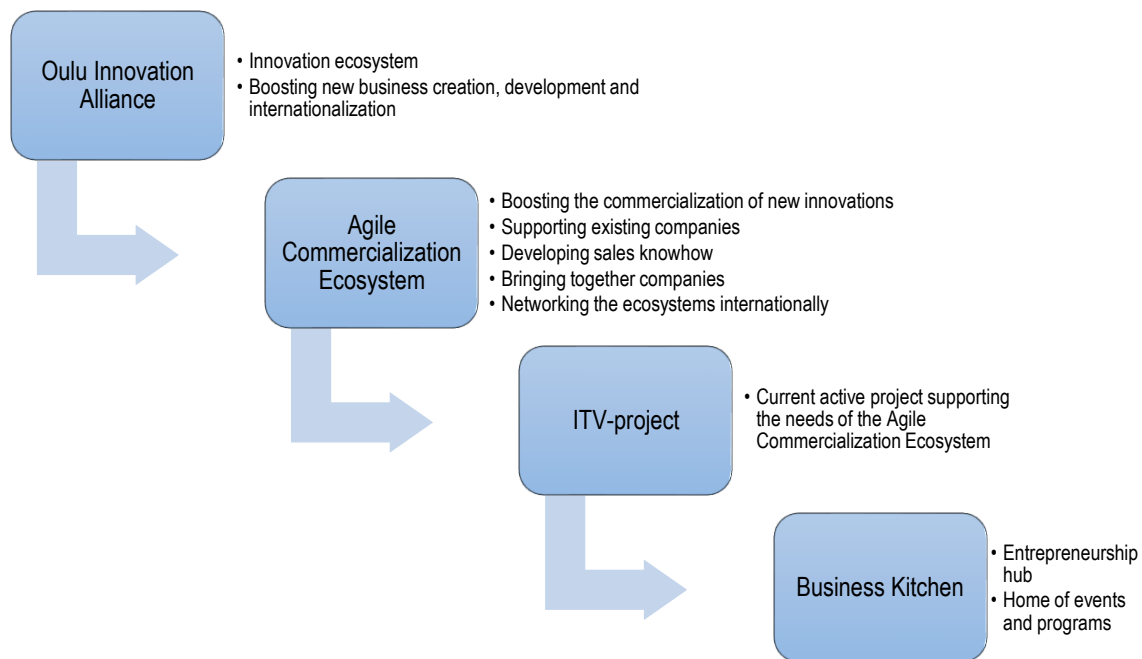


Figure 2 Objective and purpose of each party in the innovation ecosystem

2.3 Introduction of the events

Business Kitchen is an entrepreneurship hub run by two universities: University of Oulu and Oulu University of Applied Sciences. It is a community and co-working space to boost entrepreneurship as well as a brand under which all programs and most of the events are carried out, including those invented in the ITV-project. Business Kitchen provides three long-term programs, which support innovation, business creation and internationalization:

- Avanto Accelerator – Participants enter the program to improve their own business idea.
- International Business Corridor – Students assist companies in internationalization.
- Demola Oulu – Students solve real-life cases for partner companies.

In addition to the long-term programs, Business Kitchen provides a variety of events which are repeated once a year or more often:

- Kickstart – Business idea competition for three faculties: Oulu University of Applied Sciences, University of Oulu and Oulu Vocational College.
- Venturing Research Challenge – Students assist researchers in commercializing their research findings.
- Startup Weekend Oulu – Participants launch startups during one weekend.
- Brandathon – New and creative brand solutions are created for case companies.
- Masterminds' Club – Discussion and networking event for people interested in business development and entrepreneurship. (Business Kitchen, cited 29.5.2018.)

In addition to the above mentioned, there are a variety of other events, which are not repeated: keynotes, seminars, workshops, get-togethers, recruitment events and so on. These events are created according to the needs of the desired target groups during the year and they vary every year. All the before mentioned events are designed to tempt people to participate in more events, finally leading them to the programs, towards entrepreneurship and new innovations according to the ecosystem objectives. The following subchapter introduces the target groups of the events.

2.4 Event participants

The stakeholders of the commissioner, *the event participants*, consist of a large amount of people. They may be company representatives, entrepreneurs, students of different educational levels or just any individual interested in innovations and entrepreneurship. In general, the events are not limited to any age group, gender, nationality, educational background or employment status, which suggests that most anyone can attend. Usually the events have a goal which might limit the people interested in that specific event, for instance workshops which have a certain theme and attract the people who wish to innovate within that topic. Recently there was an event arranged for creative fields, which then attracted all kinds of people who thought themselves to be creative regardless of their field of work. When creating events with no limitation to who may participate, it is always a surprise for the organizer what the outcome is.

Some events are often targeted to students which is natural due to Business Kitchen being located in two university campuses. The hub was previously located in the city center of Oulu, which possibly made it more attractive for other stakeholders such as companies. Students however are an important target group as they have fresh ideas, recently acquired knowledge as well as enthusiasm towards personal development and learning professional skills. Companies often seek particularly students to help with a problem they are facing, such as in Brandathon where students innovate new brand solutions for companies, which is also a valuable experience for the students in terms of work life connection. Usually it is important not to limit the target group too much to allow a wider scale of people to join and network. There are groups of people that might not meet unless an event is organized for them, which brings us to the following chapter discussing the importance of event marketing.

3 EVENT MARKETING

This chapter focuses on the point of view of the commissioner by introducing event marketing, which is used by the commissioner to promote their operations. The objective of this thesis was to form an understanding of what the stakeholders have gained from participating the events in order to reflect the results to the event marketing practices currently executed by the commissioner. The following subchapters introduce the definition of event marketing followed by an introduction to EventBLT, which emphasizes the importance of Brand recognition, Lead generation and Thought leadership in event organizing. In addition, event goals are discussed as well as target groups, finishing with practical event organizing instructions. The chapter ends with a summary of the topics in this chapter to reflect the commissioner's perspective.

3.1 Definition of event marketing

Due to digitalization and increasing information overload consumer behavior has changed creating a need for alternative ways of marketing. Event marketing has taken its place as a tool to promote products and services, since it provides a new and versatile approach to marketing. As a part of an organization's marketing strategy, event marketing is a way to strengthen the brand and support achieving the set organizational goals. Event marketing should also always have a goal, such as gaining visibility, introducing services, getting new customers and partners, and strengthening existing customer relationships. (Vallo & Häyrynen 2016, 21 – 22, 25.) It could be argued that an organization is more likely to reach strategic goals with careful planning than merely executing operations that are not linked to one another.

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2016, 447), marketing communications mix consists of four categories: advertising, personal selling, sales promotions and public relations. Event marketing is often considered to be part of public relations, although personal selling and sales promotions play major roles in it. It is a more personal way of marketing, providing experiences that affect more than one sense. Using visual effects and music along with food and beverages assure a deeper impact on the participants, leaving a positive image of the organization. (Vallo & Häyrynen 2016, 24, 31.) Events in general aim to build a good image of the organizer, as the opinions of the stakeholders is based on their experiences and image of the organizer they have acquired through interaction

(Vallo & Häyrynen 2016, 36, 38 – 39). Gaining and maintaining a good reputation is crucial for any organization to enable long-term relationships with the stakeholders. Reputation, especially if it is bad, might affect the number of participants and their level of commitment.

3.2 EventBLT

According to Saget, events are a great way to raise awareness of the organization and to show the variety of products and services they have to offer. To support the success of events, a theory of EventBLT is introduced with the three parts that need one another to work sufficiently:

1. *Brand Recognition*
2. *Lead Generation*
3. *Thought Leadership*

The three parts have the best impact when used simultaneously, without leaving any part out of the mix. Each component serves a specific purpose and needs the others to create a cohesive and consistent basis for an event. (2006, 3, 7.)

Brand recognition goes deeper than events and thus brand should be integrated in all activities throughout the event cycle. Event branding is possible to gain in a single event, but brand awareness takes years to form. Branding may be done aggressively by putting the name of the organization everywhere or in a more delicate way by logically matching the image of the organization in the environment. (Saget 2006, 7 – 10.) Whichever way is chosen, it will enhance the brand in long-term and assist in building the image of the organization.

Lead generation goes beyond any one event. It is building the relationships and further supporting them in face-to-face encounters, providing personal solutions and interaction to meet the customers' needs. Lead generation reflects the touch points the organization has with the stakeholders, from pre-event e-mails to one-on-one time and educational sessions to post-event follow-up. (Saget 2006, 10 – 11.)

Thought leadership is getting your voice heard by experts and distinguishable individuals within the team. Focusing on keynotes from these thought leaders, the audience is given an impression of

credible content, eventually leading to increase in sales. Events personalize the organization to the stakeholders and create a more intimate relationship between them. (Saget 2006, 12 – 13.)

3.3 Event goals

Setting goals for events is the first step when beginning the planning process, for it will lead to better results and more efficient work. Vallo & Häyrynen state that goals should guide the entire process beginning from the planning phase, and results should be measured according to the set goals. The three categories into which event goals may be divided are as follows:

1. *Technical* goals, which include increasing the number of participants, reaching the right target group and decreasing expenses.
2. *Change*, which includes learning new skills, getting new ideas, changing mindsets and getting to know new people.
3. *Effectiveness*, which consists of improving efficiency, saving time, creating new relationships and improving the general atmosphere. (2016, 59 – 60.)

One event may have goals from all above-mentioned categories, for instance reaching the right target group for a specific content, changing the mindset of people and creating new relationships – the combination often used in the commissioner's events. Figure 3 below illustrates the possible goals the events may have. Vallo & Häyrynen (2016, 38) point out that gathering feedback from the participants is a sufficient way to find out if the set goals were achieved and whether there is room for improvement.

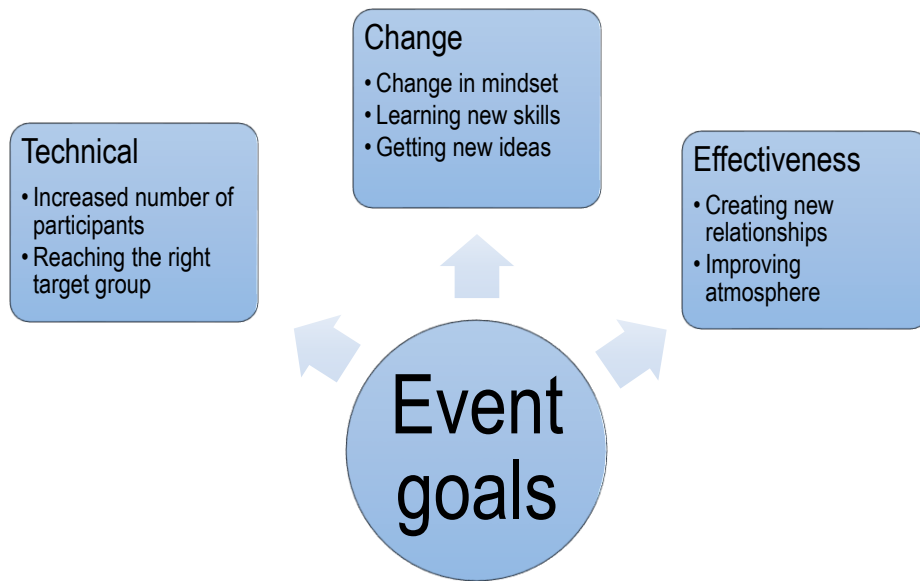


Figure 3 Event goals in theory

3.4 Target groups

According to Vallo & Häyrynen (2016, 22 – 23, 36), bringing like-minded people together is the core of all events, while events should always be designed to a specific target group with carefully planned content to support interaction and to reach each group according to their interest and needs. Target audience is a group of regular people, but for the event organizer they are recommenders, influencers and buyers (Saget 2006, 31). Target group for an event may be open for all, limited to a specific group, or just as well open for a specific group. Knowing the target group allows the organizer to create an event which best serves that specific group, as there are differences in people's needs and wants. (Vallo & Häyrynen 2016, 145.)

An event should never be organized just to please the organizer and analyzing the target group is vital to determine what kind of event they need and what content is appropriate for them. Each group should receive the same output and respect to keep the level of services consistent and interesting for all. Keeping the stakeholders' contact information up-to-date saves a lot of effort when sending direct invitations, as well as dividing them into groups according to their field of work, interests and needs. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system would benefit the organization in holding all important information in one place and available for all employees who need it, while keeping delicate information safe and secure. Being well prepared also means to

expect a certain percentage of people to not show up although they responded to an invitation. Facebook is especially unreliable what comes to predicting who will come, as people tend to respond to those requests even if they have no intentions of going. If the percentage of no-shows is over 30, the organizer should evaluate what went wrong and how it could be improved in the future. (Vallo & Häyrynen 2016, 148 – 149, 151, 153.)

3.5 Event organizing

After determining the goal and target group for an event, the actual planning can begin – where, when and how. Important factors which make an event are location, timing, catering, theme and content. Vallo & Häyrynen states that location should not be too far away for it may affect whether people want to come or not. Events are often organized in organization's own premises. (2016, 167.) Using the organization's own premises is most likely cost-efficient, as there might not be any rental costs, unlike when renting a space from another party. The venue should be of the appropriate size for the amount of people expected and decorations have the ability to bring the atmosphere to another level (Vallo & Häyrynen 2016, 171).

Timing is equally important to fit the event into the schedules of busy business people. The best time of the day tends to be early morning or later in the evening so that the office hours are not disturbed. Breakfast events are the most popular as much as the ones set in the middle of the work week. Catering should also be fit to the theme and the nature of the event and outsourcing it might be beneficial to the organizer to save time and effort as well as letting professionals choose the appropriate menu for the occasion. Theme and content of events are always tied together considering the needs of the target group and they should be consistent and supporting one another. (Vallo & Häyrynen 2016, 174 – 175, 182, 233.)

3.6 Chapter summary

Event marketing is an excellent way of promoting products and services in the modern world, where people want to see things from a new perspective and expect efficient use of their time. The commissioner provides a variety of events and services to meet the needs of the stakeholders, and in this particular case of promoting innovativeness and business development skills event marketing works particularly well. It enables to simultaneously utilize all the components the

commissioner wishes to offer – networking, mentoring, innovative environment and tools to succeed.

EventBLT introduces a theory of three components needed for a successful event: brand recognition, lead generation and thought leadership. The commissioner often runs events under the Business Kitchen brand to connect them to other events and programs as well as support the recognizability of the brand within the ecosystem. Lead generation is executed in several ways in the commissioner's operations as it is vital to the continuance of the relationships and future collaboration. Stakeholders are generally personally directed to receive the assistance and guidance they need to provide a smooth path towards their goal. Thought leadership support this as there are strong individuals within the organization to assure quality coaching reflecting their personal know-how and experiences.

The commissioner's goals with the events always include aspects from the three categories introduced in chapter 3.3 illustrated in figure 3. Technical goals are used as guidelines in the planning process to support increasing the number of participant, to reach the desired stakeholders and to keep up with the expenses. Change goals from the organizational point of view include many attributes crucial to the participants, but also the commissioner that is constantly in need for changing mindsets and learning new ideas. As an environment the ecosystem leads an example by finding new and innovative ways to work as well as developing their practices.

Events should always be planned from the point of view of the participant and what they expect. It might be so that the commissioner sometimes assumes the stakeholders need a certain kind of event, which is then proven wrong by not managing to get enough participants. It is difficult to know what the stakeholders think especially when the group of people is as massive as it is in this case. It is not possible to please everyone, but it should be in the interest of the event organizer to find the key elements which best serve each target group. A CRM system mentioned in chapter 3.4 would benefit the commissioner to control the amount of people and their contact information to enable smoother and systematic communications with the stakeholders.

Good event organizing practices are well known within the team in charge of them. As previously mentioned, the fact that Business Kitchen moved from the city center into two separate locations on university campuses has caused some difficulties. Certain stakeholders and partners have chosen not to attend events organized on campuses and the number of students now involved

shows that it is more convenient for them. Timing is another issue that always rises as no time or day of the week suits everyone. As mentioned in chapter 3.5 breakfast events are favored by business people, which has been noted by the organizer. Free food and drinks always attract people and the commissioner often receives positive feedback on this. All in all the gathered theory on event marketing practices supports the commissioner's strategy, but suggests that there are several components that could be improved.

4 PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned before in this thesis, the changes in working life suggests that personal development should be in the interests of all people in order to succeed in professional life in the future. An individual is never complete and focusing on developing personal attributes assures that they keep up with the changing environment. This chapter is considered from the point of view of the event participants and what they are able to learn when attending the events organized by the commissioner. This information was gathered in order to form an understanding on what personal development consists of and how it may benefit the participants discussed in this thesis. The topics chosen for this chapter include personal development plan to introduce the key components in becoming successful, the importance of learning professional skills, introduction to networking and finally the concept of entrepreneurial mindset. At the end of the chapter these topics will be summarized from the point of view of the commissioner.

4.1 Personal development plan

According to Fagerström, success requires right choices and actions, and achieving personal goals is possible when constantly moving forward. Once a person knows their strengths, it is possible to set goals accordingly and reach them. The better one knows their abilities, the better they can be utilized to succeed. Recognizing one's weaknesses also enables the development of those areas and becoming more efficient. Some personal attributes, such as problem-solving skills, might boost success, if they are acknowledged and used as an advantage. (2011, 15, 17.)

Defining goals is vital to become successful, since they push towards right decisions and efficient use of time. Personal goals should always be set high, but at the same time they should be achievable and realistic. Good goals are not in conflict with other objectives, but work in favor of both. Even when the original objectives are not reached, the journey has probably taught and helped to develop enough to make it worth the effort. When all parts of life are balanced, including both personal and professional life, reaching the set goals is easier. Objectives should be both long-term and short-term, while long-term goals set the direction to follow and short-term goals ensure that something is done at all times and not just in the far future. (Fagerström 2011, 17 - 19.)

The right attitude goes a long way and active engagement towards the set goals is much more efficient and inspiring. A successful person makes the right choices and keeps the objectives in mind as they go, as with the right mindset people do not wait for things to happen, but they work hard to get what they want. Proactive people aim to affect things before hand and develop better ways of working along the way. They dare to be different and challenge other people towards fresh ideas and developing the ways of working. (Fagerström 2011, 56 – 58.)

4.2 Professional skills

Personal development should contain goals to become better professionally, which does not need to end in graduation. Fagerström points out that basic professional skills are often gained during professional studies, which should reflect the future career needs. After graduation professional skills keep evolving while working, but they should also be developed by taking additional courses and studying professional literature. Further education not only supports professional know-how but offers new ideas and possibilities to network. (2011, 74.)

Succeeding in professional life goes beyond just excelling at what the actual job description consists of, as most skills support one another. For instance, even when not employed in IT-sector, different computer skills are essential in nearly every job and even more so in the future. Knowing the customers and their needs, understanding the importance and versatility of marketing, being able to sell even when not working in sales, and excelling leadership skills will take the work performance to another level. (Fagerström 2011, 120 – 124.)

4.3 Networking

Succeeding requires not only personal input, but also assistance from other people. The possibilities through networks is far greater than surviving alone, as the resources and knowledge other people have to offer multiply the chances to succeed. Building a wide network requires some contribution and can be done both actively and passively. Active networking is using all opportunities to meet new people and introducing oneself, giving out a positive image as a professional – especially during the first encounter as first impressions are crucial. Passive networking is making sure people can connect a name to a face from any occasion such as seminars and meetings, even when there are no personal introductions and handshakes or one-

on-one discussions. Networks should also go beyond work environment and reach people from leisure activities and personal life. It is not only getting but just as much giving to others, it is all about interaction between people. (Fagerström 2011, 113 – 119.)

Fagerström reminds that technology provides a great platform to support networking and to maintain already built relationships. Blogs, social media and discussion forums are a good way to show interests as well as come across active and involved, and through these channels it is possible to reach a much bigger audience. Although, online networking does not eliminate the need for personal encounters and talking to people is always the most efficient way of keeping up relationships. Asking for someone's opinion shows respect, and people appreciate personal discussions – even more so when not only addressing work issues. Modern day relationships do not require too much work but are increasingly important in a successful career. (2011, 117 – 119.)

4.4 Entrepreneurial mindset

Kansikas states that being an entrepreneur requires courage, innovativeness, determination, strength, belief in oneself as well as the ability to constantly learn new things and renew one's thoughts and learned patterns. Entrepreneurship education is more than turning individuals into entrepreneurs for the benefit of the society, but also affecting the personal development and growth of people in a broader sense, which supports the changing work life previously discussed in this thesis. Forming an entrepreneurial mindset begins at early age when children practice taking initiative and exercise their imagination along with their creativity while playing. Entrepreneurial education aims to bring entrepreneurial attitude and knowledge to people, which will be useful no matter if the person works for someone else or for themselves. (2007, 15, 21.)

Entrepreneurial mindset has been supported in the Finnish higher education since 1980s in both universities and universities of applied sciences. Witnessing positive examples is important for students to see how success is possible and achievable, in addition to the entrepreneurial environment which brings together like minded people, events, possibilities and different possibilities. Collaboration between different fields is easy within the universities, enabling new innovations which go beyond one faculty and their expertise. Failing and making mistakes is normal and part of the learning experience and the university environment creates a safe place to try. (Kansikas 2007, 44 – 45.)

Kansikas refers to Huuskonen by introducing the four steps to become an entrepreneur illustrated in figure 4 below. The process begins by an increased *interest* towards entrepreneurship, which might lead to *considering* to actually become one. Some people who consider it, might move towards the *intention* of becoming an entrepreneur, finally leading to some taking *action* and starting a company. (2007, 20.) Each step takes an initiative from the person, which could lead to a decrease in the group of people moving to the next phase. It could also be stated that all three steps before reaching the action phase indicate a change in mindset, although not everyone becomes an entrepreneur.

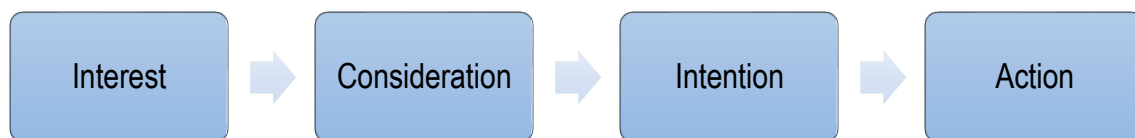


Figure 4 The four stages towards entrepreneurship

4.5 Summary of personal development

The commissioner aims to support innovativeness, new business creation and business development, which suggests that the people participating in the events should possess personal attributes to support that or alternatively have a will to develop. All activities provided by the commissioner offer the environment to develop some of the personal attributes mentioned in chapter 4.1, but the choice is the participants' whether they will be open for developing themselves. In some workshops for instance the participants are given a task to reflect their own strengths, which might help someone to see themselves from a new perspective. The atmosphere in events is kept inspiring and encouraging to support positive attitude and creativity.

Many events and programs focus on practical issues concerning new business creation or business development, which support the learning of crucial professional skills. The coaching during events is often much more personalized than what the participants may have experienced during their

studies. Some may have not attended any business studies at all but come from another field with a business idea and need help with commercializing it. Many skills learned during the events support working life needs regardless if the person starts an own company or works for someone else in the future.

Networking is possibly the most useful part of all events. Building an extensive network will someday bring along opportunities that would not have come otherwise. Bringing together people from different fields often results in innovations which would not have been created within a group of people with the same background. The commissioner's events are often in English, which tempts multicultural people to attend. This usually results in solutions which are considered from very different perspectives than within a group of Finns only. Networking is such a crucial part of personal development that it should be utilized more in order to attract people to attend the events.

Entrepreneurial mindset introduced in chapter 4.4 is a complex matter. It takes time to build up and it can be changed both consciously and unconsciously. It is a sum of many attributes and personality which supports positive thinking and the ability to develop behavioral patterns. Entrepreneurship is not for all since it requires many attributes that might not come natural to some due to differences in personalities, but entrepreneurial mindset is another thing. It is something that can be learned and developed by during studies for instance. The author of this thesis is a textbook example of a changed entrepreneurial mindset solely due to the influence of the ecosystem. Spending time with people who think differently, who are brave enough to try even if they fail and who support one another has power to modify someone's thinking into a direction that was never seen possible before. The importance of support is vital to succeed and choosing the right kind of environment to spend time in can be life changing.

5 METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this thesis was qualitative research, which allowed the author to gather information that was not yet determined. It was in the interest of the commissioner as well as the author to find out the impact of the events on participants to determine if changes in event marketing were necessary. Qualitative research was chosen to enable flexibility during the process. As Eriksson and Kovalainen point out, qualitative research rarely goes according to the plan as it leaves room for surprises that most likely occur during the research (2008, 26). To enable the gathering of information, especially any new observations not previously arisen in event feedbacks, selected individuals were chosen to conduct interviews with, leaving room for them to express themselves and give away as much information as they wanted. Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara (2008, 157) suggests that in qualitative research the topic should be researched as widely as possible. The following subtopics introduce in more depth the research method, interviews and data analysis from the perspective of this particular research.

5.1 Qualitative research

As mentioned before, qualitative research was chosen as the method to approach the topic. Event impact had not been determined before leaving room for unexpected and subliminal findings. Hirsjärvi et al. suggests that information in qualitative research may be interpreted from the point of view of the commissioner to support their needs (2008, 156). The interest of the commissioner was to gather as much information as possible for the use of this thesis as well as for future purposes to develop their operations. This also leads to the fact that according to Hirsjärvi et al., objectivity of the research may be debatable, as the perspective of the researcher affects the interpretation of the findings. However, the aim of qualitative research is to find and reveal facts and illustrate real life in all its complexities. (2008, 157.)

The interest of the commissioner or the author was not to collect information that was already known, but to approach the topic with an open mind to reveal facts that perhaps had not been discussed in the past. The research process begun with a rough draft which was soon found to be changing according to the theory base introduced previously in this thesis. During the process the entire report changed drastically as the more information was revealed the more adjustments the

work required. Eriksson and Kovalainen confirms that qualitative research is a circular process enabling changes in the entire plan as well as any part of the work, which is without a doubt one of the most rewarding features of the method (2008, 31). This research was a learning process for the author with the chosen method allowing to personally develop by making mistakes and correcting them along the way. If there had been more time for this research, it is possible that a questionnaire would have been added to support the research from a quantitative perspective. It might however be done by the author as an employee rather than student after reviewing this thesis and determining if there is a need for further research.

5.2 Interviews

Conducting interviews instead of a questionnaire was not only the primary choice of the author, but also of the commissioner. Personal interviews enabled a broader view of the topic, leaving room for the interviewees' own perceptions and additional information regarding the events and the ecosystem. Hirsjärvi et al. reminds that it is not the task of the interviewer to determine what information is valuable, whereas to gather appropriate data the informants need to be carefully selected (2008, 160). For the purposes of this thesis existing contacts were used to assure a variety of different backgrounds and points of view from interviewees. The informants chosen had both international and Finnish people, students and entrepreneurs, male and female, locals and people from other parts of Finland, and individuals from different levels of education as well as several faculties, and with a variety of experience from the events – some with less, others with more. Interviews were also done with both teams and individuals per request of the commissioner. Two teams and three individuals were chosen for the interviews, with eight individual people altogether.

Several of the organization's programs and events either take in teams or form teams during the event, which led to the conclusion that teams could have an insight to some impacts which an individual might not have noticed. Group interviews are possibly more efficient, as information can be gathered from several people at once, although there may be a dominant individual within the group who leads the interview and does not give room for the others (Hirsjärvi et al. 2008, 205 – 206). Both statements were found to be somewhat true, as group interviews allowed a time efficient way of gathering information, and both team interviews were dominated by an individual. However, all individuals were given the possibility to give their input, due to the awareness of the author about the before mentioned problem.

Interviews may be divided into three categories: structured, theme and open. Structured interview consists of prepared set of questions, while open interview leaves room for the interviewer to adapt to the situation and come up with questions they best see fit. Theme interviews combine the two, having a set of questions but allowing the interviewer to modify them according to the situation. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2008, 203 – 204.) Theme interviews were used for the purposes of this thesis, which was soon found to be the correct way of gathering the information. The interviews often took unexpected turns to topics which were not in the set of questions but enabled broader discussions within the subject.

The duration of the interviews was approximately 30 minutes each which was found to be enough time to go through the set of questions, ask additional questions that arose from the answers given and leave room for the informants to add anything if they felt the need. The interview structure may be found in Appendix 1 at the end of this thesis. It consists of the set of questions that were used to ensure the structure was the same in every interview and the theme was consistent throughout the process, although every interview turned out to be very different. Some people were willing to discuss the given topics in more depth without much effort from the interviewer and others needed more follow-up questions in order to reveal their real thoughts. After having interviewed two teams and three individuals the main findings were formed. Having a tight schedule had an impact to the number of interviews conducted. If there had been more time, it is likely that a few more interviews had been done, although the amount of information gathered was sufficient for analysis.

5.3 Data analysis

The core reason of any research is analyzing and interpreting the gathered data, which is then organized accordingly (Hirsjärvi et al. 2008, 216). In this case, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed for further assessing. The author's analyzing and observing process was ongoing throughout the time period while the interviews were held to be able to form an understanding of the content received. Hirsjärvi et al. supports this method, stating that in qualitative research the data is often collected in several stages and processed simultaneously (2008, 218). The main objective was to understand how the informants had experienced the events and what they felt they had gained from participating. The results and analysis of this research is further discussed in the following chapter.

6 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The following chapter sums up the results that were gathered by interviewing event participants. During the data analysis the gathered information was divided into six categories according to the interest of the commissioner: the *expectations* the participants had had when choosing events, the *general experience* they had had once attended, the *marketing communication* measures which had affected them before, during and after events, the opinion they had formed about *Business Kitchen* according to their experiences, the *impact* they personally felt they had had from the events, and finally the *improvement suggestions* they had to offer to support the developing of the operations. The main findings are illustrated in Figure 5 below excluding the event impact and improvement suggestions which are discussed in more detail in the following subchapters. The results of the research were somewhat predictable, but there were aspects that were not known until the subjects revealed their personal experiences.

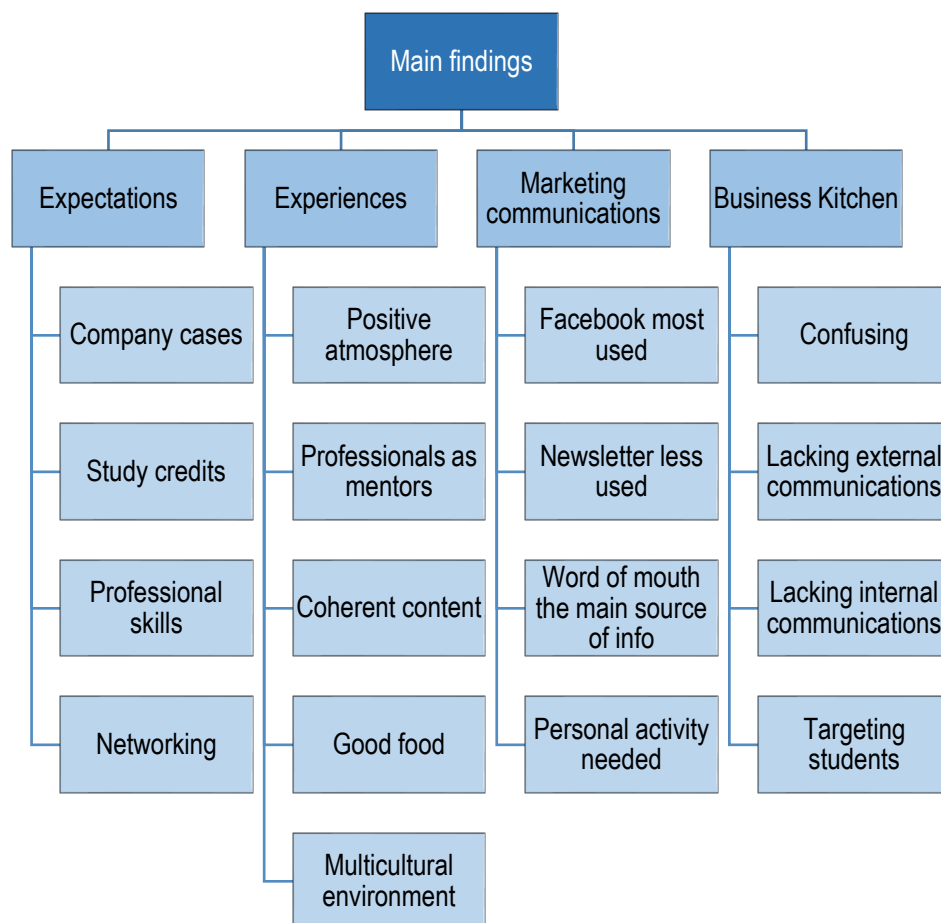


Figure 5 Main findings

6.1 Expectations of the participants

The *expectations* of the participants varied as could be anticipated. Some people had no expectations, as they were not aware of all the programs, events and support the commissioner had to offer. They joined the network to get help with a business idea and familiarized themselves with the operations when talking to people within the ecosystem. It was often mentioned that jumping in was not intentional and it just happened leading to many great things that they did not anticipate. This might suggest that the marketing communications of the organizer have failed if the participants do not know what they can get from participating. There are people who are willing to get involved and learn, but the commissioner needs to find a way to communicate to them why they should attend.

Among students the possibility to work with actual company cases was seen most valuable and something that basic studies did not offer in their opinion. There are events where the participants meet company representatives and create solutions for real work life purposes. It was mentioned, that fake cases were not seen as rewarding as getting to do something concrete for a real company or company representative and thus help them in developing their business. Some hoped for cases which were not too field specific so that the students could collaborate more and not feel out of place. Some had learned that specific events and programs are worth study credits which was enough for them to join, although the process of getting the credits was not clear and required effort from the students themselves. There will be changes to the study credit system in the future as it is being processed at the moment.

Learning about startups and how to establish a company was seen extremely interesting as some had not had any practical knowledge of the topic. Others had had some previous training but joined the events expecting to deepen their knowledge. Gaining professional skills was an objective for some of the informants as they felt that their basic studies did not offer that possibility. This was very much dependent on the field of study and the university as others were more familiar with for instance public speaking and group work. As introduced in chapter 4.2, professional skills consist of a variety of components that are not necessarily field specific but benefit people in many stages of their careers. The commissioner supports the personal development of the event participants which could also be used to attract more people in attending them.

An interesting fact was that a minority of the people had thought about the possibility and advantages of networking during the events – before attending. Entrepreneurs' point of view strongly focused on networking and the possibility of giving and receiving help from others but students in general had not yet understood the benefits nor was it a reason to attend events. Chapter 4.3 discussed the importance of networking from professional perspective, which clearly stated the importance of networks especially in the future. The commissioner aims to provide the opportunities to meet with people from a variety of fields, but the initiative to form relationships needs to come from the participants.

6.2 Experiences of the participants

The *experiences* of all participants had been mostly positive. The general atmosphere of the events was seen encouraging and supportive providing an environment to innovate without risks. The participants had experienced that every idea was valuable which boosted confidence and inspired to create more. Creating an innovative atmosphere is important for the commissioner to enable innovations and fresh ideas and it could be stated that according to the findings in this research this has been done successfully. Special praise was also given to the professionals working as mentors and advisors as they were looked up to and trusted. It was important for many that the person giving advice was not just any employee but someone who had personal experience in starting companies and developing them which confirms the importance of thought leadership introduced in chapter 3.2.

Events were also seen as supporting one another, when the skills learned in one event were found useful later in another. This suggests that by experiencing the need for the recently acquired skills rewarded the participants and led to a long-term relationship where they wanted to learn more. This finding supports the goal of the commissioner to create relationships that last over a long period of time, referring to lead generation discussed in chapter 3.2. Content was thought to be on point, interesting and sufficient, and mainly the reason to participate in many cases. Food and drinks also got several compliments, as they were even the original reason to attend events for some people, especially students.

Not having a large amount of people attending, or having a homogeneous group, such as mostly foreign students, was often seen as a disadvantage in an event, for it resulted in less local contacts

and affected the result of the case. The ideal group seemed to be multinational with people from different backgrounds and fields of education but including Finnish people in order to create a product or service that could be made for the local markets. Multicultural environment as a whole was experienced positive with the possibility to improve language skills and hear different perspectives from other cultural backgrounds, but the lack of Finnish participants seemed to cause some problems in group activities. The lack of Finnish participants in events has been noticed by the commissioner and actions to find solutions have been taken.

The location of the events got both good and bad feedback. Whenever the event was located where the person spent time anyway, it was seen as an advantage, but going to another location was found inconvenient. Most criticism got Business Kitchen Tellus at Oulu University, which is located far from the Oulu University of Applied Sciences students and entrepreneurs. The location issue has been discussed previously in this thesis and unfortunately it is impossible to change at the moment. Alternative locations for individual events however are increasingly used to balance the situation. All in all, the experiences of the participants were positive which suggests that the major goals are achieved requiring only slight adjustments in event marketing practices.

6.3 Marketing communications as experienced by the participants

The *marketing communications* of the events was generally seen adequate as it is mainly done through Facebook which is used by most people. Although, it seemed that if someone had not been to any events or was not familiar with Business Kitchen, meaning they did not follow Business Kitchen on Facebook, there was no marketing communications at all that would reach them. Most all of the informants were on the mailing list of the Business Kitchen newsletter which contains information about upcoming events, but they failed to read them. It was mentioned that email was not the primary source of information for any of them while the amount of received emails was massive and difficult to manage. The newsletter is currently manually assembled which could easily be automated using technology to save the time and effort.

Word of mouth turned out to be the main channel for people becoming aware of what was going on, as someone had always noticed a Facebook post and told their friends and colleagues about an interesting event. This was the case in all stakeholder groups. Also participating in one event often led to the staff keeping some people personally posted about upcoming events, especially

the people who spend time in either of the Business Kitchen locations which ultimately means students. It was often the conclusion that personal activity to search for information was needed in order to keep up with what was happening next. The best solution would be to invest in Facebook marketing in order to reach a larger amount of people.

6.4 Business Kitchen from the point of view of the participants

Business Kitchen was a confusing brand for everyone. It was unclear what Business Kitchen was, who was running it, whom it was for and what operations were included under the brand. Many different logos used in marketing communication and events did not help to understand the concept. Some talked about an organization, some thought Business Kitchen was merely a coworking space and others did not understand that the same people are behind many operations. It was mentioned that having known the different events were organized by the same people or their close colleagues, it would have made things easier for them in terms of finding new events and the right people to talk to. The interesting fact is that all the informants had participated in one or more events but still did not understand the concept. This did not come as a surprise since internal discussions are ongoing on the overall vision and strategy of the Business Kitchen which are currently not determined.

Internal communications did not seem to work well within the organization and it showed to the participants. Employees were not aware of what their colleagues were doing leading to misunderstandings and mixed instructions to the participants. Both entrepreneurs and students also had the perception that Business Kitchen was currently mainly targeting students, not businesses, and not least because of located in two university campuses. It is unfortunate that companies and entrepreneurs do not feel as welcome to join the events, but this is also an issue that is currently being addressed by the commissioner.

6.5 Event impact from the point of view of the participants

From the point of view of the participants, the impact was different according to their expectations, experiences and perceptions. The main impacts are illustrated in Figure 6 below. The most concrete impact had been a money prize from a competition which had enabled to take a business idea to the next level and start a company. It was life changing for the informants enabling them to

take the next step while still receiving personal mentoring from Business Kitchen. Receiving a large amount of money was the single most significant impact as it resulted in the main goal of the commissioner, creating a new business.

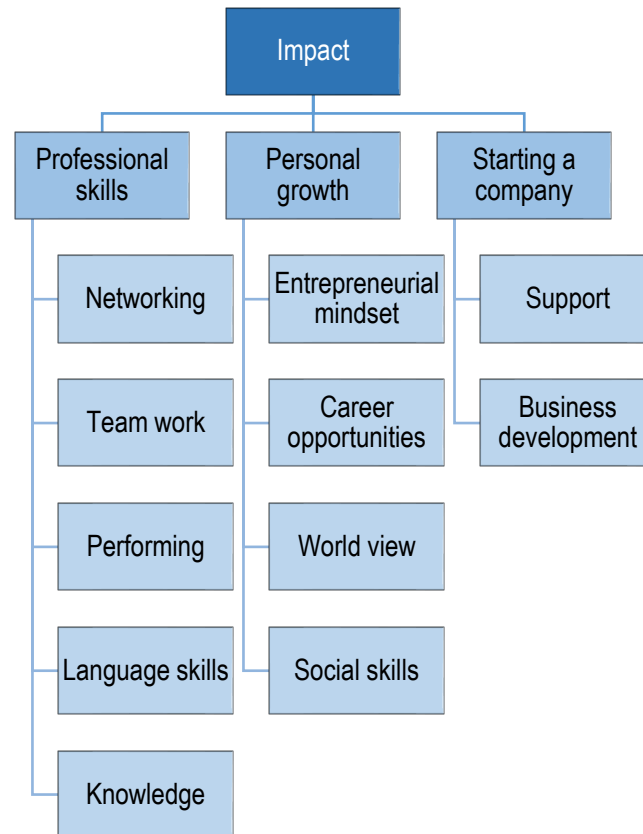


Figure 6 Event impact as experienced by the participants

Other impacts were divided into two categories under professional skills and personal growth defined according to the findings. Most people felt they had gained valuable professional skills and a better understanding of the working life. These skills included working as a part of a team and how to perform in front of an audience. Pitching is an important skill when creating a startup and it is often practiced in different events. The professional skills also consisted of improved language skills while working in multicultural teams and all the knowledge provided during workshops and other events. Practical business creation and development skills were found useful for the future career. After participating in one or more events all attendees had realized the importance of networking and saw it as one of the most valuable assets they had gained, including getting to know both peers and professional people.

Personal growth was another category which was determined according to the data. Increase in entrepreneurial mindset had happened to many, although some admitted having been interested in the subject in the past. The environment had enabled them to try a business idea without risks which had encouraged them to take action. In some cases, the experience had brought the reality of entrepreneurship close enough for them to realize it was not for them due to the amount of work it takes to start a company, not to mention the risks of it in real life. In addition to changes in mindset, personal growth was also supported by enhancing social skills by working with different people as well as changing their view of the world by providing fresh ideas on how a career may be built reflecting the changes globally.

6.6 Managerial implications suggested by the participants

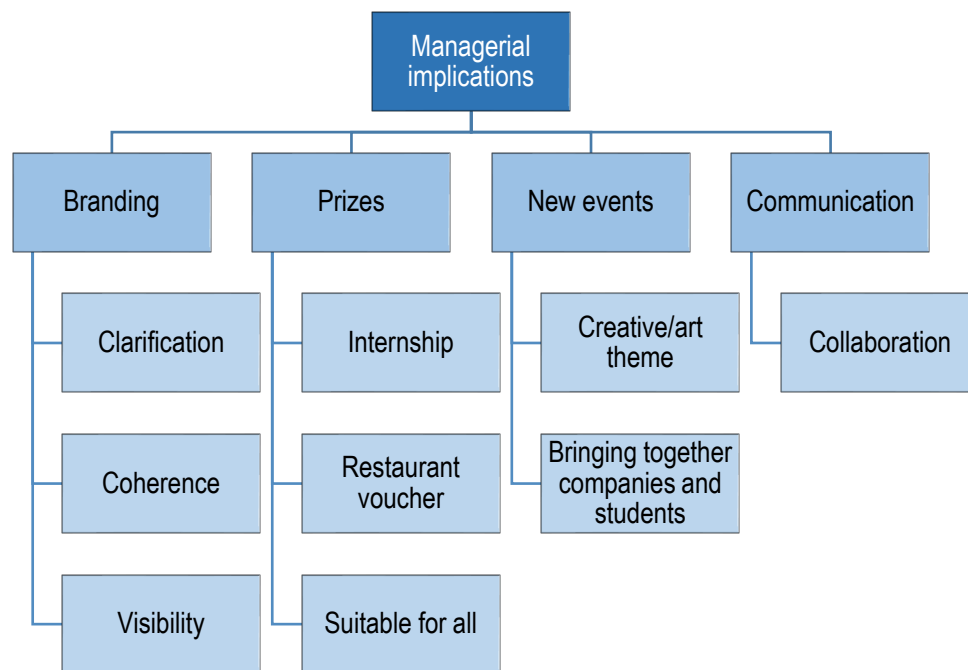


Figure 7 Managerial implications suggested by participants

All informants suggested some ideas to improve the events and the commissioner's operations in general which were then divided into four categories: branding, prizes, new events and communications. It was mentioned that Business Kitchen's visibility on campuses should be improved and the brand itself needed to be clarified and more coherent to be apprehensible. Communication between Oulu University of Applied Sciences' different departments and Business Kitchen could be better, to maximize the benefits of collaboration as there are currently many

entrepreneurial events run within different departments that have no connection to Business Kitchen.

Some found problem solving and real-life cases to be most rewarding in the events and others found competitions with prizes more motivational. Company connections such as internship or summer job were suggested as a prize. Teams that were formed during an event introduced an idea of winning a voucher to a restaurant to be able to get together with the team after the event. International exchange students reminded that prizes should also be suitable for them referring to a book they received in Finnish. Taking into a consideration the schedules of international people would also be appreciated as they might be leaving the country before they even receive the prize.

New events are constantly planned according to the needs of the stakeholders and the event participants provided some suggestions on what they could be. There seemed to be a need for creative themed events which was already noticed by the commissioner also. Bringing together companies and students constantly arose into conversation with the informants referring to a real need in that sense. All the managerial implications were very practical and viable and will be forwarded to the rest of the event planning team to assure they will be taken into consideration.

7 CONCLUSION

This chapter consists of the conclusion, which was made based on the research analysis. It is in the interests of the commissioner to produce useful content for several target groups, including students and entrepreneurs, and to perform in a way which allows the ecosystem to become an environment where multiple organizations and stakeholders support one another. The objective of this research was to support the development and success of the commissioner's actions, by determining the overall impact of their events on the event participants. As explained before, interviews with former participants were conducted in order to gain sufficient data for analysis, which was presented in the previous chapter.

The expectations of the participants towards the events varied from getting credits to expanding their network, and it seemed that the commissioner had succeeded in meeting them. All informants had a list of skills they had acquired, which suggests that the content of events is often adequate and well targeted. Many operations contain actual company cases which is important for especially students since they are able to gain valuable experience for their future professional needs. Meeting company representatives and entrepreneurs also supports career planning and networking for students, and entrepreneurs seemed to most value the networking possibilities as it helped them in getting peer reviews and attaining contacts needed in business development. In several interviews it became clear that learning the process of establishing a company was found useful and interesting, as the way of teaching the practices differed greatly from what they had experienced during their studies.

All of the participants stated that the event experiences had been positive and encouraging, and they appreciated the chance of receiving advice and supports from professionals they trusted. It is desirable that people attend several events and gather as much knowledge and networks as possible to support them in their path to entrepreneurship. As soon as they learned what the commissioner has to offer, they were eager to find out more. There was little to no criticism what comes to the content of the events, as it was always found useful. Food and drinks served at events was more important to the students for obvious financial reasons, but it was also seen affecting the general atmosphere of the events in a positive way. Socializing over coffee or a simple meal was seen less constrained and led to people getting to know each other more eagerly.

As suspected, the lack of Finnish students in events had not gone unnoticed to most and it was said to affect the results of events where people work in teams. Exchange students rarely have the intention of staying in the country after their exchange period ends, which leads to them either planning a product or a service to a foreign country without a sufficient understanding of the market and culture or taking their idea with them to their home country. The best experiences had been with multicultural teams where the local people were dominating the process and the business had a chance to develop in Finland, and the internationals gained valuable practice during the process. The two campus locations were found practical for some students, but the overall opinion seemed to be that a neutral setting, preferably in the city center, would best fit the needs of both stakeholders – entrepreneurs and students.

Facebook was the main channel for all to keep up with the events in the area and it seemed as if word of mouth went a long way supporting the marketing. All participants had received information about events from their friends or colleagues at some point and it was common to recommend an event to others regardless of the content. Good reputation seems to be crucial and should be kept in mind when planning events by supporting it with all necessary actions. Many of the interviewees were on the mailing list of Business Kitchen newsletter but admitted not reading it regularly as the amount of emails received is excessive. It could be considered that for the low value the newsletter gives, it should be automated using technology, for instance to directly pick out events from the event calendar of the Business Kitchen website. The general opinion was that at the moment it took active input from people to keep up with what was happening. This could easily be changed using technology to assist in reaching people through the channel of their choice.

Business Kitchen is a complicated brand and that is also the perception of all interviewees. Through a long period of engaging in the events and operations had helped some understand the concept better, but the people who had recently gotten to know it had no idea what it really was. By clarifying the brand and emphasizing it more during the events the organizer could result in better communication between the organization and its stakeholders, and possibly lead to increasing numbers of attendees as they would be better aware what events are coming and who they can contact if questions arise. The entrepreneurs' wishes were that more events would be targeted towards them, which leads to the conclusion that they feel estranged from the operations. It is the interest of the commissioner to serve also entrepreneurs as a target group and this is another issue that should be considered to improve.

All in all, the findings were positive from the commissioner's point of view. The events have a clear impact on the participants which is now defined in more detail due to this research. The results were discussed within the organizational team while the process of writing the final report was still on progress. While the author of this thesis looks at the results from the point of view of event planning and practical matters, the managerial team was able to gain information to prove a previously assumed fact wrong according to these findings. Event marketing practices will be reconsidered from the perspective provided by these results.

8 DISCUSSION

Finally, the entire thesis process will be discussed and evaluated from the point of view of the author. The topic was suggested by the commissioner to support the development of their operations according to the participants needs, and the results and conclusion of this thesis will be thoroughly discussed and evaluated in the commissioning organization later on. The results did support some expectations and thoughts the team had before this research was conducted, but there is a need for critical thinking towards how the events are done now and how they should be developed in the future, according to the results.

The process had an extremely tight schedule, which led to decisions of eliminating some parts of the work, such as an extensive event marketing plan, which could have been produced to support the conclusion. However, the author works as a part of team and decisions in the organization are made by meeting with all the people, which supports the fact that this thesis will be used as guidance towards some improvements in the near future. Although the timing was extremely challenging, it was in the interest of the author to produce quality content for the use of the commissioner.

As the author is employed by the commissioner and personally benefits from the results of this thesis, the analysis may have been affected by the authors personal experiences working with the commissioning organization, which should be taken into consideration when familiarizing with the conclusion of the research. The impact of the events was determined using qualitative method, which allowed the author to approach the subject from the perspective of an employee of the commissioner and modify the process as was seen fit.

The lack of a practical guide as a result of this thesis is not seen as a disadvantage, but an opportunity for the commissioner to reflect the results into the future plans that are made in order to improve the events. The defined impacts are taken as a guideline in planning new events in order to support each stakeholder's needs. The process was extremely difficult but educational for the author and the end result is considered pleasing and valuable for both the author and the commissioner.

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General
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which ecosystem events have you attended during the past year?
Prior the event/s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where did you hear about the event/s? - What necessary information did you receive prior to the event/s? - How did you find the marketing of the event/s? - What did you wish to gain from the event/s?
During the event/s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How was the overall experience? - How did you like the date and time of the event/s? - What comments do you have on the location of the event/s? - What are your thoughts about the content of the event/s?
After the event
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What necessary information did you receive after the event? - How did you feel about Business Kitchen after your experience/s? - What are the most useful things you got out of the event/s? - What did you like about the event/s? - What did you dislike about the event/s? - How could the event/s be improved?
Team interview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did you form the team in an event? - Did you continue further with that team?