

“Enhancing capacity building for SMEs in Elgazala Pole” (1)

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Elgazala pole of communication technology represents the first successful experience in STPs in Tunisia which accords a huge importance to IT sector as a tool of sustainable development of the country.

The national strategy of development of Tunisia retained in the Xth and XIth plan attaches a great importance to the development of STPs in different fields to promote the innovation, creation of companies and new jobs.

According to the last classification supplied by World Economic Forum “DAVOS”, Tunisia was classified 31st world just behind Portugal and in front of India Romania and Hungary, Tunisia was classified first African country outstripping South Africa, Morocco and Egypt.

This index considers various parameters such as the governmental policy, the legislation on telecoms, penetration and use of internet, the number of Computers per habitant.

Elgazala pole of communications Technologies resorts to the international cooperation in order to perform this capacities of management and asked for the assistance of the Canadian co-operation to develop their competences, for this purpose. This project required the collaboration of the management team of the Pole, company managers and Canadian experts.

After an analysis of the dynamics of development of the pole and an identification of the needs of startup leaders, it was agreed to give the priority to the reinforcement of the capacities of intervention for the startups and to create a toolbox for this purpose.

Executive summary

This paper presents the toolbox of Pole El Gazala, a result of a Tunisian / Canadian cooperation, aiming at the reinforcement of the capacities of Pole El Gazala in its support to the startup companies in the Pole as a new tool to enhance capacity building for SMEs in Elgazala Pole.

It describes the collaboration that was implemented to build this toolbox, the attention paid to the needs of the companies of the pole, the targeted objectives of each tool, as well as a short description of each one of these tools.

It offers reflections and particularly useful information for newly established technological parks in developing countries.

The following elements form the contents of the toolbox: A development model for the startups, a club of the leaders of the startups, a mentoring program, and a range of services offered to the companies, as well as the establishment of a pole network.

INTRODUCTION

The technological poles have to play an important role in the economic development of Tunisia and all of its regions. Taking into account the quality infrastructure that is available and the synergy that can be made possible between key innovation actors, they are able not only to attract new foreign companies, but also to support a faster development of national companies.

To be able to concentrate key innovation actors in the same space, the technology poles for the purposes of this paper, is a necessary condition to stimulate the innovation but not sufficient; the installation of a suitable organizational framework is also necessary.

The persons in charge for the pole of communications El Gazala asked for the assistance of the Canadian co-operation to develop their competences, for this purpose. This project required the collaboration of the management team of the Pole, company managers and Canadian experts.

The project was based on Tunisian competences and manners, with an effort to enrich them using well tested Canadian approaches and methods. This work, realized at Pole El Gazala, lasted one year. Various events took place to make this experience a success: Workshops, startup manager meetings

and discussions, conferences, training sessions, on the field experimentation, observation and promotion mission in Canada.

After an analysis of the dynamics of development of the pole and an identification of the needs of startup leaders, it was agreed to give the priority to the reinforcement of the capacities of intervention for the startups and to create a toolbox for this purpose.

1. THE TOOLBOX

The following objectives were retained for the toolbox:

- to stimulate and facilitate company creation;
- to break the isolation of startup leaders and to help them develop their leadership competences;
- to provide suitable information on the various potential partners of the startups and to facilitate the creation of closer relationship with these partners;
- to establish closer connections between the activities of research and the startups;
- to facilitate the access to the foreign markets;
- to allow the leaders of the pole and the startups to better understand the cycle of starting and development of the startups and to accompany them until the companies reach maturity

The toolbox was defined as an ensemble of strategies, action plans, management tools which the pole proposes to set up via its structure of animation and support for the companies to create a medium of exchange which supports and accelerates the contacts between the partners of the innovation and thus the development of the startups.

The choice of the content elements of the toolbox was agreed as follows:

- a model of development of the startups;
- a club of the leaders of the startups;
- a program of mentoring;
- a gate of the services to the companies;
- the installation of a network of Poles.

The toolbox addresses the leaders of technological startups. The leaders of these companies often have little developed experience of the business world. They must face a very strong competition and innovate in a sector of great complexity. To come to them for assistance, reinforcement of strategic competences and the development of their capacity to work in a network appeared essential and they constitute the discussion thread of the bonds between the tools.

The presentation that we propose will make it possible to briefly describe these tools and to explain their relevance, taking into account the needs for the companies, their level of development, that of the Pole and Tunisia.

2. THE TOOLS

2.1. A model of development of the startups: stages of development of technological SME

The development model of the startup aims at allowing leaders of small and medium companies, in Pole El Gazala in particular and in Tunisia in general, to better understand the stages of development that a company has to go through before it becomes prosperous.

The development of a company is not a uniform and continuous process which one can measure by the increase in the turnover, number of employees or profits. Similarly, the companies do not all grow at the same rhythm and not all of them necessarily grow. Some may remain small, others may die prematurely.

The development is a complex, step by step process, implying several factors. The capacity of the startup leaders to solve the difficulties which arise and to make the suitable strategic decisions is the

fundamental dynamics which makes it possible to pass from one phase to the other. Like each phase of development of the company calls upon different knowledge and skills, it is the capacity of the leader to adapt and learn that will decide the fate of the company.

Several authors sought to understand these questions. Their work allows us to distinguish five major phases of development: pre-launch, launch, growth, expansion and decline / stagnation. Each one of these phases is a source of problems and opportunities. They require important changes. To better understand them will allow the company to cross the course of the combatant with improved chances of success.

This model was produced to be used as guide by the company leader and to place at his disposal a dashboard useful for the decision-making. It also makes it possible for the leaders of the pole to better target their interventions to come to assistance of the companies.

2.2. The club of the leaders of the startups and his work program

To stimulate collaboration between the startups leaders and to organize training activities that meet their needs, we set up a club of startup leaders. It is a somewhat informal organization. It aims at making it possible for the leaders to better know their environment, to facilitate the strategic information flow and to develop a network of expertise. A work program was developed for this purpose: meetings between the leaders, management conferences, training activities.

The context

The context of the startups of the pole is characterized by the acceleration of competition and an increasing complexity of the new economy.

To face these new challenges, the startup leader must join together a team of qualified managers around him and also develop close connections with networks with strong and weak signals.

The participation in associations and groups makes it possible to increase the productivity of the companies.

The raison d'être of the club

The club is a non-profit organization with a mission to encourage mutual collaboration, to deliver services to member companies and their leaders and to support their integration in business networks.

The mission of mutual aid and intervention is more important than the mission of representation of interest.

Targeted objectives

- Serve as intermediary between the pole and the startups, particularly within the framework of the toolbox development project of creation;
- Create an environment of mutual aid and of services adapted to the needs for the startups.

Essential conditions for success

The participation of engaged and motivated people is an essential condition for success.

The members

The members are startup leaders, who are also principal active shareholders in their respective startups. They can progress more quickly and more easily, by virtue of benefiting from others experiences, through network gatherings.

The organization

The members choose among them some persons in charge who have the responsibility to coordinate the activities of the group. A person from the Pole plays the role of animator on a regular basis.

The services

Meetings program

Each month, the members meet to discuss the different realities of leader missions, their concerns, their projects, all in absolute confidentiality.

Several subjects are tackled, such as profits, strategic reflections, human resources, tools for control, harmony in the company.

Above all, it is a time of exchange and mutual aid.

At the beginning, the meetings will be organized at the time of the visit of one of the companies.

Management conferences program

In collaboration with the pole, the club organizes conferences, inviting quality lecturers, experienced trainers, with testimonials of startup leaders and business partners, talks on the best practices of management.

This program addresses startup leaders, as well as managers of other companies in the pole.

The objective is to draw the attention of the leaders and to provide them with information on management topics that could help with the future of their companies.

Training program

Within the framework of the preparation of the toolbox, we tried out an approach of training that was adapted to the needs and the conditions of the leaders of the startups of the Pole. It is an approach which calls upon the tools for remote training, with the expertise of a trainer and the implication practices of the participants. It not only aims at offering new knowledge in management, but also motivates and helps the leaders to apply this knowledge in their company with a personalized accompaniment.

This approach was used for a training program in marketing that was held in the Pole.

2.3. A program of mentoring

The job of a company manager is a difficult one, particularly for the young entrepreneurs. In difficult moments, they feel isolated and must sometimes make decisions which engage the future of their company without being able to call upon an adapted expertise, fault of financial means, knowledge or confidence. The installation of the program of mentoring aims at filling this gap.

The program of mentoring aims at helping the young entrepreneurs in the starting phase of their company.

The program is addressed at the same time to the mentors and to mentored and defines the roles and the responsibilities for each one.

It first defines mentoring, its origin, its bases and targeted aims.

It identifies then the competences and the benefits of the mentors and the mentored.

It specifies finally the framing of the program, responsibilities of the mentor, the organization of the relation with the mentor, procedures of attribution of the mentor and the technical role of the pole.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a relation which rests on leadership, openness and sharing. It is a relation where a person of experiment in businesses shares her knowledge in order to increase the know-how and knowledge of a new entrepreneur.

This tool constitutes an excellent starting point to improve the work environment within an organization. Mentoring is a powerful technique that helps people mature on the personal level, as well as on the professional level. It helps them modify their behaviors, their attitudes and their ideas.

The basis of a mentoring relationship

The meetings between the mentor (godfather) and the mentored (sponsored) rest on a framed program, a code of ethics and confidentiality. The mentor is not an expert at the full disposal of the mentored and he cannot solve all the problems. He gives a support and seeks the solutions within the limits of the experiment. On the occasion, he can also call upon the resources available in his company and his business network.

Program's targeted objectives

The aims of this program of mentoring consist of the following:

- to provide a support to break isolation and to reinforce the personality of the young entrepreneurs;
- to benefit from the experiment of the more tested people;
- to support the mutual trainings which result from it;
- to develop the internal networking;
- to share and exchange knowledge;
- To promote professional perfection.

Mentor competences

It is mainly the competences of the mentor that insure the success of the mentoring relationship. On this subject, for mentored, it is fundamental that the mentors are able to develop a climate of confidence, to listen and communicate.

This being said, the mentor is someone who:

- Has business flare;
- Has the ability to earn the confidence of the mentored;
- Can guide and give feedback;
- Can listen and communicate;
- Available to help a less experienced entrepreneur.

Mentored entrepreneurs

The mentoring program is destined to:

- A new entrepreneur, owner of a company of less than 5 years, with at least 3 employees and based in the pole;
- A new entrepreneur who wishes to learn, to develop his expertise, his know-how, by virtue of using the help of an experienced manager;
- A person who knows he needs help;
- A young entrepreneur who fully assumes the destiny of his company and who wishes to share his needs, his doubts and his difficulties with a neutral person who has a total glance and in whom he has confidence.

The mentored must be available, ready to learn, persons in charge for their development, receptive to feedback and able to make good use of the received assistance.

Program management

Our program of mentoring falls under a structured and formal program that makes it possible for various parties to draw benefits and avoid pitfalls.

In this way, the follow-up and the framing of the mentoring program are strongly recommended and form an integral part of the management of the program. Our methods of framing take various forms:

- Formal meetings of a duration of approximately two hours between mentor and mentored once per month;
- Meeting of the mentor and the mentored, once every trimester, with the coordinator of the project;
- Evaluation of the mentoring relationship and the program management by the mentor and the mentored at the end of each formal mentoring program.

Technical role of the pole

The pole is responsible for the promotion of the project to the companies of the pole. It must also bring a constant support to the speakers (mentor and mentored), with all the stages of the program, and to take all means necessary reach the objectives of the program. Its role is crucial for its credibility, its expertise and support are both essential for the participants, especially if they live the experiment for the first time.

2.4. The gate of the services to the companies and the entrepreneurship

The Tunisian company is concerned with development of the private sector and is in the process of creating a network of services to dynamic and qualified companies. An important number of organizations in the public or the private sectors offer financing and accompaniment services in various fields of the business management.

The information which is addressed to the managers is increasingly abundant and diversified and it changes quickly. It is also increasingly available on Internet network.

To facilitate the access to this information for the managers and those who have a mandate to provide them with the needed assistance, we created the gate of the services to the companies, available free of charge on the gate of the Pole El Gazala.

This portal aims at facilitating the access to the Web sites which give information on the environment and the services to the companies and on the entrepreneurship in Tunisia, as well as in major countries in the world. It will also make it possible to reach sites which offer training addressed to the managers and also sites which inform companies on results and relevant practices of research.

This portal addresses:

- Managers in the search of information and services that meet their needs;
- Researchers, teachers, students in the search of information, new knowledge and ideas;
- Authorities and institutions, as a tool, and aid for decision-making.

The various services accessible via this portal are classified by headings and divided in two principal sections.

The first section, information and services to companies, gather all the Tunisian sites ready to answer the concerns of small and medium enterprises, by their practical character, specialization, accessible or exhaustive. This section offers an access on line to a variety of sites including a panoply of information and services which make it possible to the Tunisian entrepreneurs to reinforce their knowledge in various fields, such as electronic transactions, finance and financial services, imports and exports, the regulatory framework, businesses opportunities, governmental services, the technical support and accompaniment.

The second section, other countries, gathers the sites of several countries which provide information and expertise adapted to the needs for the managers of Tunisian startups and companies. This section is divided into three categories. The first category, international sites, is organized by country and it includes the principal selected sites making it possible to the Tunisian leaders to develop and improve their knowledge as regards to methods and aid programs to small and medium enterprises. The second category, training in management, provides an annotated list of resources, tools and training, available free of charge through Internet.

2.5. The positioning of the Pole and the development of a network

The positioning of the Pole on the national plan and the development of a network form part of the tools developed to come to assistance of the pole startups. The access to a quality business network constitutes a key element to ensure company growth.

For this purpose, a mission in Tunisia of Peter Polatos of Technoparc Saint-Laurent made it possible to establish a strategic marketing plan for Pole El Gazala, as well as a mission in Canada by Nejib Abida and Saihi Ayachi, organized by Roger Poulin of the Technological Park of metropolitan Quebec, allowed to establish bonds with the Canadian network of technological parks.

The marketing plan aims at positioning the Pole in the market place as a viable destination for local and international companies and at working out promotion and development tools in order to make Pole El Gazala a notorious technological park, on a world basis.

It targets to highlight the success factors achieved with national and international customers and to choose how to make these success factors known. It defines finally the measuring instruments to evaluate the success of the marketing plan.

The Pole El Gazala is already member of the IASP, International Association of Scientific Parks. The participation of its leaders in the meetings of the association is at the same time useful and required to have access to knowledge and new experiments and also to identify and develop projects with partners who have common interests.

3. THE RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

The first outcome of the project lies in the increased interest and the enrichment of competences, especially the competences that have to do with developing ways and instincts for making things happen. All of this gradually took place during the year. It was with the perspective to prolong this training that this toolbox was developed.

The tools are at the same time a coding of the required methods of intervention and a historical database. Those who use them will be able to make references that facilitate the daily use of these new methods and also to enrich them in the light of the new experiments.

The tools were prepared with an additional objective in mind: That the results be used by other technological poles in Tunisia. It is obvious that their use in the other poles will require a great determination and a certain adaptation, taking into account the degree of advancement and particular conditions of each pole. Those which wish to do it will be able however to carry out an appreciable saving in time in the installation of these tools.

The tools which were developed are at the disposal of the leaders of the startups and one could believe that it rests with to them to use them. It would be to forget the multiple obligations of the leaders of the startups. Their collaboration is essential, but not sufficient. The toolbox was developed to make it possible to the leaders to have more effective tools to intervene with the leaders of the startups of the Pole. It is a tool within the framework of a step of animation and support. This step must continue to allow an optimal use of the toolbox and to enrich it starting from the lived experiments and new experiments.

¹ The Pole El Gazala:

The Technological City of Communications is a village where the symbiosis between telecommunications activities is actually developing. The city is located on the road to Raoued, 6 km far from the Tunis-Carthage airport.

Higher Education, Research, Training and Industry develop in an adequate environment where motivation to innovate in a sector based on creative intelligence and high-tech received the highest incentives.

The Technological City of Communications comprises in the same space:

- Elgazala Pole of Communication Technologies
- The Higher School of Communications (SUP'COM)
- The Higher Institute of Technological Studies in Communications (ISET'COM)
- Telecommunications Study and Research Center (CERT)
- The Observatory and Center of Information, Training, Documentation and Studies in Communications (CIFODE'COM)
- The Post Press
- The Archives and Documentation Center
- The Communication Projects Incubator

The Technological City of Communications involves about 2450 people:

- 520 engineers in private companies
- 300 engineers in public sector
- 110 teachers and researchers
- 1520 students

Commodity Services [Life Center]

The life center offers the city occupants the following commodity services:

- A bank agency
- Telecom commercial agency
- Post office
- Restaurants
- Cafeteria / Fast food
- Conference rooms (one conference room with 400 chairs and 2 others with 100 chairs each).
- Various boutiques.

Cooperation:

Elgazala Pole of Communication Technologies attaches a crucial importance to the development of cooperation with similar institutions all over the world.

Member of the Scientific Parks International Association since June 2000, Elgazala Pole has signed partnership agreements with the Technopole of Bari (Italia), Technopole of Nice Sofia-Antipolis (France) and Technopole of Marseille Innovation (France).

Moreover, other agreements will be signed in the next few months with European, American, and Asian technopoles.